

Derek TONKIN (Born 30.12.29)

DOHP Biographical Details and Index

Career Outline (with relevant interview pages on right)

HM Forces, 1948	
FO (Claims Dept), 1952	pp 2-3
Warsaw, 1955	pp 3-6
Bangkok, 1957	pp 6-10
Phnom Penh, 1961	pp 10-12
FO (Burma desk), 1963	pp 12-18
Warsaw, 1966	pp 18-19
Wellington, 1968	pp 19-22
FCO, 1972 (East European and Soviet Dept)	pp 22-24
FCO, 1973 (Counsellor, Permanent Under-Sec's Dept)	pp 24-28
East Berlin, 1976	pp 28-33
Ambassador to Vietnam, 1980 (CMG 1982)	pp 33-38
Minister, Pretoria, 1983	pp 38-42
Ambassador to Thailand, and concurrently to Laos, 1986-89	pp 42-46
(Retirement and general comments on career	pp 46-51)

Derek Tonkin

This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Mr Derek Tonkin on Thursday, 3 August 2000.

MMcB: “Mr Tonkin, you were educated at the High Pavement Grammar School, Nottingham, and then went on to St Catherine’s Society, Oxford, joining HM Forces in 1948. Was that straight from school?”

D Tonkin: “Yes, indeed. I did my National Service first, 18 months before going up to Oxford. Perhaps I could say that I passed an examination into the executive branch of the Home Civil Service in 1948, before I went into HM Forces, and indeed at a time when I was not sure that I would, in fact, go to university. A particular reason I took the examination was for economic reasons. My father had died the year previously. Although he was a civil servant, he, unfortunately, did not qualify for a pension in those days. It was before the Civil Service Superannuation Act came into force, and my mother simply felt that she couldn’t really afford to look after me. So I took the executive branch examination and passed into the Foreign Office, as they offered me a place after my National Service. Then, of course, after completing National Service, and I was demobilised, I think it was in August 1949, I announced to the Foreign Office that I did, in fact, have a place at Oxford. They encouraged me to take an undergraduate course for three years in modern languages, and they promised to keep my place available for when I’d completed my course. And so, when I’d completed a degree in modern languages, German and French, in 1952, I did in fact join the Foreign Office as an executive officer. I think the equivalent then was grade 9.

My first posting was with Claims Department of the Foreign Office, which I found extremely useful for my future career, because it was concerned with international claims. I particularly looked after claims arising from the nationalisation of British property in Eastern Europe following the communist take-over in countries like Poland,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, although I also looked at other claims more generally. But I found this practical introduction to international claims, and hence to international law, really of considerable value to me, particularly for the future.”

MMcB: “So that was a really good introduction. Then, after three years in the Foreign Office, you went off to Warsaw in 1955. What did you do there?”

D Tonkin: “It was about 1954 that the Foreign Office recognised that I had a proficiency in languages, and so I was invited to go to the School of Slavonic Studies to study Polish, which I did for an academic year, passed the intermediate examination at that time, and was posted to Warsaw as an Attaché. It wasn’t quite a Third Secretary, but it was regarded as a diplomatic rank, and I had the post of press reader in a joint Anglo-American bureau. It actually happened that our bureau, because it had to be situated either in the British or the American Embassy, was in the American Embassy, and so for two years I actually worked in an American Embassy. Again, this was extremely useful experience (because we are very close to the Americans), actually having worked in an American environment for two years. The American ambassador at that time was one Joseph Beam, who was a specialist in Chinese affairs, and that is where a lot of the negotiations between the United States and China took place at that time.

The years 1955-57 in Poland were, as you will remember, extremely fascinating, the time of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. We thought that there were going to be troubles in Poland as well. The Polish press suddenly took on a new freedom, and it was really very fascinating reading and analysing the Polish press periodicals at that time. I even found myself translating poetry from Polish into English because they were thought to be highly significant. There was, particularly, a poem by a Polish poet called Adam Wazyk, entitled “Poem for Adults” (Poemat dla Doroslych), which was translated into almost every language because it was the new reality in Polish affairs.

That posting, again, turned out to be, for my future career, really extremely valuable, having access to the American bureaucracy, the American way of life as you saw it in a

microcosm in an American embassy, and getting to understand the way the Americans thought. At times I was even inspected by American senators, and I well remember one Senator Ellender, who was a very aggressive senator, very hostile to the American Foreign Service, really assaulting me in my office and demanding to know who I was. Putting on my best American role, I said 'Sorry Senator, that's a State secret.' He saw the joke, he saw the point when I told him I was, in fact, British."

MMcB: "What was the attitude of the American embassy people in 1956 when the Hungarian uprising took place, and also the Suez fiasco took place?"

D Tonkin: "Well, as far as the embassy was concerned, remember that a number of the senior staff had been appointed because of their Polish ancestry, and many of them spoke really quite fluent Polish, not at the very senior level, ambassadorial, deputy head of mission level, but there was, I think, tremendous expertise. I think what we all felt, and this applied not only to the Americans but to the British as well, was that our intervention in Suez was really a terrible disaster because it took the world focus away from events, particularly in Hungary but also in Poland. It so happened that our first child was born in Berlin, as my wife went out to Berlin to have the baby, in October 1956, and I went to see her, drove by car. When I drove back, the ambassador in our embassy (Sir Andrew Noble) was really astonished to see me and said 'How could you possibly get through?' I said, 'Well yes, I did have some trouble worming my way through various Soviet tanks.' He said, 'How many?' and I said, 'Well, there must have been three or four hundred tanks', all lined up in East Germany, and some of them in fact had already moved into Poland. And so, in my youthful way, I had wormed my way back from Berlin to Warsaw by road, which I understood I was perhaps not supposed to have done, but they were extremely grateful that I had done so.

The Poles, of course, showed a maturity at that time that ensured that the Soviets did not use the full weight of their military might against them, whereas in Hungary it went the other way. The democratic process in Hungary really went too fast and too far for the Soviets to accept. In the case of Poland, the Polish Communist Party leader was

Wladyslaw Gomulka, who himself had been imprisoned for some years, but had been released and had been rehabilitated. He replaced the Polish Communist Party leader, Boleslaw Bierut, who was regarded as being pro-Soviet. The Commander-in-Chief at that time of the Polish Armed Forces was also thought to be pro-Russian, if not Russian himself. It was Rokossowski.

Khrushchev himself came to Warsaw in late October 1956 for negotiations with the Polish politburo, and I remember he addressed the population of Warsaw in front of the Palace of Culture and Science, and I'm very proud to say that I was there as well. I had the opportunity to see Khrushchev and Gomulka, as it were on stage, reassuring the Polish people that they had nothing to fear. But the importance of what was known as the Spring in October, in Poland, was that the Poles reacquired a measure of independence, particularly in economic affairs, from the Soviet Union. Really up to that point, the economy had been under total Soviet dominance. They had been using, for example, Polish shipyards in Gdansk and Gdynia, simply for Soviet purposes. Poles were not being paid properly, there were debts relating to assistance provided, so-called, after 1945. But really, from 1956, the Poles acquired a measure of independence, and I think they were, at that stage, reasonably satisfied with what they had achieved, whether you were communist or not. For the first time, people started going again to New Year's parties and having a good time, you really felt that the country had recovered. Up to that point, and certainly during the first twelve months that we were in Warsaw, it was a police state. You couldn't sit in the park and talk to anyone without that person being quietly taken away because we were under observation, as British. The embassy in Warsaw in what is known as Aleja Roz (alley of roses) is quite close to a central Warsaw park known as Ujazdowski Park. It was a delightful place to walk, but we assumed that wherever we went we were shadowed.

This was a time when Warsaw, which had been totally destroyed by the Germans, was in the process of reconstruction. We had a very small flat quite close to the embassy, and I remember on Saturdays and Sundays I was always invited to go and help rebuild Warsaw. I said, 'Well, I'm delighted to help, but I am a British diplomat.' And they

said, 'If you'd like to come and move bricks and rubble . . .'. Each block committee was responsible for its own facilities, and it was the only way to get our lift going again, the only way to ensure a water supply, so I quite gladly did perform my task. After about nine or ten months, word must have got around that they didn't want this British diplomat who spoke Polish becoming too involved in social affairs, because I got to know the labourers rather too well."

MMcB: "After a couple of years in Warsaw, you went on to Bangkok, which must have been a considerable contrast."

D Tonkin: "It was a considerable contrast, and to this day I don't know why the Office chose to send me to Bangkok. They simply decided that it was time I went somewhere else."

MMcB: "So it wasn't a punishment."

D Tonkin: "It wasn't a punishment by any means, but they decided that I was doing rather well in the press and information field, and I was sent as Second Secretary (Press and Information) to Bangkok. I had a particular responsibility to help save Thailand from communism by involving myself with Information Research Department (IRD). I'm sure it's no secret nowadays that they were concerned with providing materials internationally to combat Soviet disinformation and to expose the nature of Soviet communism. But in the case of Thailand, this largely meant getting to know Thai journalists, sending them home happy with a bottle of whisky, and ensuring in this way that the following day you would see a suitable article appearing.

I had an office both in the embassy and also in the downtown Information Office, then known by the generic name of BIS (British Information Services), so that any one time the ambassador (Sir Richard Whittington) never quite knew whether I was downtown or in the embassy. This caused a certain amount of consternation at senior levels because the Head of Chancery used to regard me as part of his staff, whereas the First Secretary

(Information), who had been a kind of Oriental counsellor in Bangkok for many years, insisted that I should be downtown. I watched this with a fair amount of amusement.

The Ambassador said to me when I arrived, 'Well Derek, I'm very pleased to see you here. By the way, it's most important that you should learn Thai because officers of Second Secretary and above here are all expected to learn Thai. Now, I know you've had no language training, but do see what you can to pass the examination within twelve months.' So, I sweated like hell for twelve months to learn this impossible language without really any formal training at all, and I just about passed the preliminary examination, which seemed to be good enough for the Ambassador, because in 1960 he said, 'Right, you must go up to Chiang Mai to be acting British Consul.'

After doing my time as an information officer, getting to know the Thai press in Bangkok itself, I found I was beginning to circulate outside the capital quite a lot. In fact, on occasions, the Ambassador said to me, 'It's about time you went up-country, met some local officials. Take your film van up-country.' So I would go up-country and show films, *Trooping the Colour*, to rather astonished audiences of Thai citizenry in the small towns around. This was a time, of course when very few people outside the capital city spoke any English at all. You could not expect to be understood. I remember the look of astonishment at one petrol station when I had a puncture in my tyre, which was the first ever tubeless tyre, and the man simply refused to believe it, that there was no tube inside and that I must have removed it.

Incidentally, when I arrived in Thailand, the Prime Minister was still Field Marshal Pibul Songkhram, who you may recall had been the Prime Minister in 1941 when Thailand had rather rashly declared war on Britain, but not on the United States. We did have negotiations with Pibul in 1941. Josiah Crosbie was the Minister. I don't know if you've read his memoirs, but his memoirs of his discussions with Pibul are really quite fascinating. But Pibul obviously decided the Japanese were going to represent the real power in South-East Asia at that time.

Then you had this rather curious situation that the Thai Ambassador in Washington, Seni Pramoj, had a Declaration of War to deliver to the Americans but declined to do so. And so, throughout the War, the Americans thought of the Thais as being non-belligerents, whereas, unfortunately, in the case of Britain the Declaration was delivered. This produced a rather strange situation, that you had in Thailand a considerable number of Thai students from very good Thai families, including the Royal Family, who announced their intention to fight the Japanese and were promptly drafted into the Pioneer Corps. They made it clear that they didn't think the Pioneer Corps was really right for them. Eventually, out of this developed, in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, Force 136. This was basically the Free Thai Movement. Anyhow, the question arose after the Second World War, whether one should prosecute Pibul as a war criminal. But no, they decided to let him back, and he remained as Prime Minister until August 1955 when he was replaced in a coup by Sarit Thanarat, who was the strongman of Thailand.

Sarit's great contribution to Thailand was that he reasserted the Thai national identity. He controlled the influx of Chinese immigrants who were flooding into the country, and I think, re-established Thailand as a proud, independent country. He also enabled the King, who was then quite a young man, to develop his own role, and became, eventually, highly successful. So, although Sarit has his critics because he was thought to be pretty ruthless and corrupt, nonetheless, I think it is recognised that he made a very valuable contribution to Thailand's development at that particular time, in both the political and economic sense.

At this point, we come to 1960. The former Consul in Chiang Mai, Jacobs-Larkcom, had retired and he was being replaced by a former Bombay-Burma representative called Batwell. But in those days, the Consuls were all appointed individually because it was assumed you needed someone who knew northern Thailand, and this took you back to the British community there, it was never thought that any British Foreign Service officer could be appointed. So they had recruited Batwell. It took about six months to find him, another three months for him to come out by sea, and so I was sent up to hold the fort for

the best part of a year, during which I found that my office was operating entirely in Thai, more particularly in northern Thai.

I have two abiding memories of my time in Thailand, first, on my second day, Major Hudson, Royal Engineers, came to see me to announce that he was going to get married and would I kindly arrange the marriage ceremony under the *lex loci* (local law), which, as the British Consul, I was entitled to perform. This essentially meant making contact with the local District Officer, the *Nai Amphur*, to ensure that our registers were all completed appropriately and at the same time. Roy married his bride, who came from the Shan State, whose name was Ar Pawn, and they have been happily married ever since. I am still in touch with them. I remember my consternation, on my second day as Consul, being told I had to marry someone, and I rang Bangkok. Beckman was the Consul then in Bangkok, and he said, 'My dear Derek, it's all down in the regulations.' You may remember Foreign Service regulations in those days, the so-called Red Book, was one single volume, and on consular marriages it had about two pages of sort of general principles that had to be applied.

The other abiding experience I have was of the Treasury inspectors coming, and of a formal reprimand that came from the Office that I had failed to weed the archives appropriately. I protested that, unfortunately, the archives were in a language that I did not know very well, to which the answer was, 'But you have passed the preliminary Thai language, you ought to understand.' I said, 'The problem with these documents is that they are not in the Thai language of Bangkok, they are in Lanna Thai, a language which is now studied only by a few erudite professors.' They included the original title deeds of the consulate and other documents written in Lanna Thai, which went out of use about the 1900s, 1910s, and I said I was not prepared to destroy documentation that I did not understand, and it would possibly include the original title deeds. On that, they accepted my explanation, and I was happy to continue in the Diplomatic Service without a blemish on my character.

After Bangkok, I was cross-posted to Phnom Penh, because at that time we had a Regional Information Officer who was rather keen, having got his hands on me, that I should then go across to Phnom Penh, which I did for about eighteen months. The contrast between Cambodia and Thailand was much greater than I had thought, and I felt this the moment I crossed the frontier from Thailand into Cambodia. I noticed in the customs post that the tiles were all in French style, white and yellow tiles, a colour known in painting as cambodge. Fortunately there were a number of officials who spoke quite good French. At that stage Cambodia was still very much a francophone country.

I arrived in Phnom Penh and the following day we were allocated a house. My next door neighbour was an Anglo-French British Council representative called Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom I still meet from time to time. Jean-Jacques said to me, 'Welcome to Phnom Penh. You must come out for a picnic tomorrow.' So, out we go into the countryside with one or two friends, francophone friends, and we have a picnic in the middle of a paddy field. The local Cambodian farmers regarded this as perfectly normal. This is what French people do on a Sunday – on fait le picnic dans la campagne – and there we were, drinking wine and thinking how extraordinary the contrast with Thailand. If this had happened in a paddy field outside Bangkok, people would have thought we were completely mad.

My time in Phnom Penh was interesting because Sihanouk was then in full spate. He was successful, I think in 1961, in rescuing Phra Viharn (the temple of Phra Viharn) back from the Thais, thanks to the judgement of the international court, whereupon, of course, the Thais closed the frontier. It was no longer possible to get across. The battle had begun for the soul of Cambodia, particularly between the Chinese and the Russians on the one hand, and the Americans and the South Vietnamese on the other. The North Vietnamese were eventually represented in Phnom Penh, but not in my time.

A post came up in the Ministry of Information. They needed a speaker for Radio Phnom Penh English language news. The Cambodians made it clear they did not want the Americans, they did not want the Cubans, they did not want the Russians or anyone else,

it had to be the British who would provide a speaker. Well, our bureaucracy was not particularly good in providing anyone from the BBC, so the Ambassador (Peter Murray) promptly nominated me as an expert in radio broadcasting in the English language. So, for about twelve months, I became the speaker on Radio Phnom Penh in the English language. I'm glad to say that my transmissions were recorded and studied very carefully in both Bangkok and Saigon. Messages that I passed that I was simply holding the post until we had a BBC representative were greeted with a certain amount of suspicion. My instructions were that for about the first ten minutes of the news, I should do nothing but record internal affairs of Cambodia. It really meant telling people what Sihanouk had done the previous day and what he was proposing to do the following day. But that left me with five minutes of international news that I was able to use in my own way. I used to fill the rest of the time (I had another 15 minutes) with playing my own LP records. Eventually, I got some transcriptions from the BBC, and indeed the BBC did eventually provide an expert who took over from me. But that meant that about half the day I was in fact working inside Radio Phnom Penh in the Ministry of Information. This again I found really quite fascinating because it opened up new vistas to me, and I saw things from outside the embassy.

I only stayed in Cambodia for about eighteen months.”

MMcB: “Presumably we only had a very small post there.”

D Tonkin: “We had a small post, yes. Peter Murray was the Ambassador. He must have had about eight officers. He had one or two military attachés, he had a First Secretary, Richard Hanbury-Tenison, who eventually became Lord Lieutenant of Gwent, a very good friend of mine. He left the Diplomatic Service. There was a commercial secretary and they would have had one or two other people. The embassy that they occupied was at 96 Boulevard Norodom, and is now the residence of the American Ambassador.

That was again quite an interesting time, and, perhaps not all that surprising, when I came back to the Foreign Office, I was posted to South-East Asia Department, with a responsibility particularly for Burma, various islands in the South Pacific, and also Indonesia. But I found myself dragged into Vietnamese affairs at the time. The Americans regarded the South-East Asia Department of the Foreign Office as being rather pinkish and we were not all that welcome in American circles.”

MMcB: “That was 1963?”

D Tonkin: “1963-66.”

MMcB: “They had already started bombing then hadn’t they, in Vietnam?”

D Tonkin: “In 1963, certainly at that time they had a number of advisers in, perhaps as many as 10,000 and were becoming actively involved, and as this developed, I left eventually in 1966. There was the famous Tonkin Gulf, if you remember. I played a very historic role in this.

The Americans bombed, I think it was on a Thursday or Friday. I was the Duty Officer in South-East Asia Department at that time, and we were actually living in our present house, and I had no telephone. The telephone was at the local police station, which then was about 100 yards away, but try as the Duty Officer of the Foreign Office would, he could not make contact with me. So, when I went into the Office the following day, I found the Resident Clerk was really rather upset. ‘What’s the point in having a Duty Officer if you can’t get in touch with him?’ I said, ‘It’s not my fault. I’m just so low on the priority list that I’ve not been awarded one.’ And so Communications Department were in touch with the British Post Office and said, ‘We really think you ought to give Derek Tonkin a telephone, because two things have happened.’ The first was that President Johnson had sent a message to our Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary saying that there were various reasons why they had bombed, and there was a certain amount of

disquiet at quite senior levels that this message had not got through. (It was delayed and eventually the Resident Clerk had done something about it.)

The other thing that happened was that General Ne Win of Burma that weekend had sent a present of mangoes to Her Majesty The Queen, and H M Customs had seized these mangoes on the grounds that we couldn't possibly have fruit coming into this country; it might be contaminated. By the time I managed to clear the mangoes on the Monday or Tuesday, they'd rather gone off, so the Palace were not particularly pleased with Derek Tonkin. And so, rather laconically, the Foreign Office had told BT that President Johnson was not very pleased and that Her Majesty The Queen was not very pleased! It happened on Tuesday morning that a cortège of cars had come along to see where this house that was obviously of such vital importance was, and there was my wife hanging out the nappies. They were quite taken aback that this house could possibly be as important as the Foreign Office had said. But a telephone pole went up, and I had a telephone.

It was when I went back to the Foreign Office in late 1962, early 1963, that I was invited to go for a bridging interview, between branch B and branch A. I went to this interview but didn't perform particularly well because I wasn't clever enough in answering their questions. They asked me, 'Well, you've done really quite remarkably well in learning languages, you've got German and French at Oxford, you then took Polish intermediate, you've got Thai, you've even got Cambodian.' I said, 'Yes, well I just enjoy learning languages, it's great fun.' And I didn't make the right kind of signs, as I should have done, about how important this was for understanding the culture and so on of countries. Anyhow, I was not successful at this first attempt. I'd been in South-East Asia about twelve months when Ted Peck (Sir Edward Peck), who was the Under-Secretary said to me, 'Oh, by the way, Derek, you might like to know that you are now a member of Branch A.' In other words, no further discussion, no more interviews, how damn silly can you get. Quite obviously, this fellow, Derek Tonkin, could never pass an examination to save his life, but he's the sort of man we want. And it just happened, snap, like that, no interview, no further discussion! So that is really how I joined, and

had by that time become a First Secretary. The transition was almost imperceptible. I'm not sure whether it could happen nowadays, or quite how these things happen, but of course recruitment is now rather different because people are brought in at various stages.

As Burma desk officer for three years, one of my roles was to look after Ne Win when he came to this country, as he did almost every year, for a medical check-up. He used to like to play golf at Gleneagles, and he also had, surprisingly, a number of friends in this country. Lord Mountbatten used to help out on occasions, like if we were having particular problems at the time with the nationalisation of British banks in Burma. I'm afraid that our endeavours to get compensation for British property were not very successful. This was, incidentally, the first time that an attempt was made to bribe me in the Foreign Office when a lady of Anglo-Burmese origin, who had a lot of money blocked in Burma, sat with me in the great hall downstairs in Downing Street. She proceeded to put out a number of diamonds and rubies, making it clear that if I could facilitate the recovery of her property, certainly I would do very well out of it. As much as she pushed these diamonds towards me, so I would push them back again, wondering all the time what people who were passing by, under-secretaries and people like that, might be thinking. This was, of course, in the days when we had no interviewing rooms at all. You had to actually interview members of the public in the corridors, at one of those large tables covered with blue baize, with all sorts of eminent people passing to and fro. What I did accept from her was a plate of Burmese sweetmeats, which I took up to the department for our coffee, which we all thoroughly enjoyed. I thought that was reasonable in the circumstances.

I have a particular theory about General Ne Win, which I have not seen in any published work. He was married at that time to a lady called Kitty, Kitty Ne Win, who had been a starlet in Burmese films. Kitty had served at the NAAFI at Mingaladon Airport during the war. She had subsequently married Ne Win because he was a young Burmese army officer, and it was a very happy marriage. Kitty, who was a very attractive lady, undoubtedly had a lot of influence over Ne Win, but two or three years later she died of cancer, and I believe that he was so distraught by this that he never really quite recovered.

I think it did affect him, that the love of his life had gone, and almost from that point onwards he became somewhat embittered. Nothing to do with the British, just that it was his own personal karma, his own personal fate. It may certainly have had some influence on his determination to take Burma out of the twentieth century and put the clock back two hundred years. It was very sad.

I was also there during the Sukarno rise and fall, when the British Embassy was sacked. Andrew Gilchrist was the Ambassador and used to regard me as his personal secretary in London. I would get a telegram from him, like 'They're changing the guard at the palace, with malice.' He would send me a telegram saying, 'Please transfer £1,000 to my wife who is asking for money.' I would say, 'How can I do this?' and he would say, 'Silly fellow, just go to the bank and tell them.' And armed with the telegrams, I would go. Gilchrist would send a telegram, 'I shall be arriving at Heathrow. I shall be very angry if you meet me.' And he meant it, so I didn't meet him. I had a good relationship with him. He was quite a character.

I remember Ambassador Diah being summoned to the Foreign Office by Ted Peck to receive a strong protest about the sacking of the British Embassy by Indonesian mobs, and Ted Peck said, 'We'll keep him waiting.' So Mr Diah was made to wait, 60 minutes or more. There was a joker in the pack at this time, and this was in the rather delightful shape of Devi Sukarno, who was a Japanese lady and had been taken as a wife. Sukarno had a number of wives, but she was formally recognised and had the name of Devi Sukarno. For Devi Sukarno, these political and military machinations of confrontation meant absolutely nothing. Being the delightful lady she was (and still is), she used to attend society weddings in London, would descend on London, would go around Regent Street and Bond Street buying everything, and send the bill to the Indonesian Ambassador. I would have these telephone calls from Heathrow Airport saying, 'We have a lady here who claims to be the wife of a Head of State, but quite obviously, she's just a rather pretty, attractive Japanese girl.' I'd say, 'Well, I have to inform you that if her name is Devi Sukarno, she is indeed, and you must treat her with appropriate courtesy.' With all these problems going on about Indonesian confrontasi against

Malaysia, Devi Sukarno involved in high society in this country caused us quite a merry runaround. I'm quite sure Sukarno had encouraged her to come over here.'

MMcB: "What motive could he possibly have had?'

D Tonkin: "Oh, just pinpricks against the British.

Eventually, confrontation did come to an end. I wish I had more information about this. I was told that we had, in our own way, made some financial arrangement with Sukarno to encourage him that it was time he really came to an end. But I believe it did cost the British Government something like £2 million, in order to induce Sukarno. I do believe what the head of the joint Malaysian-Indonesian Department told me at the time, that there was some financial inducement. Maybe it was to Indonesia generally, but the assumption was that Sukarno would take his cut from all this. In other words, they needed reconstruction, they needed development aid, something had to be done. Eventually I heard, 'Oh, we've bought him off. It'll all come to an end.'"

MMcB: "So it was development aid?'"

D Tonkin: "How it was presented, I don't know. When confrontation came to an end, of course Sukarno didn't last in power longer than another six months or so. There was an attempted coup by the communists. Aidit was the communist leader at that time, and wild elements attempted to assassinate nationalist army leaders who were anti-Communist. A number of them managed to escape, including Nasution, who, if my memory is correct, found asylum in the gardens of the Iraqi Ambassador's residence. He happened to be living next door and hopped over the side and was able to get away. They were able to regroup, take control of the army again, and then began a massive clampdown on the communist and pro-Communist forces in Indonesia, without attacking Sukarno directly. And, I remember, Aidit was pursued throughout Java, and eventually perished somewhere around one of volcanoes around central Java. This whole process took quite a time, and then there were these rather frightening reports that came in, for

example from a consulate in Surabaya, of people who were being murdered and thrown into the compound, heads being thrown into the compound each morning.”

MMcB: “The British Embassy compound?”

D Tonkin: “The British Consulate in Surabaya. We had consulates then in Medan as well as Surabaya. Whether we had one in Bali, I’m not sure, probably not.”

MMcB: “And this was to do with the weeding out of pro-Communist forces? Chinese?”

D Tonkin: “Yes, Chinese as well, but it was mostly Indonesians, and it’s thought that as many as 500,000 may have perished. This sort of number, it’s hard to say, but it was really a frightening massacre by anyone's standards. And of course this so undermined Sukarno’s position that he was replaced. There was an *éminence gris*, who was a foreign minister, called Dr Subandrio. Dr Subandrio, you may remember, was likewise eventually pushed aside.

My three years in the Foreign Office from 1963 to 1966 were again of very considerable interest, although at that time it never seems to have occurred to the Foreign Office that I might need to go and visit Burma or Indonesia. There were no orientation visits. The training I had on Burma was going to see the Head of Department, who was Fred Warner. And Fred Warner would say, ‘Welcome Derek, to South-East Asia Department. You’ll be looking after Burma, here’s your room, and the washrooms are along there.’ And that was it. When I would ask, ‘I’m looking after Burma. What is it I am supposed to do?’ The answer came back ‘Everything. Anything that concerns us at all, you intervene.’ I did find at that time that the Treasury were involved in some obscure negotiation about Burmese sovereign debt. And I thought, ‘Ah, I’d better intervene.’ The Treasury made it pretty clear that this was nothing to do with me. Fred Warner said, ‘You go on. I’ve been waiting for someone to get hold of them.’ So you really felt you had a universal remit to intervene on anything related to Burma, and indeed I did, and this was the name

of the game, certainly in those days. No-one would move, no technical department would move unless the political department said ‘Snap, it’s all right to do so.’ I don’t imagine nowadays that it’s necessarily like that.”

MMcB: “No, I suppose the situation has changed very considerably since then.”

D Tonkin: “This brings us up to 1966 when I was posted back to Warsaw. I was posted back to Warsaw as First Secretary and Head of Chancery. Poland was then in the steady process of democratisation. It was still to be some three or four years before Lech Walensa arrived in the Gdynia shipyards. The Communist Party leader was Eduard Gierek, who was from Silesia, Slansk. He was thought to be very nationalist, and his problems were essentially with the students, with Warsaw University, Warsaw Polytechnic, who decided they needed to secure a little more democracy. It was my first confrontation with a brutal police force, because I would look around the university to see what was going on, and I think a number of our younger people in the Embassy were really rather horrified by the way Polish police beat up students. They had not realised how vicious these confrontations could be.

The two years I had in Warsaw again were very fascinating. I think it’s probably all right for me to mention a matter affecting our friends. I had been posted to Warsaw as First Secretary and Head of Chancery, which meant I had to spend a fair amount of time in the Embassy looking after Embassy affairs, looking at the Polish political situation, and I also naturally made contact with as many Poles as I could. Some years later I was posted as a Counsellor to East Berlin, and just a few years ago, in about 1996, I was in an Eastern part of Berlin which contains the archives of the former State Security Police. They had a number of documents about my time there, one of which was a document which quoted information from the Polish security authorities reporting that I was indeed a first secretary from March 1966 until April 1968, responsible for political affairs in the Embassy. However, I did maintain contact with Polish students and Polish citizens, and it was concluded by the Polish security authorities that I had been head of the intelligence residentura. This caused me considerable amusement because, at the time, the First

Secretary for Cultural Affairs in Warsaw was Colin McColl, subsequently Sir Colin McColl, Head of MI6. He was, of course, as a cultural affairs officer, very much operational outside the Embassy, opening exhibitions, promoting a Polish magazine and doing things very much under Polish eyes. They had obviously concluded that he couldn't possibly be the head of the intelligence residentura, so it must have been me. I would not say who was the head of the residentura, but it certainly wasn't me."

MMcB: "Thank you, yes. That's hilarious really. Did that bring your time in Warsaw to an end? I see you went to Wellington that year."

D Tonkin: "Yes, after Warsaw, I had felt that, rather with tongue in cheek, I had suggested to the Foreign Office that they might send me somewhere where my children could have a delightful time, they were a growing-up young family. So they very kindly sent me to New Zealand, to Wellington, where we spent a delightful four years.

It turned out to be rather more interesting than I might have supposed because this was at the time of Britain's entry into the Common Market, and, forever more, cheese, butter and lamb became engraved on my consciousness. What I remember particularly from my time in New Zealand was going around the country talking to, particularly farming, groups, trying to explain to them why it would be a good thing if Britain should join the Common Market. Now, if you're faced with 500 sheep farmers at Invercargill in the south and you're trying to persuade them it's a good thing that there will be new tariffs imposed on their exports of lamb to Britain, that is not an easy task to undertake at all.

My posting to New Zealand at that time was in the context of the amalgamation of the Commonwealth and the Foreign Offices, and I was in fact one of the first Foreign Office personnel to arrive in Wellington. The High Commissioner, Sir Ian MacLennan, was naturally of Commonwealth Relations Office origins, and he found it very puzzling indeed that I should feel, as Head of Chancery, that I needed to send a report to the Foreign Office about trade unions in New Zealand. He couldn't for the life of him see why I should be interfering in the internal affairs of a Commonwealth country. I had

some difficulty in explaining to him that this was part of Foreign Office traditions and he must excuse me if I felt that this could be of interest to certain people in London.”

MMcB: “Who, specifically, was it of interest to?”

D Tonkin: “Well, in those days there was, particularly, a Labour Adviser in the Foreign Office, and they were anxious to collect information about labour activities on a world-wide basis, particularly in relation to Britain, concerns with the ILO (International Labour Organisation), and so on. But also because it very much reflected the politics of the country, and you couldn’t really claim to be following the internal politics of New Zealand without looking at the trade unions.”

MMcB: “Originally, the Commonwealth Relations Office had been doing that as well, had they not?”

D Tonkin: “No, not at all. As far as I could see, I was the first person who had ever thought that it was appropriate to report on what was seen, by certain members, and indeed by the High Commissioner himself, as being part of the internal affairs of a Commonwealth country. After all, he played golf with the Prime Minister, and it was not the sort of thing Commonwealth countries did among themselves, was it?”

MMcB: “When you were talking to the farmers in Invercargill about the reasons why Britain needed to go into the Common Market, how did you present that argument to them? What countervailing advantages could you produce?”

D Tonkin: “It was essentially a question of reassuring them that there would still be a market for New Zealand butter and lamb, in particular, but not for cheese.”

MMcB: “They were protected weren’t they?”

D Tonkin: “They were protected, but New Zealand lamb and New Zealand butter, to this day, remain very much sought-after New Zealand exports to this country. Of course, if you are a farmer you are almost by definition very much concerned about your markets. I think we did understand their anxieties. The New Zealanders were also particularly astute in negotiating, particularly with the British Government, in that they appealed, over the heads of the British Government, direct to the British consumer. And so, advertisements were appearing on British television for New Zealand farming products, virtually to the chagrin of British ministers who realised that New Zealanders had recognised that a fair deal for New Zealand could best be secured by appealing directly to the British electorate, and that meant particularly to British housewives. I give them full credit for having lobbied, I think very effectively, in this way. In the event, New Zealand had a pretty good deal on butter and lamb. As far as cheese is concerned, 70% of New Zealand cheese at that time was cheddar cheese from factories in Taranaki, which were due for replacement in any case. I don’t think the New Zealanders worried too much that sales of New Zealand cheddar were going to be threatened.”

MMcB: “At the same time, of course, British exports to New Zealand were not doing terribly well because they were all buying Japanese cars.”

D Tonkin: “Well, this is true. This was the time of the great change when a traditional British market in New Zealand was quietly being taken over by the Japanese. The argument that we used was, ‘We have to buy your butter, cheese and lamb, so you’ll have to buy our trucks and cars, it’s as simple as that. And if you don’t like it, well, that’s tough.’ Of course, you had a situation where some two-thirds of the population of New Zealand, because of their family contacts with Britain, had the right of entry into Britain, and it was during my time in New Zealand that this term ‘patrial’ was invented. I might even claim some personal credit myself for this, because I did suggest to London that anyone who could claim to have had one British grandparent should have the right of entry, at least, into Britain. This was accepted: right of entry into Britain, not acquisition of British citizenship as such, which would take five years. But eventually the word ‘patrial’ was coined to express this close relationship. However, I did have trouble with

the other one-third, who didn't have this right of entry, particularly with those with Maori connections, who at once suggested that there was something racist about this approach. My answer was simply, 'You can't please everyone. We have managed to please two-thirds of the population, and that's better than pleasing none of the population.' It was rather left at that."

MMcB: "So you enjoyed New Zealand?"

D Tonkin: "New Zealand we enjoyed. I can't say that it was all that stimulating intellectually. The issues of Common Market were essentially political and economic. We also had responsibility, of course, from New Zealand in looking after British interests in such places as Western Samoa, and even the Pitcairn Islands. The High Commissioner to New Zealand was Governor of the Pitcairns. I never actually made it to the Pitcairns, nor did I make it to Western Samoa, but the Governor was also responsible for Fiji, not as resident governor, but as Governor-General, so he had these interests in the South Pacific. There were also the Pacific Territories, like New Caledonia, New Hebrides, where we were expected to maintain a watching brief. Although I never succeeded in visiting any of them, I did sit on a committee that approved, for example, Pitcairn stamps, so I had plenty to interest myself."

MMcB: "I'm sure it must have been very enjoyable. After four years there, you came back to the Foreign Office."

D Tonkin: "I came back to the Foreign Office where I joined East European and Soviet Department. I was particularly responsible for Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania. But only for about a year. When I arrived in London, we had, I think it was in 1971, expelled some 105 Soviet diplomatic officials. These were particularly people attached to the Soviet Trade Delegation. The whole matter had got quite out of control. The Russians were simply flooding us with intelligence officers. We had to take a stand, so Alec Douglas-Home arranged for 105 of these to be expelled. Now I was able to conduct my own little purge against the Czechs. There were twenty-

one diplomats in the Czech Embassy. We had identified seven of them as being intelligence officers, whose activities were unacceptable. The Czech Ambassador was summoned and told he must remove those seven people who he would know were intelligence officers. Well, the inevitable happened. He did remove seven, but none of them was on our list. He was then summoned again and presented with another list of seven where they were actually named, so within a matter of two months, fourteen out of twenty-one Czech diplomats had been removed.”

MMcB: “When you say that their behaviour had been shown to be unacceptable, in what way had that been demonstrated? How would you become aware of the fact?”

D Tonkin: “We had reports from our Security Service that they were engaged in activities which showed that they were intelligence officers seeking to acquire information in improper ways.”

MMcB: “Such as?”

D Tonkin: “By making contacts particularly with people in sensitive situations and seeking to utilise them to secure intelligence and information. They had initially been identified by the pattern of their activities. It was felt that there was sufficient information against them that was available to our authorities to summon the Czech Ambassador and tell him that these seven must be removed. He knew exactly who they were, just as we did. It is now nearly thirty years ago, and I can’t go into any particular details because I wouldn’t remember them. But I remember the result of the expulsion of fourteen Czechs, which hardly caused a ripple in the British press. They did retaliate, but only by removing, I think two of our diplomats in Prague, one of whom was coming to the end of his tour in any case, and another one who happened to be on home leave at the time. So it was a minimal reaction. It was a response of the kind that we had expected, and it was to be seen very much in the context of the action taken a year previously against the Soviet Embassy and the Soviet Trade Delegation.

MMcB: “Had they succeeded in asking us to change anyone who was particularly appropriate?”

D Tonkin: “I would say the answer is yes. They had probably identified one or two people who they knew were probably not pursuing normal Foreign Office functions. I think the Czechs were very shrewd and very clever, far more sophisticated than the Russians themselves. I think we always had a high respect for the Czech intelligence service, but they had been up to all sorts of tricks in Prague against our people. For example, they identified one young British diplomat who tended to drink a little too much, and one evening he was made to knock over, and apparently kill, a Czech pedestrian. It was subsequently shown that he, in fact, hadn't touched anyone, it was simply shown that a dummy that had been thrown in his way and blood spattered on the windscreen. It was a clear fix, but the young man had not been sober enough to understand what was happening. So, you know, they were engaged in somewhat offensive operations against us, offensive in both senses of the word. I think we were rather pleased when they were cut down to size. In any case, what does a Czech Embassy need twenty-one senior officers for, key staff, at that particular time? The answer was no, not at all. We left their military attachés. You always leave military attachés because there is a quiet understanding that they must be spies, so what's the point of expelling them. They are, as it were, declared intelligence officers. They go around in uniform in any case.

I stayed in East European and Soviet Department for a year, when I was promoted to Counsellor and joined the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department. As you know, PUSD, is a euphemism for liaison with the intelligence and security authorities, although it is also much concerned with the Cabinet Office and the Joint Intelligence Committee. I was a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee, as the Foreign Office representative, for about two years. I found this particularly interesting, because our task was primarily to produce for ministers, the red book of intelligence, a weekly digest of intelligence and, by commission, any special assessments that were needed. The JIC at the time consisted (it always had a Foreign Office chairman) of the heads of the three intelligence services,

the Security Service, the Assessments Staff. Percy Cradock used to be head of the Assessments Staff. I'm not quite sure why I, as a counsellor, represented the Foreign Office, but I did, and subsequently, some four or five years later, in fact my particular post was removed, and they had a Deputy Under-Secretary who took over when they appointed an intelligence co-ordinator. However, it was very fascinating for me as a new counsellor to be involved with these exalted people who had a wealth of experience at their disposal."

MMcB: "So what you were doing was basically producing information for ministers or the Cabinet about current problems?"

D Tonkin: "Yes, it was largely co-ordination of intelligence and information sources so that at least the intelligence staff had all the available information at their disposal. You could say that the JIC was the only body in Whitehall that had inputs from every conceivable operational organisation. It was, I think, for that reason that ministers felt that the intelligence derived from these weekly assessments was really all they needed, and what they wanted was something short. They simply didn't have time to read page after page: if you'd like to produce an annex, fine, but please make your weekly intelligence assessment as short as possible, and concentrate on what is really essential, what is important.

During that time, I covered such things as the collapse of South Vietnam (you saw it coming day by day) and the invasion of Cyprus by the Turks. Again, we knew it was going to happen. We had advance intelligence about Turkish aircraft operations, we knew that they were coming. So at least you knew, even though there was nothing you could do about it. Very often, the problem with intelligence is that you have advance warning, but you really can't take any action to prevent it, because it would give the game away, they will know that you've derived this from some internal source.

One of my responsibilities was liaison with GCHQ in Cheltenham, which at that time was publicly declared as a defence research establishment, although everyone knew it

was concerned with the interception of communications. One of the particular problems I had was that people were beginning to publish their wartime memoirs, particularly how enigma had been broken.

I was also responsible for vetting the memoirs of SOE (Special Operations Executive) operatives, particularly operations in France. This I found particularly fascinating, because, really even to this day, SOE has remained very secretive about their operations. I think the people who did take part in the SOE, like those who were dropped in France, although there have been official histories, have shown the highest level of integrity in not feeling compelled to spill the beans, as so many others have felt necessary. In which context I would say, I'm absolutely astonished at Stella Rimington (recent Head of MI5). I cannot imagine what has got into her head. All I can assume is that she wants to make a fast buck, and I think this is really very sad, very depressing. It is all so unnecessary that a person with such responsibility should feel compelled to do this, for no apparent reason other than to eke out what may be an inadequate government pension."

MMcB: "It can't be all that inadequate."

D Tonkin: "No, I wouldn't have thought so as Director-General. I was also responsible at the same time for liaison with the Security Service, and I knew something of their activities. If I could just say in passing, something personally entertaining. My wife, Doreen, was selected for GCHQ and was offered a post there after she graduated from Oxford, but she decided not to take it up because she thought it would be a far better bet to marry me. It wasn't until twenty years later that I actually discovered from her that she had been to GCHQ, and the reason was that in PUSD, I used to go down to Cheltenham every six weeks for liaison, and she used to tax me about why I was going to Cheltenham. I used to say I was going to a defence establishment there, but she would say rather jokingly, 'I don't believe you. You must have a girlfriend down there.' Eventually she said, 'You're not by any chance going to GCHQ are you? I know all about it, but I've never told you.' It was one of the secrets we had between ourselves.

One of the things I was particularly asked to do by under-secretaries was to evaluate the utility of intelligence to our foreign policy. Now, tremendous effort is being made, what value is it to us? Does it matter a damn if we have all these agents all over the world? If you're collecting all this information, what do you do with it? Please show, in practical terms. The answer was, surprisingly, that every three months or so, you would have a real gem, you would have something of really very far-reaching importance. But much of it, I'm afraid, didn't influence British interests to all that extent. I said it wasn't for me to evaluate, in the last resort, how important this was, but I could point to specific operations where the intelligence gained had been absolutely invaluable, and it tended to be of the more sensitive variety. But there were operations that I did think gave us a very valuable insight. There were occasions where quite sophisticated opponents have made mistakes in their transmission of signals, and it was those mistakes that you were waiting for, even occasions where, for reasons which were quite unknown, you had en clair messages coming out, the equivalent today of computer glitches. They happened then, so you had to maintain this vast apparatus in order to pick up these particular occasions. I think in retrospect, you could argue that rather a lot of money was spent."

MMcB: "It didn't stop us getting involved in the Falklands war, did it?"

D Tonkin: "No, it didn't, and I think we saw the Falklands coming. In fact, I can remember doing an intelligence paper assessing the possibility of reinforcing the Falklands, and the answer was, 'Only with very great difficulty.' We could land aircraft there, but they couldn't take off again. I think that at the end of the day, given the atmosphere, we really had no alternative but to devote these resources, particularly directed against the Soviet threat. I do remember being pushed by under-secretaries to show, so that at least they could tell the ministers in confidence, that there had been occasions when this intelligence had been invaluable to British interests. On the whole, I was able to do so. But a lot of money was being spent, and of course since my time, the expenditure on computer power has risen very dramatically. I don't know nowadays how much is being spent, but I shouldn't have thought that it was all that essential."

MMcB: “It’s very difficult to compare that kind of nugget of information with the steady flow of stuff that you get from a well-functioning embassy.”

D Tonkin: “And there was this discrepancy, this dichotomy, between reports that were coming from ‘our friends’ channels, who were represented in particular embassies, and we would say, ‘But this is just political reporting. Why hasn’t this been fed into the proper machine?’ We tried to establish guidelines. What we wanted was, if there was raw information from particular sources, fine, but please, we don’t want your interpretation, your analysis. That should be done by the embassy. Of course, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there must have been a lot of soul-searching within the intelligence authorities about the nature of their role, but this was after my time. But certainly, in my time, it was pretty clear where the enemy was and where our targets were.

So that was two years in PUSD, and in 1976, I went to East Germany, as Commercial Counsellor, which was, again, my first truly commercial role. We had only opened diplomatic relations with East Germany three years previously.”

MMcB: “Really, as late as that?”

D Tonkin: “Yes, it was really very late. This was following the signature of a treaty of relations between East and West Germany, under which the Germans had a permanent representation, as they called it, in East Berlin, but we had embassies. Our embassy was in Unter den Linden, about 200 yards from the Brandenburg Gate, but of course you couldn’t walk through it, although we tried, as far as we could, to treat Berlin as a single city. Many of my meetings were in West Berlin, with the British Military authorities. My wife used to shop in West Berlin as much as in East Berlin. We used to have our bank accounts, I used to join a tennis club in West Berlin, so I was continually criss-crossing the border, and on no occasion did we ever have any trouble with the East German authorities. There was a diplomatic channel you went through, and you hardly needed to slow your car, it just came to a stop, then you drove through. They knew, in

any case, who we were. They were never quite sure who you had in the back of your car, and there were occasions when it was believed, dare I say, some Middle East or South American diplomats smuggled young ladies out in the back of their cars. There was a famous occasion where an Egyptian had smuggled his young lady out, but not on the night they had thought, so when he arrived he was stopped, his boot was opened and there was nothing there. She came the following night and they didn't dare open again, but they knew there was something going on.

We enjoyed East Berlin as well. The East Germans were a little puzzled because, although I was Commercial Counsellor, and there was also a Political Counsellor, Catherine Pestell, as Commercial Counsellor, I always became Chargé d'Affaires when the ambassador was absent. They could not understand why the Commercial Counsellor was appointed Chargé d'Affaires and not the Political Counsellor. The answer was quite simple. I had the seniority. I was about twelve months ahead of Catherine in my elevation to the rank of Counsellor. I used to say to them, 'But you need not worry. It's because we know that economic affairs are more important, as good Marxists, than political affairs.'

I was able to go around East Germany quite a lot. The Leipzig Fair was a regular six-monthly meeting. I used to go to factories, I used to take British delegations around. I realised very quickly what a terrible state East German industry was in. The West Germans had not understood this when unification eventually came. The West Germans had no idea what they were taking over. One very amusing incident. My wife and I went to Rostok for a weekend. We stayed at a hotel there and in the evening we came down and, as in most German restaurants, you have to wait to be seated. We were told we were most unfortunate there was no separate table for us and would we mind if we joined an East German couple. I said, 'No, not at all,' and they sat us as a couple with an East German who turned out to be one of East Germany's leading atomic physicists. No-one in their right mind would ever have seated a British diplomat next to one of East Germany's leading atomic physicists."

MMcB: “How did you discover that? You got talking to him?”

D Tonkin: “Oh, he told me straight away. I said, ‘I have to say I’m from the British Embassy,’ and he said, ‘Oh, you needn’t worry, I’m from the Atomic Institute.’ It was really very hilarious. He told me about his life, and he said, ‘You know, we are very well looked after. We have a flat in Berlin, we have a dacha in the countryside, I can come on holidays whenever I wish, we have a car, we can always go on holiday, anywhere, to any foreign country, provided we go east and not west.’ He accepted this. I did not attempt to make any contact, take his name or anything like that, but it was really very interesting.”

MMcB: “This is 1976. This was a time when Britain was being obliged to go to the IMF for funds to bail our government out of the consequences of its own gross financial mismanagement. Was there any sort of repercussion from this in East Germany at that time?”

D Tonkin: “Not that I saw.”

MMcB: “They probably weren’t aware of it.”

D Tonkin: “Well, they would probably have been aware of it but would have recognised that it was nowhere near as serious as their own economic problems. There were a number of British companies who were interested in developing investment, relations, with East Germany. Many of them used to work, and I think sensibly so, through West German subsidiaries, not least because of what was known as Inner German trade (Innerdeutsche Handel), whereby there was customs-free access to the West German market for East German goods. So why get involved in complex direct relationships when it was often easier to work through a West German subsidiary or associated company.

It was a very artificial division, the city. We found, on the eastern side, there was rather more of a sense of social responsibility, the name of the game was not making money, as it was in West Berlin. We found a deep involvement by East German citizens in their factory, in the school, they were always being encouraged to participate, not of course to take control, but to participate. When I asked them, 'Are you not interested in going to West Berlin?' their answer was, 'Well, it's something we never think about because it's dangerous for us to think about it.' It's rather like you and I going out to Cowes and seeing an ocean-going yacht and thinking how nice it would be to go on one of those, but it's not for me."

MMcB: "I find this idea of inter-German trade rather interesting, because it suggests that relations between East and West Germany were a good deal closer than they might have appeared in countries where they were in receipt of embassies from both sides, and where there was an ideological divide. How did it work?"

D Tonkin: "Well, the first thing is, that there were of course large numbers of West German businessmen who used to go into East Germany on a regular basis, on any one day. At the checkpoints you could see scores of cars going across, and they were West German businessmen and West German relatives, and so there was a very close relationship at the working level. Also, it's true, that almost anywhere in East Germany you could receive West German television, certainly in Berlin itself. There was no attempt made to control it, except sometimes in the schools, particularly doctrinaire masters and schoolmistresses would ask their children whether the clock they saw on television was square or round. And if you gave the wrong answer, it meant the family was looking at West German rather than East German television. And there were those young communist enthusiasts who would climb up chimney stacks to re-direct aerials, but it didn't really last for very long.

I think our concerns were of an essentially commercial nature. We felt that a lot of goods from Eastern Europe that were flooding into East Germany, were being relabelled as East German products, and that they were then finding their way into West Germany. This

was particularly true of the clothing trade, electrical equipment, machine tools. It was so easy to send machinery that was three-quarters finished into an East German factory where it was put together and relabelled. What I found was very surprising, was that the West Germans had not understood the nature of East German society, despite their close contacts, they had not understood how decrepit East German industry really was, to what extent their factories had been run down. The assumption was, when the two Germanies came together, that within a very short time, East Germany could be raised to the material level of West Germany, and this simply wasn't possible. The amount of investment that was needed, the amount of change in thought, in work patterns, that was needed, was beyond what the West Germans had supposed."

MMcB: "You think that was a miscalculation and not something they decided to overlook?"

D Tonkin: "No. They had not understood this; they had not realised it. One of the forms of expertise that I developed was what the Germans would call an Ostexpert; I knew what Eastern Europe was all about. I'd had a lot of experience of it, and however much you tried to tell the West Germans 'Do you realise that this chemical factory in Schwedt is coming apart at the seams? Do you understand the mentality of these people who are not able to take decisions for themselves unless someone directs them? Can you interpret East German statistics when they say that they have eighty-three refrigerators per hundred families, and in West Germany you have ninety-four, do you realise that this eighty-three means that they have something of some kind that might possibly work in their homes, but that if you go to buy a new refrigerator there is small, medium and large, except they're out of medium and there are no large ones in that you want, and that you can have a small one?' These statistics tended to show that in terms of standard of living, East Germany was even above Britain. It simply wasn't true. You could see it wasn't true.

I also found it interesting because my wife had studied German at Oxford, as I had, and the language in East Germany had remained static, ever since the Second World War.

They were still talking the classical German that we understood, whereas in West Germany it had changed out of almost all recognition. So, as my wife went along the Bornholmer Strasse, on the East German side she would buy vegetables that were very cheap, she would then go into West Berlin, on the same street, to buy tropical fruits that were not easily available. Whereas in East Germany she would say, ‘Haben Sie Pampelmuse?’ which are grapefruit, the moment you went over you’d say, ‘Gibt’s heute Grapefruit?’ They’d taken over this English word ‘grapefruit’. So we were similarly finding you had to adjust even the language. Of course, there was the usual communist terminology used over there, where solidarity and friendship and peace meant something totally different from what was meant in the west.

So that was four years we had in East Germany. We were rather pleased to go there because we had studied German at Oxford and had never had a German-speaking post. We had virtually to relearn the language, so although I knew off by heart, the German poets, large slabs of Goethe and Schiller and so on, I had not really had any colloquial practice.”

MMcB: “That’s interesting. Four years there, and then?”

D Tonkin: “Four years there, and then I had my first ambassadorial post in Hanoi.”

MMcB: “Gosh, East Berlin to Hanoi.”

D Tonkin: “Yes, East Berlin to Hanoi. What had I done wrong?! I said to Security Department at the time, ‘I understand there is a rule that you shouldn’t really spend more than about three years behind the Iron Curtain. Here I’ve already spent four and you’re giving me another two years.’ Their answer was, ‘Well, you’re the man for the job. We’re really quite happy for you to go.’”

First of all, I have a very interesting name – Tonkin – which is, as you know, like the French ‘Tonkin’. This was the name of the northern province of Vietnam. But the name

'Tonkin' in fact is derived by the French from an old name for Hanoi, which is 'Dong Kinh'. You will know that in Chinese 'Peking' is northern capital, 'Chungking' is middle, and so 'Dong Kinh' is eastern capital. And it was this name, old name for Hanoi, that was applied by the French to the protectorate and to the gulf. So the first thing was, here is this chap called Tonkin who has come as ambassador to Hanoi. It must be black British humour. The other thing I now realise is that my file of some 280 documents that I had seen in the former East German intelligence authorities, must have been sent to Hanoi, so they were expecting someone who quite obviously had all these intelligence connections, and had been head of the residentura in Warsaw, hadn't he? None of which, of course, was true.

My time in Hanoi was dominated by the Cambodian situation. The Vietnamese had gone into Cambodia in 1979. They had taken over the country in a very short time, removed the Khmer Rouge, but the problem in the United Nations was that the Khmer Rouge, under Pol Pot, still occupied the Cambodian seat. However, it was about this time that the Russians went into Afghanistan, a serious breach of sovereignty, and under the influence of these breaches of international sovereignty, concerns about human rights tended to play second fiddle. It was also true that, even by 1979, there was not a universal awareness of the horrors of the Pol Pot regime. It took about three years, until 1982, for the international community to accept that they couldn't possibly continue to accept Khmer Rouge credentials at the United Nations. And so arrangements were made with Sihanouk and with others that you would have a coalition government of democratic Kampuchea, CGDK, that came into existence. I'm afraid it was very much a fig leaf for the Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk himself was appalled that this coalition, of which he was now the Head of State, continued to use the Khmer Rouge flag and continued to use the Khmer Rouge national anthem, which was all about rivers of blood flowing. I've no doubt, in retrospect, that the western community made a mistake in accepting, first, Khmer Rouge credentials, and secondly, the CGDK.

From Hanoi, I used to argue that, in my view, the Cambodian seat in the United Nations should be kept vacant until there was an act of self-determination, supervised by the UN.

It was much better to keep the seat vacant. You can allow delegations to come and address the UN, but keep the seat vacant, because quite obviously no-one deserves to occupy that seat. The feeling at the time was that their experience with empty seats, for example after the Hungarian uprising, had not been satisfactory. It was argued that it was preferable that someone should occupy the seat, so that there should be debate. It was also true that at that time, we were concerned with breaches of sovereignty. You had not only the Vietnamese moving into Cambodia, you had the Soviets moving into Afghanistan, you had the Argentinians and the Falkland Islands, and those were three events that caused very considerable concern. The feeling was, 'You must draw a line. You can't possibly accept this.' However, the issue of human rights would certainly, nowadays, have assumed even more importance, and my proposal, again as a fairly new ambassador in Hanoi and in a fairly junior post, was quietly swept under the carpet, as I would expect it to be. In retrospect, I still believe it would have been the best solution to have kept the seat vacant.

The Vietnamese, of course, were welcomed as liberators when they went into Cambodia. Their stay in Cambodia, that lasted until about 1989, ten years, was on the whole benevolent and beneficent, but, unfortunately they kept on saying that the situation is irreversible and we're there to stay. As far as they were concerned, Cambodia, like Laos, was once again under their influence. This was something that the international community was not prepared to accept, and this is why very considerable pressures, including embargoes, were put on Vietnam to persuade them to withdraw. It's one of the few occasions in history where diplomatic pressures and economic embargoes really have produced a result. So frequently, embargoes only help the people you're trying to persuade to move. For example, in South Africa, we applied an embargo on oil, an embargo on military equipment. The South Africans developed their own oil, oil from coal technology, through SASOL; they developed their own defence industry and became exporters. South Africa was a post I went to after Hanoi, so it was of particular interest to me.

Had the Vietnamese stayed in Cambodia only twelve months and handed the problem over to the United Nations, they would have received universal acclaim. Sihanouk himself has said that they were welcomed as liberators because no-one else was going to save them from the Khmer Rouge. I'm afraid the Americans as well, at that time, were still smarting after their defeat in Vietnam. There were a number of American agencies operating on the Thai-Cambodian frontier who gave support to the Khmer Rouge, helped to re-arm them, gave them support and guidance, simply because they were there to attack the Vietnamese. Eventually, the Americans stopped this, but it did last for about a couple of years. Agencies were out of control. It wasn't American policy, it wasn't State Department, it wasn't White House policy, but it's what they did, and they were able to get away with it because American attitudes towards Indo-China at that time were very much coloured by their defeat in Vietnam in 1975. Britain earned considerable support from Vietnam because we were one of the first to withdraw our recognition from the Khmer Rouge as such; we refused to accept them.

My time in Vietnam was really rather fascinating. Living conditions were very tough in Hanoi. We were on twenty-four hours' notice to decamp, because the Chinese had already made attacks across the frontier, they could be in Hanoi with twenty-four hours, there was concern about the safety of the Diplomatic Corps. Living there was tough. We imported almost all the supplies and equipment we needed; you could buy very little food on the local market; there were no medicines. We had a very small embassy. The climate is not good in Hanoi; times were difficult. Our own staff, secretaries would come for three months, junior staff would come for six months; we managed to last for two years.

But, you know, it's one of those posts that I look back on very favourably. It gave me, overall, a preference for the people of the north to the people of the south. If I am asked, 'Should I go to north or south Vietnam?' I say, 'Go to the north.' It's the cradle of Vietnamese civilisation; you have settlements going back 1,000, 1500 years; the old capitals were there, are there. It is really the place you should go to understand Vietnam, whereas the south is largely the result of Vietnamese conquest, coming down and taking

over Annam, taking over Khmer populations, which used to extend right across even to where Saigon is today. Saigon used to be a Cambodian provincial capital called Prey Nokor, the city in the forest. It was then settled by immigrants from Hainan, who gave it the name of Saigon and explains why there was a population, even today, of some half a million Chinese. There used to be nearly a million Chinese down there, and most of them did not have Vietnamese nationality, whereas the Chinese in the north had gone a long time ago. There were only ever some 5,000 Chinese in Hanoi, but in the south they were there in great numbers, and they had mostly come from Hainan.”

MMcB: “Had they gone there for commercial reasons?”

D Tonkin: “For commercial reasons. In fact, I remember telling the Prime Minister at the time, Pham Van Dong, who died only earlier this year. He said to me, ‘Tell me something about the Falkland Islands?’ and I explained how our involvement in the Falkland Islands as a staging post on the way to Australia and New Zealand had happened, that it was really quite a long way from the Argentinian mainland, and that it was virtually uninhabited. We believed we had as much right to be there as anyone else. ‘In any case,’ I said to him ‘We’ve been in the Falkland Islands for about as long as you have been in Kien Giang and Ca Mau’ in Vietnam, which is right in the south, which was about the time the Vietnamese finally took over those Cambodian provinces. Then the French came in and said to the Vietnamese, ‘Stop it, you’ve got enough of Cambodia already, we’re going to divide you up now into three lots, Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and we’ll retain Cambodia.’ He saw the point, but he said to me, ‘Nevertheless, you will understand, Mr Ambassador, we shall have to vote in favour of anti-colonialism and an end to the colonial situation. It doesn’t matter to us who takes over.’

Provided the Vietnamese were not involved themselves, they were always prepared to listen to what you had to say, and were certainly very pragmatic in their reaction, in their responses.

It was unfortunate about the Cambodian seat, because even to this day, it remains something we cannot explain away, why it is that even though we had begun to have knowledge of the horrors of the Pol Pot regime, for three years we allowed them to stay in that seat. And for the next ten years we allowed them to play a major role in the United Nations.

Then I came back from Hanoi, and the Foreign Office were not quite sure what to do with me. It's one of those situations where I'd run out of leave and I said, 'Well, I'd be interested in a post, somewhere. What do you have in mind?' Eventually they said, 'How would you like South Africa?' And they said, 'Of course, you wouldn't be there as Ambassador, you'd be there as Minister.' I said, 'Well, that sounds fine.' They said, 'The reason we want you to go to South Africa is that you know absolutely nothing about the country, and we want you to go there and find out exactly what is going on. Your expertise has been in political analysis in foreign countries and we want someone to look at South Africa who is completely new. Tell us what you think, because when you go there, the South Africans will be all over you to see whether you are for or against them. One of the problems is as it is for the Arabists. They go to Egypt or Saudi Arabia. They're known, because they've been involved for twenty or thirty years, and people know whether they're pro or anti Israeli, or pro or anti Arabs. You're completely new. Your role is simply to go around and find out what you can, and tell us what is going to happen to this country.'

I had a kind of roving role, six months in Pretoria, six months in Cape Town, but I spent an awful lot of time going around the country talking to the various communities there."

MMcB: "Because the Embassy goes from one place to the other."

D Tonkin: "It goes from one place to the other every six months, but I decided, during the second part of my tour, that I would stay in Pretoria; I wouldn't go down to Cape Town, I'd much rather stay in Pretoria and see what was happening in the Transvaal during the time that Parliament was down there. I said I could always go down to Cape

Town if ever I needed to. After three years, looking at it, purely analysing the country from a Foreign Office perspective, with Foreign Office expertise, I said that first of all the situation is really very complex indeed. You have no idea how complex it is, but I can tell you it is. Even if you take just the English-speaking communities in South Africa, I can tell you that there are at least a dozen separate communities; there are the sort of Victorian people in Cape Town, there are people in Kimberley, the old Rhodes, there are the go-getters in Johannesburg, there are the retired Indian Army officers in the Eastern Transvaal. When you go down to Natal, you're looking at the Pacific and Australia. I said that they may be English-speaking communities but they all have different mentalities, different characters, different approaches, even different languages. There are so many variations. I said that the same is true of the Afrikaaners; there is not just one Afrikaaner, there's a whole range of Afrikaaners, and even the language they speak is different, from the Cape, round Stellenbosch to what they speak in Natal and the Orange Free State. The Orange Free State was so 'verkramp', so bigotted, when our driver used to drive us down from Pretoria to Cape Town, he could not stay overnight in the Orange Free State because there was nowhere for a black driver to stay. He was not allowed to stay at our white hotel because there were no rooms at the back for drivers. He was just expected to be there. Blacks were on the farms and that's where they were supposed to be.

I did talk to people quite a lot, and in the end I came to the conclusion that it was going to be all right. I said that the reason is that, whereas many of the English-speaking communities have rights of entry into Britain, the Afrikaaners will have to compromise because they have nowhere to go. Although most of them, historically, went to South Africa intending to live on their own, and not wanting to employ any blacks, willy-nilly they had become involved with the black community, and somehow they would work it out. And this, indeed, is what came to pass. It was F W de Klerk, who took over from P W Botha, who saw the light, and although he's a dyed-in-the-wool Afrikaaner, said there has to be change and there has to be a resolution, Mandela has to be released, and that is it.

I remember I sent a fairly brief report after my three years, where I simply used a few Afrikaaner and black African quotations, almost of a semi-humorous variety, of blacks saying of Afrikaaners, 'Well, they've thought this way for so long, it's going to take them time to change.' I had a rather interesting experience there because Ewen Fergusson was the Ambassador, and I'm sure he won't mind if I tell this, but he had a rather serious bout of hepatitis which weakened him very considerably. He was in hospital for about two or three weeks, he was then convalescent for as long as six months, and Ewen being the sort of chap he is, wanted to take control as soon as he possibly could. I would go and see Ewen, propped up in bed, and say, 'Here's a couple of telegrams for you to see.' By the time he'd got to page three he'd fallen asleep. I reported all this to the Foreign Office, and I had a conspiracy with the Foreign Office. They would pay me the rate for Chargé d'Affaires until Ewen was declared fit to resume, but until that point I was not to tell him that I was being paid as his replacement. He did recover, of course, eventually, but he took a good six months, and I quite enjoyed the time as Chargé d'Affaires, hardly 'ad interim' but by arrangement with the Foreign Office.

In those three years, the declining years of apartheid, 1983-86, you could see the end coming. The concerns internationally were that it should not be a bloody end, and there were a lot of apocalyptic reports written about what was likely to happen. But I said, 'No, I think it'll be all right.' The big problem, of course, nowadays, is security. If you talk to anyone who's been in South Africa, it really is very rough. But the transition, and the first few years of a black-dominated government, were successful. I began to realise how little the anti-apartheid movement in Britain actually contributed. When I came back from South Africa, I really knew about the country far better than anyone else. No-one wanted to talk to me, absolutely no-one. It shattered their illusions, anti-apartheid movement, no-one wanted even to have lunch with me, or discuss this or discuss that. So I said, well these people obviously have their own careers. When you look at people like Bishop Huddleston, a crusader who went back to South Africa, although he recently died, he had to come away again; they just couldn't stand the old boy. I think rather amusedly of Peter Hain in his present position. He established his credentials, and now he has to deal with the likes of Mugabe. And I think, 'Yes, you will have your problems with him

as well.’ But the short answer is that people simply didn’t want to know how complex the situation was and what the relationship was between Afrikaaners and blacks; it was so different, depending entirely on where you were, who you were dealing with. There was a recognition that it was, in many ways, to do with political control, but there were areas in Stellenbosch, and even on campuses in Pretoria which were totally relaxed, always were totally relaxed. The Orange Free State was a complete write-off, parts of the Eastern Transvaal were really very rough, very tough indeed.’

MMcB: “You mean opposed to the idea of . . .”

D Tonkin: “. . . of any accommodation with blacks at all. Very right-wing. There were Afrikaaner resistance movements and all that, but they all withered away. There was a general recognition by the Afrikaaners that an accommodation was unavoidable, that something had to be done, and that it was an economic nonsense. This moved them to recognise that they had to do something. Difficult to know what to do with the country nowadays. At least the transition has been made and it is now up to them.”

MMcB: “One hopes that somebody will follow in their footsteps in Rhodesia.”

D Tonkin: “Yes, but I don’t think so. The whites in any case still represent a very sizeable community and have control over fire-power, which at the end of the day could be very important.

When I was in South Africa, this very important question of ‘your last diplomatic post’ came up. You know, it is very important when you spend some 30 years in the Diplomatic Service, and you’re wondering what are you going to get in the end. There were two possible posts. One was Warsaw and one was Bangkok. It just happened that I had the right experience and qualifications for Bangkok. They needed something more than pure knowledge of Thai affairs. Cambodia was still a very hot political potato and they needed someone with Indo-China experience. I had that because I’d been in both Cambodia and in Vietnam. My wife said to me she really felt that she couldn’t put up

with another Polish winter, because they start in November and they don't finish until April. So, for better or worse, I plumped for Bangkok, but I was told that there was going to be a lot of competition, because I think about a quarter of the Service had put down Bangkok as their second or third choice. I'd gone for the first choice, so I thought I could be hung for a sheep as a lamb, so let me go, and I was really very pleased when I got it.

I arrived in Bangkok in February 1986, my predecessor, Justin Staples, had told me, 'Thailand's in a bad way. 1984-85 had been years of depression, the economy is sinking, you're going to have a tough time, Derek.' However, it wasn't to be. In 1986, the Thais suddenly discovered that there was nothing they could do better than entertain tourists, and so the whole tourist explosion in Thailand began. Their hotels developed, their facilities developed, the airlines developed. And on the back of all this, you had a sudden resurgence in the Thai economy. The entire British community there found they were making money. Even ordinary Brits, who operate on the fringes of Bangkok society, found that their talents as consultants were being exploited. The British Chamber of Commerce, that was very much in the doldrums, suddenly found they were riding the crest of a tremendous wave of prosperity.

The three years I had in Thailand, from 1986 until the end of 1989, was a period of very considerable prosperity for all concerned, not least for the British commercial and industrial community. It also saw the virtual resolution of the Cambodia problem, and I would say about 25% of my time was spent on Cambodia. Sihanouk was frequently in Bangkok. The three opposition movements were based in Thailand, and I had quite a lot to do with the royalists, the Sihanoukists, and there was also the republican, old Lon Nol regime, KPNLF. I had virtually nothing to do with the Khmer Rouge who were very much under the control of the Chinese. Their embassy had a special Khmer section."

MMcB: "This is the People's Republic of China Embassy?"

D Tonkin: "Yes, People's Republic of China. They used to supply arms, military equipment, advice to the Khmer Rouge on the frontier, and the Thai army used to take

10% of whatever was provided. But you couldn't avoid Khmer Rouge diplomats because they were in any UN organisation, FAO, UNESCO. Any UN organisation where there was a Cambodian representation, you would find a Khmer Rouge diplomat. I well remember at ECAFE, seated at the lunch one day with two Khmer Rouge, one on my left and one on my right. One was an engineer, the other had been a teacher. Both were delightful people, talking fluent French, knew my background."

MMcB: "You mean they'd read your dossier."

D Tonkin: "Yes! I shouldn't have been talking to them at all."

A problem with Bangkok, as you know, is the social whirl. It's unbelievable. My predecessor, Justin Staples, became so exhausted I think he had to convalesce for about four weeks. You remember Christian Adams had a pace-maker fitted, and I don't know whether his death had something to do with the social merry-go-round. In any one evening I would find that I had at least five cocktail parties to attend, and invitations to two or three dinners, and you just couldn't keep up with it. It did mean you had a very strict regime on drink. I hardly used to touch drink at all, maybe half a glass of wine, but otherwise you'd drink yourself into an early grave. My wife and I almost preferred to go to four cocktails parties than one, because we would spend most of our time sitting in the back of our car, embassy limousine, going from one to the other (Bangkok traffic is terrible). We'd put on the music and the news, as we had a radio, and you felt far less exhausted spending five minutes at a reception than you did standing up for an hour and a half. But it was very tiring indeed, and the demands on your stamina were immense.

Highlights of my time included a visit by Margaret Thatcher and Dennis in August 1988. That visit was really very important for a resolution of the Cambodian problem in ways that have not been recognised. She came with Charles Powell, Private Secretary, and Bernard Ingham, Press Secretary, by special aircraft. She'd recently been in Hong Kong, Malaysia, no Foreign Office advisers at all. They came to me and she said, 'Tell me about the Cambodian problem. You've got ten minutes to do it in.' I had arranged for her

to meet Sihanouk, so, into a helicopter she gets and off we go to the border where Sihanouk is. That is quite a saga, because Sihanouk had assured her he would be there in an open-necked shirt, very relaxed, but when we turned up he was in a sky-blue suit, with a tie, and there's nothing much you can do about that.

But they got on rather well, surprisingly, and when she came back to the Embassy, Bernard Ingham, Charles Powell and myself, got around and said, 'What can we do about this Cambodian problem?' Charles and Bernard said, 'Well, we've had some success in the United Nations in dealing with Middle East problems, Afghanistan, let's put this back into the United Nations. And let's put it back particularly into the Permanent Five, initially, because of the Permanent Five, China is involved on the side of the Khmer Rouge, The Soviet Union is involved on the side of Vietnam, France is the old Indo-China colonial power, the Americans are heavily involved, only Britain is the really independent one. We were never involved in the Vietnam war, maybe we can make a contribution.' And so, instructions were sent out to the UN to pursue this with the Permanent Five very actively.

The Foreign Office weren't very happy about this. I heard suggestions that I had been involved in "settee diplomacy" and it was not my place to put forward this policy. Of course, they were miffed because Mrs Thatcher clearly did not think that what Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, had to say was all that important, and particularly what Geoffrey's foreign policy advisers would have to say. And so, Charles, Bernard and Maggie Thatcher decided, and I think very sensibly so, that what had to be done was to put this firmly into the UN, not just to the Security Council, but all the Permanent Five together. She was also under the influence of Gorbachev. She had decided that she could make a contribution. I don't think this catalyst has really been recorded fairly in any of the books I've seen about the resolution of the Cambodian problem. It tends to be put in the lap of people like the Australian Foreign Minister at the time, people like Stephen Solarz, an American senator who knew this part of the world, and also the Russians are credited. But I think it was Charles and Maggie who had the instinct that this was

something the Permanent Five could really take up. There was in fact a resolution of the problem through that channel. I think that was extremely useful.

I had, during my time, most members of the British Royal Family through, including the Duke of Edinburgh. The Thai are monarchists, the relations are very close. Particularly Princess Alexandra was there. That all went down extremely well. I had two-thirds of the British Cabinet, who found an excuse to come through Bangkok, and I always found them something to do. Malcolm Rifkind came through when he was Secretary of State for Scotland, and I said, 'Right, Minister, I think it very important you should lobby on behalf of the Scotch Whisky Association because we have a particular problem in Bangkok which is that the Hakka Chinese gangs are manufacturing illicit hooch.' They were so clever, you could not say from the external appearance of the bottle. They had replicated the security holograph that could not be replicated; they had all the seals. The only advice I could give to visitors was, if you want a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label or Red Label, buy half a bottle, because they don't bother to do half bottles, they will only go for a full litre size.

I was also at that time, non-resident Ambassador to Laos, Vientiane. I used to go up there about every two months, which was psychologically a little difficult, because the moment you went into the country, you became British Ambassador to Laos, you had to forget about your relations with Thailand.

Because by that time I was a reasonably fluent Thai speaker, I was possibly the only Ambassador in the country who could actually talk to the leaders in Thai, which, of course, they understood. I spoke Chiang Mai dialect in any case. I remember talking to Lao leaders there. There was Souphannavong, who was the Head of State. You may remember there were three brothers, or half-brothers, Souvanna Phouma, Souphannavong, who was called The Red Prince, and there was Boun Oum, who was also a Prime Minister. I actually put on a reception for the Queen's Birthday, and I had various government ministers there, and I was talking to them. Afterwards, some of my chers collègues permanently resident in Vientiane came up and said, 'What language

were you talking in, because we've never been able to speak to them?' 'Oh,' I said 'I was talking to them in Thai.' Well, of course, if you're appointed as an Ambassador to Laos, you're unlikely to learn Lao. It was very difficult and there were none of them who had any Thai connections, so they used to slightly resent this terrible man coming from Bangkok, sort of worming his way in to people that they hardly ever saw. The answer was, well this is the way, the language. The language helped, but also the fact that I'd been in Vietnam. Souphannavong's wife was Vietnamese, the wives of two or three of the others were Vietnamese. This is curiously something I've subsequently found after I retired, that some of the Cabinet in Phnom Penh, who are pure Khmer but with no French background or French training at all, do speak Vietnamese, because that's where they learned it – in Vietnam; that's where they learnt after their liberation.

So, I ended my diplomatic career, if I may say, on what I felt was a high note. Looking back, a thoroughly enjoyable 37 years in the Service, from 1952 to 1989, with no regrets at all about where I have been posted. Not least because I was, by origin, a grammar school boy, and I remember when I went into the Service, into Claims Department, I had quite a lot to do with Northern Department, and Northern Department at that time included a number of people like John Julius Norwich, and a number of other people who were obviously from very wealthy families, and it was another world. It was the pre-war world of diplomacy. And so, how I, as a young grammar school boy, could possibly hope ever to reach such high levels, was something I never aspired to. Even when I became Ambassador in Bangkok, I don't think there were many grammar school boys who were Ambassador around the world. When I think about who they were, there were not many, a handful of us at the most. This represents almost, in some ways, the end of an era, because from now on it's not that significant. It was then. As far as Thailand was concerned, in the Thai Foreign Ministry, the people at the top had all been British educated. They were the last of an era as well, because, if you remember, after that time Thai students were educated in America or Australia and so on, but that was the last of the really British educated.

I retired at the end of 1989, as I say, at the end of a marvellous career. We came home first class, as you are entitled to. We had this splendid limousine that deposited us in our house, my wife kicked her shoes off and said, ‘ Thank God, that’s that.’ Particularly the end of the social life, which she, like many other wives, found faintly ridiculous, particularly the standing around at cocktail parties making small talk. Dinner parties weren’t so bad, because you were always sat next to the two senior men, who ought to be at my end of the table, but never were, and you hoped to be able, over coffee, to talk to them. But she always had the entertaining people, whereas at your end, you might have the wife of the Mongolian Ambassador, who spoke no known language, the wife of the Chilean Ambassador, likewise, and what sort of conversation did you have with them? I found two subjects that were always fascinating; one was superstitions, you know, ‘What superstitions do you have in your country? Black cats, ladders, numbers and so on.’ This could keep them going for quite a time. And the other thing was the occult, the spirit world, ‘What spirits do you have in your country? Are they malevolent, are they poltergeists who throw things?’ It was pure theatre, pure theatre all the time, and not once did I achieve anything of any consequence from the hour and a half you’d spent at table. It was over drinks before and coffee afterwards that you hoped to acquire something.”

MMcB: “But at least you were establishing a sort of contact, which makes it easier to talk to the men afterwards.”

D Tonkin: “Yes. And they’re jolly pleased that their wives had an interesting talk to an Ambassador. ‘Really an exciting man. Oh he’s not a dull fellow, perhaps we’ll have him round.’

So we came back to Britain, and we had this somewhat daunting task of putting our house back in order, having been rented for some twenty years; property all over the place, the renovation and redecorations and so on. But I had been asked, even before I retired, whether I’d be interested in joining a new company in the City that would be involved with South-East Asian shares and securities. This had arisen because I’d taken

a particular interest in the Thai stock exchange where, in my time, from '86 to '89, the foreign board was dominated by British financial interests. Some 75% of all foreign investment on the Thai stock exchange had been British, either from Hong Kong or directly. So I said, well this is obviously of interest, and I became very good friends with the chairman of the Thai stock exchange. He told me how the system worked, how they developed their system from Hong Kong, how they would like to take on the new Hong Kong system at that time, and so there was a very clear British interest there. Now, word had obviously gone back to people that the British Ambassador was interested, so I joined a company in the City called Thai Holdings Ltd. We were particularly involved in the Thai stock market as well as other stock markets. I was registered with the London Stock Exchange as a partner in the company. They then told me I had to sit an examination, new stock exchange rules. I said, 'An examination on what?' and they said, 'Well, to ensure that you really do know something about Thailand.' This is ridiculous. So I said, 'No, I'd rather not do that.'

I then moved on and became an adviser to Standard Chartered Securities. They began to show an interest in Vietnam. I began to take a number of commercial, and financial representatives out to Vietnam, and those who were involved in investment made it clear that they would like to set up a Vietnam Fund, could I suggest suitable people to be non-executive directors, would I like to take the chairmanship of this company? I said, 'Well, this all sounds very interesting.' So we set up, initially, the BETA Vietnam Fund. This was on the back of the BETA group of companies who are specialists in emerging markets. The word BETA, incidentally, is simply a co-efficient of volatility in investment. A beta volatility is better than an alpha volatility. It is less, but you need to be a specialist to understand that.

At the same time that I was developing this, I helped to set up the Vietnam-Britain Business Association, because it seemed to run together. I also, at the same time took an interest the Thai-British Business Association. I didn't stay for too long in these roles, because it is really something that an Ambassador does for the first two or three years after he retires, then he hands over to someone else.

After the BETA Vietnam Fund, I began to look wider afield, and we set up the Beta Mekong Fund, with the same Beta group, to cover Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Yunnan, Burma, and, subsequently, Thailand was included: the six Mekong countries. I have been a director of these two funds now for about seven years, but now that I've passed the age of 70, I felt I did not want to offer myself for re-election. It's felt in the City that 70 is a good age, and really after that you ought to retire, and if you don't you're clinging on to something and you might be removed. So it would seem sensible to me that I should retire. I did retire from Beta Vietnam Fund last year, and next month I shall retire from BETA Mekong Fund.

I have plans to involve myself in specific investment projects. One that I'm currently pursuing, which may amuse you, is to re-establish in Shanghai, a racecourse. The Chinese are very interested in this, and this stems from some involvement I had with the racing fraternity in the UK over the renovation of the Saigon racecourse. The matter is primarily political, whether the central authorities will allow this, and how you can relate gambling, betting, which is the essence of horse-racing, to a socialist society. "Social evil" and all that.

Another thing I'm looking at is the recruitment of Thai nurses to come to Britain to work in NHS trust hospitals, and we are trying to develop a pilot scheme with one particular hospital which, if it's successful, could then be extended. I'm also doing the same in Vietnam. The big problem is going to be knowledge of the English language among Thai nurses, but there are quite a lot of those who have qualified who would really love to come over here. Provided their English was good enough, they would be extremely good. In Vietnam, as well, where they have a long tradition of health care, I know there are doctors there who would love to come over here simply to work as nurses. They've been to Mozambique, where they learnt Portuguese. I have been talking to the Vietnamese Ambassador about this, because this has to be done more on a government level. However, in the case of Thailand, we are talking to Mahidol University, which specialises in the medical sciences, among others, agricultural and medical sciences, and

we feel that if we can develop an academic relationship between a teaching hospital in this country and Mahidol University, we can then look to develop a pilot scheme. I shall actually be in Bangkok next week when I shall be looking at this.

The Shanghai racecourse is a bit of a folly, because I don't quite know how it's going to go, but the Chinese are inveterate gamblers. What they're after are British ideas controlling the whole set-up, because British racing has a world-wide reputation as being clean, total integrity, ability to remove sinister elements, like the Mafia.

I shall have interesting things like this to do, but not what has virtually been a full-time job. However, it's been extremely useful in a financial sense, because for ten years I've had another ten years of income, which I certainly found I needed to supplement my pension. I also have been chairman of the Ockenden Venture, which is an international charity concerned with refugees. We are currently operating in the Sudan, Afghanistan, India, Cambodia. We've recently moved into Uganda. We tend to operate in impossible parts of the world, and this is a difficulty, because there are no British commercial interests that we can try to tap."

MMcB: "So where do you get the funds from for that?"

D Tonkin: "Well, by public appeal, from DFID, from UNHCR, from various international groups. I stepped down at the end of last year because I had in fact been chairman ever since 1990, and I felt that it was time to go. Otherwise, you know, you become fixed. 'We can't get rid of him. He likes the job.' This notion of change, I found from my own experience, is so important. You believe that you've become irreplaceable and you're not."

MMcB: "Well, I think that's become a very good point on which to end this fascinating account of your very interesting and successful career. Thank you very much indeed."