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Sir Anthony (Russell) Brenton KCMG

interviewed at his home in Cambridge by Malcolm McBain on Thursday, 6 May 2010

MM Could we start by my asking you something about your education and family, and your decision to join the Diplomatic Service?

AB Well, my father was a British naval officer which gave me the taste for moving every two years. This was what we did and because of his career we went abroad, Australia for much of the time actually. My mother was a New Zealander, which also gave me itchy feet. I went to the Peter Symonds School, which at that time was a direct grant grammar school in Winchester and went from there to Cambridge to study maths with the vague intention of becoming a mathematician. The thing about mathematics is that you very quickly know how good you are and that one could stay on to do research. I decided that I was never going to become a mathematician. At that point, not really knowing what I was going to do, I applied to do the Civil Service exam. I did this without any real intention of joining the Civil Service. In those days, they sent you a little piece of green paper which gave you a range of options – House of Commons Clerks, House of Lords Clerks, Home Civil Service and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which I had never contemplated in my life. I imagined it would be full of people completely unlike me: six foot tall Etonians. But nevertheless I thought it would be fun to go through that process. Subsequently they offered me a job and that was just too tempting an offer to turn down. So I joined.

MM What part of the Foreign Office did you join?

Entry to the FCO in Far Eastern Department, 1975

AB I was an administrative stream entrant, a general purpose entrant, but with hopes of becoming a high flying diplomat. They first put me in Far Eastern Department, which was essentially a training job. I spent a year there dealing with Japan. Quite an enjoyable year. The substantive thing I remember doing that year was organising a visit by the then Crown Prince of Japan to the UK. He had been educated here so we spent quite a lot of time in Scotland where he had gone to university. There were quite interesting political edges to it, because there were ex-prisoners of war, prisoners on the River Kwai and all of those memories, which had to be damped down, given the strength of our economic relationship at

the time. So that was all quite fun. This was a year to learn how the Office worked, who did what, how to draft papers and so on. In the course of this period what essentially they do, or they did with us, was to offer us the opportunity to learn a hard language. This was very attractive to me. There were various options. I chose Arabic, because the Arabists seemed to me to be a good tribe to join in the Foreign Office. Indeed they were influential; they looked after each other; and the Arab world had lots of interesting issues attached to it. So I went off then I did a year and a half's Arabic.

MM At MECAS?

Hard language training—Arabic, 1976

AB Well the first year – because Lebanon was having a civil war at the time – the first year was actually at the Army Education Centre at Beaconsfield, but then for the final six months when the war was over, we reopened MECAS and I spent six months there, and enjoyed learning Arabic actually.

Posting as Second Secretary (Political), Cairo, 1978-81

And then I went as my first posting to Cairo as Second Secretary, Political. That was my first posting and it was terrific actually. Egypt is a wonderful country in quite a lot of ways. Political officers are able to get around the country, and try to understand the politics. The Egyptians are very nice hospitable people, we have a lot of historic links and there's lots of history there. I'm fascinated by history and there were serious things going on. The country teetered on the edge of bankruptcy all the time and there was a Middle East dispute in progress, a bad time for the local people, but it was a very good time for me to be there. I arrived more or less at exactly the time that President Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem, which was a huge break in the whole history of the Middle East dispute, and so I was there through all the negotiations which led up to the Egyptian/Israel Peace Treaty; the first ever peace treaty between an Arab country and Israel. And then I was there watching the backlash – it was, and it still is a fairly autocratic country, so there was no public backlash. But you could feel the resentment in Islamic and other circles building up against what was seen as Sadat's excessive deference to America and to Israel, culminating of course in Sadat's assassination. This happened more or less at the time I left Egypt. So I was present at a

Greek tragedy. Sadat was a very great man. He was one of the very few politicians that I have met who was actually a maker of history, rather than simply a respondent to it. And he made the peace treaty, which he saw was very necessary for Egypt's economic and other success. And then, in the end, he paid the price for it. So it was a very interesting and satisfying time from a professional point of view to be there.

MM So after Cairo – that breathtaking introduction to the Middle East?

European Communities Department of the FCO, 1981-85

AB After Cairo – at that time I was a very strong supporter of British involvement in the European Union. I was very keen to work on European Union matters. I came back from Egypt in 1981 in the run-up to a British Presidency of the European Union, and I expressed interest in being involved in that. I was put in the so-called Presidency Unit, which was a small group of officials put together to plan meetings and organise the European Councils and other big meetings of the Presidency. This was also a very good Presidency to be in on because again there were historical things going on. We had to deal with Greece's problems for example. The Russians were doing various unacceptable things at the time, including invading Afghanistan.

MM They had invaded in 1979.

AB So anyway, we were responsible for coordinating. I was dealing with the Common European Foreign Policy and we were responsible for achieving such coordination as could be achieved in Europe at that time. The key, as it were, bureaucratic job in the Foreign Office which deals with European foreign policy then was a job called European Correspondent, and at the time I was doing the Presidency job the European Correspondent was Robert Cooper in Brussels. I used my time working with him while I was in the Presidency. At the end of it I inherited that job from Robert. Robert is now in Brussels working for the EU. Then I went to the Hague and did the hand-over from the Dutch and at the end of the UK Presidency I spent six months actually in Brussels working in the Belgian Foreign Ministry, helping them with their Presidency through the aftermath of the British Presidency. Quite a lot of experience at the time. You learn a lot doing that. People kind of assume as an outsider that Europe has shared interests: that it is therefore quite easy, particularly if you are a big country, to co-

ordinate the foreign policy issues of the day. Actually it isn't. It's very challenging and difficult. I then went into the job of European Correspondent, who is the key man. We had a very small unit for handling Common European Foreign Policy, which was a job I did up to 1985. At that time it was a big political mess – that must have been when the Greek thing happened; there was the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and I was advising the Political Director, as he is now known, and the Foreign Secretary when going to all the important meetings and just making sure the papers were in the right place and getting the right advice to the right people on time. But I guess one of the most satisfying and interesting things at the European Council meetings – Mrs Thatcher was the Prime Minister at the time. I mentioned Sadat as being one of the few politicians I have dealt with who make history rather than of course simply reacting to events. ... She of course was another, and being part of the British Delegation while she fought various huge battles in Europe was a very interesting time. This was the time when we were “getting our money back”. We got very active, for example, on the South African issue bringing apartheid to an end through economic sanctions. The UK had a very specific concern because there were about a million people in South Africa with some sort of claim to British citizenship and could have come to live here if things had gone badly wrong. So we found ourselves quite awkwardly caught.

MM And of course we also had important actual commercial investments in Southern Africa.

AB Yes, we had large investments. We couldn't be simply and flatly condemnatory of apartheid. We had to do what we could to help to engineer the end of it in a way which did not end in economic and political collapse in South Africa. Of course the other big event that happened on my watch was the Falklands War and that brought home to me quite sharply some of the difficulties arising from an attempt to achieve a Common Foreign Policy. I think the Falklands in a way was the beginning of some disenchantment on my part with how totally Europe could inherit the individual foreign policies of the individual member states. In the event of a direct attack on a British possession, one could not kind of assume that our close friends and allies in Europe would support and help us. Actually a number of our European friends and allies were deeply difficult.

MM Such as?

AB Such as the Belgians who had traditionally supplied some munitions to us but refused to do so during the Falklands campaign. Mercifully, the Spaniards weren't by then members of the European Union but were planning membership and were unenthusiastic. The Italians were members of the European Union, but the Italians discovered that a large proportion of their population had Argentinean links, so they again became very, very coy in giving us, the UK, the sort of support which we thought we should naturally expect from a member of the European Union, Italy. The EU on foreign policy matters works by unanimity, so while we got an initial statement of support, basically on the back of the wonderful wording of the Security Council Resolution which Anthony Parsons got at the UN; beyond that, there was rather a feeling of discomfort amongst a lot of our European partners about the war we were engaged in. There was very limited enthusiasm for backing us in what I saw as being a thoroughly morally justified war.

MM We did get substantial help from the French of course.

AB We got help from the French on Exocets of course. But there was a striking contrast between the, as I say, slightly lukewarm feeling in European discussions, and the very strong support which we got from the Americans or bits of the American system.

MM Ah yes.

AB From the important bits, the intelligence agencies, the Pentagon and the White House. The Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, tried to make peace. He was very upset that his initiative didn't succeed.

MM Deeply influenced by Jeane Kirkpatrick at the UN?

AB Nevertheless, I know Washington well of course, having served there since. The things we really needed out of America were intelligence, overhead from satellites, and military bits and pieces, and help with getting overflying rights across places like Chile. That made a big difference.

MM A very interesting sidelight, I think.

AB It was fascinating. Again it helped to bring home to me the difficulty, as I say, with Europe when the chips are down, and how the American system works. No one talks naively about the special relationship anymore, but there are undoubtedly bits of the American system which for historical reasons are very close to corresponding bits of our system and therefore are willing to help us even when US policy overall is in a more neutral mode.

Posted to UKREP to the European Community, Brussels, 1985-86

Anyway, so, I did all of that through those years. First of all I did a spell as European Correspondent. My enthusiasm for Europe was not so dimmed at the end of this that I ceased wanting to do Brussels or to go to the place where I'd done European foreign policy, where the real Europe in a sense happened. So when I finished as European Correspondent which was in September 1985 I was then posted to the UK Permanent Representation in Brussels to do the energy job, which was both a bad thing and a good thing. It was a bad thing in the sense that Margaret Thatcher had decided that energy was a business for business and that there shouldn't be any government policy on it anyway, firstly, and secondly whether or not there should be government policy on it; Europe certainly shouldn't have a policy on it. So I spent – I was only in the job for about a year – spent that year basically preventing Europe agreeing on anything to do with energy. There were various efforts going on to take control of oil. We of course had huge oil and gas fields back then and the North Sea was pumping away like mad. There was a suspicion in Whitehall that Europe wanted to get its hands on our oil. So it was pretty negative in that sense.

But there was a hugely positive moment in the end because Chernobyl blew up in 1986, and I was the key bureaucrat, if I can put it that way, in handling our bit of the European response to the Chernobyl explosion. It was another fascinating moment, because the strategic response of each European country was simply to close its borders to food imports from other bits of the continent where they thought the food might have been irradiated. So there were queues of trucks forming across the Alps and all of that. And there was a huge row about the sorts of radioactivity standards we had to set in order to allow food imports. The aim of the Community, really was to get the roads open again and get the food flowing again. The row was very technical at this point concerning short-lived isotopes and the length of time for which they might pose a danger from the risk of irradiation which was of immediate concern to consumers. We did eventually do a sort of a deal, and it was literally that, a deal carved out

among EU Ambassadors at the committee COREPER. It must have been agreed at about 4 o'clock in the morning. It was a fascinating bit of horse trading among representatives of member states leading to a solution.

Secondment to the European Commission as Deputy Chef de Cabinet, 1986-89

I was only there in UKREP for less than a year. What happened then was that one of the British Commissioners in the European Commission, Stanley Clinton-Davis, now Lord Clinton-Davis, who was Commissioner for Transport and the Environment, wanted a Deputy Head of his Cabinet, his Private Office, and I was picked to go and do that job. So I left UK Government Representation that summer and my responsibility was for the environment side of the Commissioner's job. It's funny to look back to 1986. The environment was a thoroughly, thoroughly marginal issue. Not taken very seriously. Stanley's job was Transport and Environment. Very much in that order. Transport mattered. Trucks moving across national frontiers. That was what was important. The environment was an add on to placate the Greens. I moved into Stanley's office at exactly the right moment when, suddenly, the environment took off as an international issue. There was a whole mass of stuff going on in Europe. Chernobyl was still rumbling on. So though we'd done the deal on short-lived isotopes there was still an argument going on about how we were going to handle movement of goods affected by medium term isotopes, which deliver radioactivity for longer. I was involved in that. It was really interesting, because I'd been involved in negotiations from the British end. I was now involved in negotiations from the Commission end. So I was dealing with the same people, but instead of arguing the British case, I was arguing, as it were – trying to get a deal for the Community case, and so you get two very different perspectives on the same issue. The British, I have to tell you, were extremely awkward. [laughter] Looking back, to be fair, I am proud of it. The British, we, sought scientific opinion and then said those are the standards the scientists recommend, those are the standards we should use. Whereas people like the Irish and the Italians said – Our people are terrified of this stuff. We need the lowest possible standards. Science has nothing to do with it. It's all about pleasing public opinion. And reconciling those two approaches, and we did it, was an extraordinarily interesting piece of negotiation. That was one of the things that I found myself dealing with, but more important in the longer term, as I said, this was exactly the moment, 1986, when the environment became a serious European and global issue, and we had a thing called the European Year of the Environment. I found myself writing speeches every week for Stanley

to deliver. By coincidence we had two huge EU negotiations in progress, one of which was about vehicle exhaust emissions, setting Europe-wide standards for vehicle exhaust emissions, the first ever such standards. We take it for granted now. It was historic stuff. We, in the EU reached an agreement so that there were common standards on vehicle exhaust emissions all across Europe. Because there were serious difference across those countries, such as the UK which had large car producing industries and were being lobbied by their companies to have minimal standards and then you had other countries – notably the Scandinavians – with really quite deep concern for the environment, arguing that you needed the toughest possible standards – and again it was a process of reconciling those two approaches and horse trading to find a compromise that everyone could live with. It was real politics; real gritty stuff.

And then the other big directive which we dealt with while I was in Stanley's cabinet was the so-called large combustion plants directive. This was the response to acid rain; sulphur emissions from big electricity generating plants using coal, and this was going to be very, very expensive – retro-fitting lots and lots of coal-fired electricity plants to get the level of sulphur emissions down, and again the UK was the awkward customer, because the winds in Europe are prevailingly eastwards apparently so they blew our emissions on to the Continent. We had much more coal generating capacity than a lot of other European states and Margaret Thatcher, in favour of minimal government, was not disposed to spend huge sums of money on retro-fitting carbon scrubbers to power stations. The British had to go along with some of it, but the Greens were not strong in Britain, and there was resistance to the sort of measures that Europe was pressing for. So again it was a very challenging negotiation. Again the deal was done at 4 o'clock in the morning amongst the two or three crucially concerned ministers to produce the final text and it cost the UK about a billion pounds to deal with the subsequent retro-fitting. The only reason that the UK agreed to it was because they wanted to privatise the electricity industry, and the electricity industry was not privatisable with the huge uncertainty about what the size of this bill was going to be hanging over them. This was again real big money politics. The Commission, with Stanley at the centre of it, was a fascinating place to be. So that was Europe and there was quite enough going on there, but in addition there were big global aspects, such as the hole in the ozone layer – remember that? We are just about to have, I heard on the radio this morning, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the discovery of the ozone hole by the British Antarctic Survey. And so there was a question of how we handled it. This was probably the first ever global environmental issue, because this hole was the result of the use by everybody of certain chemicals like CFCs of which the

public were very conscious. The hole was the clearest possible graphic demonstration of the problem we were creating for ourselves, which we had to find a response to. Europe was part of the global response, and a big part. There were a lot of chemical businesses in Europe producing the chemicals involved, and there was a negotiation; quite a complex negotiation going on in Montreal. I don't have the dates at the top of my mind, but we're talking I would guess 1988, which succeeded in agreeing on the phasing out of CFCs. It was the first big success for the human community, to put it that way, to tackle a global environmental problem, and I was involved in all that. The standard argument has become quite familiar now. The people who produced this stuff wanted their businesses to be affected as little as possible. The environmentalist side of the argument were very keen to have these chemicals closed down. It wouldn't have been doable except that Dupont, a very big producer, suddenly discovered they could make more money out of producing the substitutes for CFCs than they were making out of CFCs.

MM – Isn't Dupont an American company?

AB It is an American company but they have lots of European subsidiaries. So we did that deal which was a big shot in the arm, as it were, for the international environmental interest, and for international environmental self-confidence. Our dealing with the ozone layer meant that we could deal with other problems, and this was at exactly the moment when climate change was beginning to emerge as something more than a minor eccentricity on the part of fringe scientists. I have written an awful lot of papers for ministers and senior politicians over the years about this. The one that I still remember with most pride was the one that I wrote for the European Commission at about that time. Its first sentence was "Climate change is real". It was the beginning of international work on climate change – anyway I finished in Brussels because my Commissioner, Stanley, was not re-elected. Margaret Thatcher was going through one of her phases of intense hatred of the Europeans. She wanted to be rid of Lord Cockfield who was a senior Commissioner, but she couldn't decently get rid of him without also getting rid of Stanley. So Stanley had to go and I went as well.

Head of UN Department of the FCO, 1989-90

I came back to London and did a bit of pottering about in the Foreign Office. No major job had been offered but the one that was offered to me was given to somebody else without

anybody really thinking about it. I very nearly stayed in Brussels as a permanent EU official at this point. But all credit to him, David Hannay spotted that things were going wrong in my career, and stepped in. I don't know how he did it, but I emerged as Head of UN Department. Hannay was a great fixer. Without his intervention at that point I would have ended up leaving the Foreign Office. But I went back as Head of UN Department. I only did the job for a year. I found it only moderately interesting. I found out quite a lot about the UN. We had one quite interesting crisis when I was doing the job, which was the independence of Namibia. There was an insurrection in Namibia at the time. Margaret Thatcher happened to be there and personally made peace, which was quite a big UN operation. I was at the London end of that. But the UN on the whole was too abstract. What the Head of Department spent a lot of time on was worrying about the budget of the UN and various things like that. I had been quite gripped by the subject of the environment in my time in Brussels, and did a little bit to help the Foreign Office to wake up to the fact that this was a real issue to lock on to and do something about.

Head of Environment, Science and Energy Department, FCO, 1990-92

We were coming up to the Earth Summit in 1992. It was in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil – the first ever global summit – it was called the UN Summit on Environment and Development, and was fundamentally the first ever global summit to deal with environmental issues. It must have been the end of 1989 and we set up and rearranged ourselves inside the Foreign Office to create a Department whose name I can't remember –

MM Was it something like Environment, Science and Energy Department?

AB – to take on various bits that were going on in the Foreign Office, fundamentally to prepare us for that summit, and in particular to involve us in the big climate change negotiations which by now were going on in the run up to that summit. So I very cheerfully moved from UN Department to head up this new Department, and the core of the job was preparing the UK for the 1992 summit, and to do the negotiating from the Foreign Office perspective in the run up to what became the Rio Convention, the climate change convention. So I did all those negotiations through 1990-91 with the run up to ...

MM Who did you negotiate with?

AB It was a global negotiation. The UN organised it. There were regularly two or three months of huge meetings – preparatory conferences. But in between the gaps – I mean there were people you knew from all over the world. There was an American Deputy Assistant Secretary for environmental affairs; there was my French colleague, my German colleague, doing equivalent jobs to me, an Indian colleague who was the Permanent Secretary in charge of the Ministry of External Affairs, there was a Chinese official, among others. There was quite a community of climate change negotiators who all knew each other, all of whom interacted, both bilaterally and multilaterally over that period. And this was the first time the global negotiating community had seriously begun to address the issue of climate change. This was still serious for us. It was quite striking to me that it was serious for the politicians who understood it. The most interesting feature of the climate change dossier is that once a politician understands the stakes they tend to get gripped, even the most potentially sceptical politicians. There is a famous story, and a true story about Margaret Thatcher – not a woman to be taken in by greenery, or by vast multilateral exercises of this sort. Crispin Tickell slipped some material on climate change into her summer reading.

MM Of course he was very keen on the danger of climate change and had meetings with Mrs Thatcher while he was on leave from his post as Ambassador to Mexico.

AB Oh he wrote the book on it. She read this stuff and came back as she always did, voracious for more, and became very active, in pushing for some sort of effective action to deal with this problem. Exactly the same thing happened with Blair and Patten. You saw these people being sucked into this fascinating and challenging problem. We had this period therefore of however long it was – three years – negotiating climate change and setting up all the other things which were involved in Agenda 21. The climate change negotiation was very hard. It was hard for us, the UK, because initially our target was out of line with what the European Union wanted to achieve as a target and I don't think this reflects, to be honest, us with any credit because we lost our emissions reduction target. I vividly remember in the very early stages of the process having lunch with my French opposite number and him saying to me "Why are you Brits creating such a problem for yourselves over this? It's plainly all hot air. We don't want to set a target because in a few years it may all have been overtaken." I said "we don't work like that. We have to set ourselves a target that we can meet". We had a problem first of all amalgamating our target with the European target. You

may be interested in a story at that time. The problem was that our Department of Energy, the UK lead Department at the time, employed an economist who was projecting a certain level of rising emissions which made it impossible for us to get our emissions back to the level that Europe had asked us to do. Heseltine was in the Department of the Environment, pushing for us to move to the European target and being blocked by the Department of Energy who had its own projections. Heseltine then moved to become Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Energy then became part of the Department of Trade and Industry. So as Secretary of State, Heseltine dug out this economist and basically put him on other duties, got the projection changed, and therefore was able to change the target. So those are the sorts of ways in which policy can develop. That was the position with regard to Europe but there were horrendous problems once you got to the wider world, because suddenly you found yourselves – first of all the Americans were much less willing to recognise this was as serious a problem as Europe recognised, and therefore weren't willing to accept a need to set themselves a target at all. And secondly, all the developing countries were saying – well that's a problem for the developed countries. We don't want anything to do with setting ourselves targets. If you want us to do anything, give us money. We went through hundreds and hundreds of hours of just repeating the same things.

This process immensely improved my bridge game. What used to happen at these meetings was that the so-called G77 developing countries would go off for their own private meeting and we, the developed country representatives, were left kicking our heels waiting for the G77 to come out with their position. So we played bridge. I spent a lot of time, as I say, improving my bridge in the margins of these meetings. Eventually, I mean, it's easy enough to cobble together agreements, in the sense that developing countries weren't going to do anything unless bribed. The real core issue became the one the developed countries set themselves with a carbon limitation target, and that became a European/US issue – with the US saying not on your life, and Europe saying you must. And that was finally settled in a very small private meeting between us, the Brits, and the Americans. As we approached this huge conference at Rio, it became a game of chicken because of Bush, the first President Bush. Bush was not going to attend the conference unless we had resolved the climate change issue. So you would have then had a conference without the key agreement which it was intended to agree, and without a key participant in the form of the US President. We didn't want a position with Bush not turning up at this great world shindig in the run-up to a general election in 1992. Under the leadership of Michael Howard who was our Environment

Minister at that time, we eventually did a deal with the Americans which produced an extraordinarily complex piece of prose with which it was possible for both of us to agree. If you read it one way, it imposed an emissions target. If you read it another way, it didn't. So the Americans were able to sign up to it because they'd taken it negatively and we were able to sign up to it because we took it positively. So we did this deal with the Americans and then sold this tangled piece of prose to Europe and the rest of the G7 and that solved the problem. I don't know, a hundred and fifty countries or something signed the Rio convention, which is the base document for all subsequent international action on climate change. Quite a satisfying thing. Of course immediately afterwards the European Union said - this compels us all to get our emissions down. The American equally clearly said - this doesn't compel us to do anything at all. We'd done the deal with a satisfactory convention as the outcome. It was a very good moment. I had finished doing the environment job, more or less. The conference was in early-ish 1992 and I left the job in September 1992. It was a very good moment to end - let's put it that way. I was there to do the conference. It was a success. We'd done the deal on climate change however ambiguous it was, and it was a good moment to move on. I felt quite strongly that having done this really fascinating policy work for the past three years on a subject which is undoubtedly the biggest challenge to mankind's negotiating capacity that has ever existed, I'd like to go away and have a chance to think a little bit about what I'd been up to. During the negotiations one was always worrying about the production of briefing papers for the next meeting - you are always preparing papers. You don't think in any depth about what you're up to.

MM Short term.

Fellow, Centre for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1992-93

AB Short term, exactly. And the Foreign Office, as you probably know, has a wonderful tradition of sending one person a year to Harvard for a year as a fellow of the Center of International Affairs, to enjoy the facilities of Harvard, and to do what he likes. I was able while I was there to write a book called the Greening of Machiavelli - the history of international environmental diplomacy, with particular focus of course on the negotiations I had done on climate change. That was a terrific opportunity, which enabled me to do the thinking about what we had been up to in terms of environmental negotiations, including the Chernobyl negotiations, over the past few years.

MM Did the Office allow you to publish it?

AB Yes. I cleared it with the Office. Chatham House published it. An astonishing number of people whom I encounter have come across it. Someone said to me - this book was so good that it was actually stolen from my Oxford College library. So we did the book which was 1992-1993 and then my career took a slightly surprising turn. What normally happens to people after they've done Harvard is that they get posted on to Washington or New York. That didn't happen to me – no jobs of the right sort came up.

Posting to Moscow as Counsellor (Economic, Aid, Scientific), 1994-98

But this of course was 1993 – we were in the aftermath of the collapse of Communism, and Russia in 1991, and suddenly the Foreign Office were looking for different sorts of people to send to Russia. In the old days the Embassy in Moscow had people to read Pravda and to try to peer over the Kremlin wall but it was very hard to do serious business. To go back a long way, while I had always been interested in Russia, when I was thinking about which hard language to choose as a new entrant to the Foreign Office, Russian was an option. But in a nanosecond I chose not to, because going as a diplomat to Russia back in the dark days of the 1970s, you couldn't travel, couldn't meet Russians – you were very constrained in how you lived. There was no-one to talk to. Anyway having failed to send me to America in the natural way after Harvard the Foreign Office said – what about Russia? I seized the opportunity. Russia was suddenly opening up. So I spent from 1993 to the beginning of 1994 learning Russian. I'm quite unusual in the sense that I did two hard languages in the course of my career, but it was fun. It actually gave me time to finish the book which I hadn't had time to do in Harvard. I went to Moscow in September 1994, and it was a new job. I was Counsellor Economic which meant that I was in charge of commercial relations, economic reporting and advice to the Russian government, and we had a wonderful sort of aid programme designed to help the emergence of the market economy and civil society and all that.

MM The Knowhow fund.

AB The Knowhow fund. It was a great programme. We used to do things like radio programmes like Mrs Dale's diary where the family – one son was a bankrupt, the other an entrepreneur. They discussed how you got bank loans. So I went to Moscow in late 1994. It was a terrific job and it was exactly the right place to be. Russia was changing extraordinarily fast. And exactly the right job to be in because the key thing happening in politics was all over the place – the time of Yeltsin. But the key thing was the process of economic transformation which was going on in Russia. Huge privatisations were going on. Suddenly you could travel everywhere. I was the first Western face in quite a lot of small Russian towns away from the centre, just explaining what we were about, explaining that we didn't have tails and horns and talking about how they could set up small enterprises, giving some aid under the Knowhow fund, talking about a small cheese shop in one town, describing the retail sector in another. It was a genuinely interesting on the ground experience going out there. The Russians are wonderful people. Engaging with them was rewarding. They were fascinated of course by the West. The economic job, as I said, gave me an excuse to travel, and an excuse to meet normal Russians. Russia's continual problem is that the surface layer of diplomats and security and intelligence officials remains quite unchanged since Soviet communist days. But the emergence of young businessmen and the whole new entrepreneurial class was the exciting thing that was going on. I was very much impressed by various huge British investments that were underway – BP was in, Shell was in, Rio Tinto was in. There were lots and lots of people who were engaging in this activity. So I was there for three and a bit years.

MM Who was the Ambassador?

AB Initially Brian Fall and then Andrew Wood. So I finished that in 1998. I was there between two rouble collapses. The rouble collapsed when I arrived in 1994 and there was a further rouble collapse, a major default in 1998 just after I left.

It is worth adding as regards my time in Russia from 1994 to 1998 how easy and close relations were then by contrast with later when I went back as ambassador. In 1994 we were all optimistic about the prospects for democracy in Russia. There was an openness and receptiveness to Western ideas, Western approaches, again I'll come back to this. So that was 1994-98. I finished there with some regret I must say. I had spent time doing what I was good at. There was the first ever State visit by the Queen to Russia during my time, when

they had to fly in a planeload of dinner jackets for the Russian elite attending the State banquets, those sort of things. The Prime Minister, and various other visitors of note, John Major, for example came through quite regularly. We had a lot of visits from Foreign Secretaries. So I left Russia in early 1998 – just after Christmas.

Director for Global Issues, FCO, 1998-2001

I was actually on holiday with my family in San Francisco before Christmas and I got a phone call to my hotel on something like 20 December to tell me that they would like me to be back in the Foreign Office to do a Director level job for the 1st of January. If I really needed the time they would put up with a wait until 7 January. It was a great pain. That's exactly what happened. I left Sue to get the kids out of school, and pack up the flat and follow me. The job was called Director for Global Issues – wonderful, wonderful job title. Clare Short once said to me: "If that's your title, what's God's title?" But it meant I covered the UN; I covered human rights issues; I covered the environment, which was one of the principal attractions of the job for me. Then there were things like drugs, terrorism – all that. Basically it was a dustbin type job. It covered all the multilateral stuff that the Foreign Office did, that didn't fit in comfortably anywhere else (it didn't cover NATO for example), so came to the Director of Global issues. It was slightly bitty. The UN was more interesting than the last time I'd done the UN because when I did the UN back in 1989, there was no significant business going on, whereas by the time I got back to the UN in 1998, the Security Council was humming. There was an awful lot of common activity between Russia and the West. The environment was big. We were now into another phase of climate change negotiations and I engaged in that.

MM Do you think that we were a leading state in environmental issues?

AB We were always very difficult in Europe because we tended to lock on to the science of what was feasible, whereas for the Europeans, even at this late stage, the environment remained very much more of a political than, as it were, a scientific issue. I think, and I don't think it's just my patriotism coming out, that precisely because we were so proper and responsible in the approaches we were taking, we had a lot of influence while the Europeans might not, being in some ways back markers in European Councils and in the wider world. We were considered people to be taken seriously. We had serious reasons for the positions we were taking, and we were people who delivered on the commitments we took on. One of

the sad things about the Rio Convention actually was that we had this target to get greenhouse gas emissions back to 1990 levels by the year 2000. The Americans rejected the target. It wasn't binding for them. It was binding for the EU. We took this target seriously – I can't remember how many members the EU had at that time but out of that number only two actually hit the target. We were one. Germany was the other one. Germany only did so because they took in East Germany, which had had a collapse in its industrial sector, but that is a way of saying that all of these countries had behaved irresponsibly. They'd taken on a target and failed to deliver on it. And we're watching something very similar happening, sadly, with regard to the Kyoto Protocol, the current target setting exercise. We're going to hit our target. More European countries will hit their targets this time, but a few are going to miss by a mile. Now that seems to me ... If I'm looking for a defence of British diplomacy then quite a lot of it lies there. We don't commit ourselves to doing things that we don't intend to carry out. Director for Global Issues – I did all this.

One of the most interesting exercises in which I played a reasonably leading role in at this time was the establishment of the International Criminal Court, which was another Robin Cook project, and again a very, very difficult negotiation. Again the Americans were a huge problem and eventually of course they locked themselves in a corner. If there's one thing worse than dealing with economists it's dealing with lawyers. This was an exercise crawling with international lawyers. Again the developing countries were using the project basically as a way of undermining the Security Council, looking for ways of making war illegal and all that. It was a challenging and interesting negotiation which, in the end, had a reasonably successful outcome. That was one of the main activities. There was a lot of activity and concern about Russian nuclear waste. I was well placed to advise on this one and went on a trip to Murmansk with Robin Cook. One of my jobs was to carry the Geiger counter for Her Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and to ensure he wasn't facing irradiation. The other was to get Clare Short on a mobile phone for him when he needed money. Up there, that close to the North Pole, mobile phones do not work well. You had to find the spots in town where there was an adequate signal ... So I mean there were lots of interesting features like that. The Foreign Office under Robin Cook was quite an interesting place to work. He was not an easy Foreign Secretary.

MM Just as well he was out of the way by 2003.

Minister at the British Embassy in Washington, 2001-2004

AB So I did that job till 2001, and I did finally get my posting to America. I was sent off to Washington as Deputy Head of Mission, slightly disappointed in a way, because the job I'd been angling for was Director General Economics in the FCO. One of the other things I'd been responsible for was G8 Summits. We had the Birmingham G8 Summit on my watch, so making that work was part of the job. You learn an awful lot doing a job like that. Huge circuses are part of the organisation. Basically we took over the centre of Birmingham for two days. No traffic. No people without passes. It was extraordinary.

MM How deeply involved in that were you?

AB I was the organiser. I was at the meetings. Actually that was the time when Tony Blair began to launch climate change as a G8 issue. So it was interesting from that point of view. But the G8 process involves Washington and Moscow. There is lots of sound and fury and a huge build-up. The summits often produce quite eye-catching conclusions, but this is a process with no machinery. There are no real committees. There is no real bureaucracy, none of that, so again it's a process where quite often states make commitments, which they don't deliver on. Gleneagles somewhat later was a classic example of that. They got huge commitments to increase foreign aid to the Third World but I'm pretty sure that a lot of those commitments have not been delivered on. Anyway, the Birmingham Summit was another big project while I was there. It was at that time I became conscious that things were going wrong between Russia and the West actually. It was at a G8 meeting where there was a meeting between Yeltsin and the other seven members to consider what was going wrong with the Russian economy. The date of the summit must have been the middle of 1998, so it was on the eve of the rouble collapse, and Yeltsin appealed to the G7 heads for the sort of help that he saw Russia as needing and got very little response. He got fine words, but what he needed was actual bolstering. Yeltsin didn't get what he needed. It was the rouble collapse at the end of 1998. And that led pretty directly to Yeltsin looking around for a tough guy to lead Russia through its next phase. And actually it was the perfect time to go to this job in Washington. It is a star embassy, full of talented people. My sister lives in the United States. I had had the Harvard experience. I got there in January 2001. My first formal engagement actually was to attend the inauguration of President George W Bush. So we then had to spend a few months explaining to London that they were dealing with a rather different

sort of American president than Bill Clinton. And we got streams and streams of high level British guests coming through to see him and the new administration. It was quite revealing too in that the Americans in Washington took for ever to get the new administration set up because they all had to be approved by the Senate and so on, and this took time. I vividly remember giving a dinner in my house in, it must have been August that year, for a visiting team of leading officials from the Ministry of Defence and what there was of the senior team in the Pentagon. There were two of them, because all the other jobs were still vacant, you see. Now this was August 2001. Actually being a No 2 anywhere is a frustrating thing to be.

MM Who was your Ambassador?

AB It was Christopher Meyer at the beginning. I'll come on to that. I got to the Embassy. I knew the country; I was having a good time. I was responsible for the consulates so I was able to get to Houston, San Francisco – taking an interest in what they were up to in those places. But having been used to quite intense policy work, it's not a heavy job in those terms and you are surrounded by very sharp, hungry people. As well as the Ambassador of course, Christopher, I had a line of Counsellors most of whom are now very senior Ambassadors, underneath me, keeping me off their patch as far as they could.

MM Yapping at your heels.

AB I remember this very vividly. Lots of people away over the summer. Christopher Meyer was away so there was plenty for me to do, so we got into September and all the counsellors were back from holiday. Christopher was back from holiday, and I remember wandering around the Embassy on 10 September thinking where's the job? I'm not going to stay here very long. And then we had the 11 September and the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the attack in Washington and suddenly we were up to our eyes in US/UK cooperation in the aftermath of the attack. I had a very nice house a quarter of a mile from the Embassy. I had a daughter living with us at school in Washington. I didn't see her between 11 September and Christmas because we were just so busy seven days a week, fifteen hours a day, doing the stuff. We had delegations coming and going; coordinating initial response; a huge consular issue. Straight after the attack one thing that happened was all air flights were stopped and all of these British people rolled up at the Embassy, stuck, including John Major, as it happened. So we had this building full of British refugees. We were lucky, however,

because one plane came over the Atlantic the night after the 11th September attack, on which was Richard Dearlove, coming over to talk to the CIA about our co-ordination. So we had a plane. We were able to put John Major and all these people on to the plane, so we dealt with that. That was just the beginning of a succession of those sorts of problems. And Washington became a very weird place, because not only did we have 9/11 to deal with, but there was a series of so-called anthrax attacks. Envelopes containing white powder were going around. Washington was in lock down for more or less three months, while we were coordinating a war with the Americans in Afghanistan. Fantastic. A really interesting time, dealing with the Americans, making sure they were doing the right things. Making sure that our Ministers who came through met the right people. Making sure that the two sides understood each other as well as possible. There must be few examples of two governments working as closely together as we did with the Americans over that period. And this comes back to what I was saying earlier about the Falklands. There were bits of the American system of intelligence services, the Pentagon in particular, whose instinctive habit was that if they needed someone to talk to, we were much smaller but if they needed someone to compare notes with it was to the Brits they turned. There were huge amounts of that sort of stuff. So we did all that and that took us through to early 2002, when things resumed a more normal course. I then resumed going round visiting the consulates and that sort of thing, until it became clear about mid-2002 that high politics were at issue. I was left there in charge during Christmas 2001 while Christopher went on holiday and that was the period when we had the shoe bomber; India and Pakistan got as close as they ever got to a nuclear war, and there was one other huge crisis that Christmas, but I can't remember what it was, but anyway, again I got one day off over Christmas – Christmas Day. It was a period of continuous very interesting activity. So we got into 2002, things calmed down a bit, but by the middle of 2002 it was clear that we were moving towards war in Iraq. Cheney made a big speech in July saying in effect that we must get rid of Saddam. We were back to emergency stations again. We were arranging very close co-ordination with the State Department and between the intelligence agencies. We were back explaining Blair's policies. He came over quite often but it was quite interesting – in the Embassy we were quite out of touch with British politics and at the level of opposition building up in the UK. I say, personally, myself, I was very committed to the Iraq War and saw it as the right thing to do.

MM I think probably almost everyone who knew anything about it was committed to it. And certainly the Conservative opposition in this country was committed to it.

AB That's right. It's amazing how distorted memories have become as the War itself turned sour. We were then very, very busy moving towards that, and at the same time, Christopher had already been in post for five years and for one reason and another, health reasons, wanted to go. His chosen successor was David Manning, and there was no way he was going to be allowed out of No 10, so I was left holding the baby. Christopher Meyer went in early 2003.

MM Before the actual invasion?

AB He'd gone. I was Chargé in the final few weeks before the war itself and its aftermath until David arrived in September, having had a pretty tough time himself. I was there running our pivotal Embassy through this quite pivotal period, and that was fascinating. I was advising No.10 on views in Washington.

MM Did you move into the Residence?

AB I did for a month. We had a very nice house and I was quite dubious about moving out of it. We had to give our staff a month's break, so Sue said – well. Of course there was the whole establishment up in the Residence doing nothing, so we moved in for a month. It was actually quite interesting. We had three children with us and one by one they actually decamped from the Residence and went back to the other house. They saw it as much more human scale. They could have their friends round more easily. As I say, I was very committed to the war at the time. I remain committed to what we believed to be true. I think Saddam was committed to acquiring WMD. Then we did what we believed was the right thing to do, but the follow-up was bad. There are various explanations for that. It's very difficult to plan the follow-up to a war before it has ended. But anyway, being involved in a war at that level is an education. Suddenly routine issues require a much higher level of salience and importance. Then David Manning arrived in Washington in September, so I had a quiet few months after that. We left and returned to London in May 2004. I knew I was going to Russia. I met heads of companies trading in Russia. I brushed up my Russian.

Return to Moscow as Ambassador, 2004-2008

Then back to Moscow as Ambassador in September 2004. I went out there slightly nervous that it would be rather dull actually, because ...

MM After Washington?

AB Well Washington had been fascinating in policy terms and governmental terms. We had fought two wars together. The adrenalin had been flowing out fast and it seemed a normal job might not be so exciting. An awful lot of bilateral jobs around the world now have become rather humdrum in terms of policy. But actually Moscow turned out to be anything but dull. We were into the phase of Putin, now President, becoming increasingly suspicious of the West and increasingly ready to take offence.

MM What was the reason for that?

AB I mean, his background partly. He was ex-KGB of course.

MM Suspicion?

AB Suspicion? I wouldn't put it that crudely. He's a Russian nationalist. He wants to create a strong Russia. You can write a version of Russian history, since Stalin, if you like, showing that the West has systematically undermined Russian power and influence wherever it could. I think that Putin finds that version of Russian history quite persuasive. There was the expansion of NATO although Russia had withdrawn from central Europe, experience of the war in Kosovo, where we basically ignored Russian sensitivities about fellow Serbs. We bypassed the UN Security Council and went ahead with the war in Kosovo. Western companies moved into Russia when Russian assets were cheap and the Russian state was weak. We took advantage of that by grabbing choice assets at bargain basement prices, as they would see it. There's a whole narrative, if you care to construct it. Russia has certainly been through a very bad time, has had an appalling economic time. Putin was determined to reverse that and make Russia great again. That had to be demonstrated to the West to make the West realise that they couldn't kick Russia around any more. And that phase of Russian

policy came to a head more or less at the time that I was there. It's still there although I think it's attenuated a bit now. They've had problems with recession and so on, but it's still there

MM The rouble has gone down?

AB Putin was lucky that Russia had had ten years of vast economic growth partly because of rising oil prices and also because Communism was such a fantastically inefficient economic system; running the country almost any other way would have been an improvement. But he had this strong view about the need to make Russia stronger, and we, in the UK, for various reasons, found ourselves at the forefront of those with whom Russia wanted to be seen as visibly tough. A couple of the companies it is alleged had taken advantage of low Russian prices were BP and Shell. Boris Berezovsky, the famous Russian *émigré*, lives in London and the Russians were determined to get him back.

MM Does any other European country have quite as many rich *émigré* Russians as we do?

AB I doubt it. London is a magnet for rich Russians. For businessmen it provides a huge array of financial services. The language is a big attraction. English is of course the international language of business. They want their kids to go to our schools. Their wives like coming to Harrods. If you have a few million dollars to offload out of Russia, what better to do than to buy a big house in Hampstead. So for a whole complex of reasons a lot of Russians came to the UK.

MM And I suppose there's also a slight feeling that we're a little bit apart from the continental mass?

AB I don't think that's how they think of it. I mean Russians have strong trade links with Germany. Their biggest trade partner is Germany. They like ski-ing in France. They own properties in France. Western Europe for them is quite an attractive place. The UK is attractive from a business point of view. Back to what I have been saying about our reputation for reliability and responsibility, London is a good place to keep money. Financial services in the City are a huge attraction.

When I arrived, Putin had already been there for his first term. We had this huge problem with Berezovsky when I was first there. The lines that I'd learned to say best in grammatical Russian in all the time I was there was I cannot arrange for the extradition of Mr Berezovsky. Tony Blair, our Prime Minister, cannot arrange for the extradition of Mr Berezovsky. If you want to arrange for the extradition of Mr Berezovsky you have to persuade a British judge. Of course they didn't believe that.

MM They couldn't really.

AB Of course not. They do not have independent judges. So we had the problem of Berezovsky and all of that and we had Blair's increasing discomfort with the decline of Anglo/Russian relations. Prime Minister Blair was quite close to Putin initially. He had worked hard to establish a good personal relationship.

MM And amazingly Mrs Thatcher was very close to Gorbachev.

AB Gorbachev is easy to explain, because what Gorbachev was doing was dismantling the worst aspects of the regime. That was something we could be entirely sympathetic with. The contrast between Gorbachev and his predecessors was that they were all old and locked into old Communist ways of thinking. Putin was young, dynamic, fighting fit. I saw quite a lot of Putin and it was apparent as you dealt with him that he was a hard, hard man. He was a very good leader. Of the leaders I have met – I wouldn't say Putin was a history maker in the same way as Mrs Thatcher -- but I have never seen a man who was a better master of his brief. He was a man who goes into discussions with other heads of government knowing the subject they are about to discuss better than his opposite number. I saw him with Gordon Brown when Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer just after the Russians had turned off the gas supply to Europe because of a dispute with Ukraine. Putin told Brown that the trouble with the UK was that the UK buys its gas on the spot market and is thus exposed to extremely high gas prices at certain times, whereas if we bought gas on long term contracts from Gazprom, fluctuations on the spot market would cease to be a problem. I have never seen a Head of Government so much in possession of facts about the detailed arrangements made by another country in a matter of this sort. Putin was extremely impressive. He knew the results of a recent by-election in a constituency next to Brown's own constituency in the UK and what the implications of the result were for Brown. He said he was very sorry about the result. It was

ace briefing, thoroughly mastered by Putin and delivered word perfectly. He was a very hard man completely committed to the pursuit of Russia's interests. As a result of political problems in Russia, and as a result of discomfort in London at human rights events in Russia, I attended a human rights conference organised by some dissident Russians. Suddenly the UK was in the firing line for all sorts of reasons. I can list a whole sequence of events. The events were briefly an attack on the British Council. They were accused of tax evasion. Russians kicked down Council office doors around the country. Immense pressure was put on the Council to diminish their footprint in Russia.

MM: Why should they want to do that? Why should we care?

AB: We care about the Council.

MM: The Council is spending money in Russia.

AB: What the British Council is doing is good for Russia. Anyway, the Russians launched their attack, and there are various explanations for this. First, the British Council is a soft target. Let me put it this way. About ten Council Offices were situated in a variety of places in Russia. The Russian intelligence agencies viewed this with acute suspicion. There was the accusation that they were not paying Russian taxes. I found myself having to speak up for the British Council. An encouraging aspect of this difficult agenda was that the Russian cultural establishment came out in support of the Council to some extent, which was quite brave of them in the circumstances of the time. The high point for the Council was that in 2006 they set up some new offices in St Petersburg right on the Nevsky Prospect. Blair was coming for the St Petersburg summit in 2006. I proposed he should open the new Council offices. Suddenly, a week or so before the visit, the Russians said we could not open the Council office in St Petersburg because it would contravene the fire regulations. This was a complete fabrication. They just did not want Blair opening a British Council office in the middle of St Petersburg. There was then a major tussle, which culminated in a UK/Russia stand-off. We said if you want a scandal we will have one. Blair will if necessary stand on the pavement outside the office and open it formally from there. It degenerated into seeing how far they would go and how difficult they were prepared to be.

MM: You were a hard man as well!

AB: Cherie Blair was there as well in the margins of the summit and was going to meet prominent Russian women human rights activists. The British Council was a major battle line which I had to manage. There were major British investments in Russia. Shell had a huge investment on Sakhalin Island. The Russians had by accident acquired an environmental dossier which they threatened to use to close Sakhalin down. Their real objection to the investment, was that Gazprom was not a co-investor in the project. There was a row among the shareholders and the Russians threatened to close it down. Russians know when they are doing something wrong: everybody hides. They were threatening at one point to withdraw the environmental expertise which was essential to the project. If they had done that the project really would have had to close down and that would have meant a billion pounds or so to wind it up.

So I had to find someone to explain to the Russians that this would be fatal and they would have to step back from this particular course. I was sure the Russians could do a deal with Shell but I could not get hold of anyone with the suitable authority. They were all absent, sick. The Minister of the Environment was not receiving visitors. I was reduced to having to go round diplomatic events in Moscow looking for someone in authority to explain we were on the edge. Eventually I was able to track down the President's economic adviser and to explain what we were on the edge of and what we needed to back away from. Eventually a deal was done. That was another example of an attack on a major Western interest.

MM: Would you have had an opportunity to explain the situation to the President?

AB: No. Nobody was receiving me, especially him. I wasn't able to make appointments. Nobody was taking my calls. BP similarly was having big problems. TNK/BP was having trouble with its partners. The whole weight of the Russian state was against them. The FSB carried out searches.

MM: But if Putin can be so formidably well briefed when he meets Gordon Brown why do they have such difficulty in understanding our particular attitude towards Russia? It is not as if we are trying to do them down, is it?

AB: They do understand our attitude. These are hard men. They are holding the cards. They play hard and the Brits lose. They are reasonably cautious. They do not get into the game unless they are going to win. I have immense respect for the hard-headedness which they bring to these disputes and sometimes wish we were a bit more like that in our dealings.

MM: Why then were they so anxious to make life difficult for you personally?

AB: OK, let's come on to that. The other thing that happened was the Litvinenko murder, which was a very big dent in relations. We have no proof that the Russian state organised the murder but the circumstantial evidence is strong.

MM: It is indeed.

AB: We had to react. We cannot have a British citizen murdered in London as a result of the scattering round of radioactive poison. So we threw out some Russian diplomats. They threw out some British diplomats. There were various other things. We limited co-operation on the intelligence front. Relations sank to a new low. I had some Russian friends but I was the British ambassador and, basically, I was not persona grata. It was part of the career but it was rough. And it still goes on to some extent. But just to finish this, we were absolutely right to react to the Litvinenko murder. The main point to me was clear. We had to show they could not get away with this without paying a price of some sort. I think they rather expected us to react. The main point for me was getting over a very clear signal that if they acted in this way, there would be a response and that would discourage further attempts of this sort.

MM: Isn't there a problem over the concept of nationality? Here is Litvinenko, a former officer of the KGB, who comes to Britain, we give him citizenship and describe him as British. But he is still a Russian.

AB: If he acquires British citizenship he deserves the protection of the British state.

MM: That is our line.

AB: I don't know if Berezovsky has British citizenship but if they had tried to murder Berezovsky on British soil, we would have to react. You do not tolerate a foreign state, if it

was the Russian state that did it, sending its intelligence agencies to bump people off on British soil. You have seen the reaction to the killing in Dubai recently by the Israelis. We would not be involved at all except that the Israelis forged British passports for their agents. It is absolutely right that we respond very firmly to that sort of infringement on British sovereignty. As a result, Mossad no longer has a station chief in London. I was a hard liner on that and I remain very clear that we have to respond very firmly to provocation of that sort.

MM: My question to you is if you were born in Russia or applied for a Russian passport would you then become a Russian according to Russian law?

AB: In Russia, yes, and be subject to military service.

MM: So it is unlike Germany, for example, where I believe the Salic Law applies and you do not become a German simply by place of birth or residence.

AB: In the UK we have citizens and we look after them. So there was that and then we had the whole Nashi business. Because I went to this conference (about human rights) which I mentioned earlier, a Kremlin youth group, a sort of equivalent of the Hitler Youth, said I was backing fascists and demanded an apology, which of course I would not give. So they demonstrated against me and followed me around, bust up meetings, and were a considerable nuisance. I had to put up with really quite intense persecution for eighteen months. It was particularly hard on ... You acquire an insight into paranoia. You become conscious that if you start to speak at a meeting someone in the middle of the hall will suddenly stand up and start shouting abuse at you. It was all quite difficult. Eventually, they gave up.

The point I wanted to make was that this episode gave me good reasons for having existential doubts about the purpose I was serving while being an ambassador there at this time. The conclusion I reached was that I was conducting bile away from some other activity that they might have found that would have been more damaging to UK relations than the difficulty they were causing me. The fact is being ambassador in Moscow was not dull. I feel that my presence, and it could have been anyone in that position, served a genuinely worthwhile purpose. Actually, we went through a phase during which we had very few contacts with the Russian authorities. No.10 was not really talking to the Foreign Office. The new Foreign Secretary in London, David Miliband, had an intensely difficult start with Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister. For all sorts of reasons, the lines of communication

were down. You have to be able to communicate with the Russians about matters like Iran. There was the actual financial crisis. You have to work hard at contacts. If anybody was able to come up with ideas about how contacts could be made it was me. There was a job to be done and I did a moderately good job.

MM: That must be an extremely modest way of describing it. What about the role of the Russian ambassador in London?

AB: Yuri Fedyotov, an old friend. The Russians have a much more formal view of what their ambassadors do. When I was doing the Global Issues job in the FCO in London, he was doing a somewhat equivalent job in the Russian foreign ministry. We saw a lot of each other at UN meetings. He arrived quite newly in London and was still feeling his way around. I know that by now he has a much better grip on how British society works.

MM: British society is wide open. Parliament is highly visible. UK parliamentarians make a point of getting to know foreign diplomats and of explaining their views.

AB: It is open. But Russian society is much more open than it was. Bits of the Russian system are suspicious of precisely that openness. They read all the information in British newspapers and say: "Who paid to put that information into the paper, and why?" So quieter, backstage contacts matter quite a lot. They matter less than they would in an open society like America.

MM: I was extremely impressed by the fact that at that recent conference "Legacy of the Cold War" at Churchill College, Gorbachev saw fit to send a message to be read out in public at the end of the conference saying we should not say that Russia lost the cold war. It was an opening to a new society. It is true Russia is a beneficiary from the new openness!

AB: They did lose the cold war, but of course, as diplomats, we do not say it like that. But that is the reality. That is part of the problem with modern Russia. In their hearts they know that Russia collapsed and that is very difficult for them to accept. Their empire collapsed. The Soviet Union collapsed. Their economy collapsed. Their whole ideology collapsed. I recommend to you a piece in this month's 'Standpoint' magazine on Russian history. It is called 'Russia and Europe, an insoluble problem', something like that.

MM: Going back to Berezovsky, why are the Russians so keen to get him?

AB: He is a very powerful and extremely rich man. It was he, along with some others, who saved Yeltsin in 1996, the first ever Russian presidential election. Yeltsin started the campaign with an approval rating of something like 4%. He won the election in the summer. Berezovsky brought the newspapers and television stations in to support Yeltsin effectively on the understanding that if Yeltsin won, Berezovsky would get a share of the power. Putin came in with his group of people led by Berezovsky expecting to remain very powerful. Putin's view was that power was too widely diffused in Russia. It wasn't going to be given away to stray oligarchs, and quite early on he made that clear to Berezovsky. Berezovsky then turned his newspapers and television stations against Putin. Putin then exiled Berezovsky and has never forgiven him. Berezovsky has never forgiven Putin. He certainly finances dissidents like Litvinenko and definitely speaks out against Putin. The Russians are very angry about Berezovsky, who has been most prominent among expatriate oligarchs. They want to get their hands on them.

MM: Do they want to simply put them in gaol?

AB: The parallel case is that of Khodorkovsky who is in gaol. But as I arrived in Russia in 2004 as ambassador, the Khodorkovsky trial was just beginning. I was involved in reporting on it because it had implications for UK/Russia commercial links. What was going on was a gross travesty of justice. No doubt he had committed a lot of criminal acts, but so had a lot of other people. It was very selective. What it was really about was the fact that Khodorkovsky had set himself up in opposition to Putin. So Putin destroyed him. He was locked away in gaol. What it demonstrated was that the liberal, cuddly, democratic Russia we had hoped for was not the Russia we lived in.

MM: What do you think the future holds for our relations with Russia?

AB: Things will remain difficult. The new affirmative Russia, much less close to the West, is going to remain a reality. Russia will be more like China, repositioning itself as an independent power rather than ...

MM: I thought they were being helpful.

AB: My view is they are more helpful than they are given credit for. I did a lot of talking about Iran when I was Ambassador and co-operation was reasonably close. They are sometimes a bit slow on sanctions where their interests are different.

MM: They ought to be quite helpful to us over Afghanistan, in respect of overflights.

AB: And they are. They are just as keen as we are to prevent the Taliban coming back to power because of their interests in states bordering Afghanistan.

MM: Did you have much to do with Lord Browne of BP over the TNK negotiations?

AB: John Browne had gone by the time I arrived as ambassador. I did see quite a lot of him when earlier I was the Economic Counsellor in Moscow. The history of BP's relations with TNK starts with BP's initial investment in Siberia. This was stolen from them but they came back and entered a new investment with TNK, with roughly the same people who stole the Siberian investment. The TNK investment, even after the recent changes to its terms remains extremely prosperous. One reason it got such a good start was that Browne was frequently in Russia, knew everyone there, had his finger on the pulse, and if anything went awry was there to deal with it.

MM: I wonder what the Russians made of Browne?

AB: He is a very impressive guy. Most Russians are eccentric in one way or another. The Russians don't care about personality. They care about what sort of dealer you are. What mattered to them is whether he knew his business inside out and can deliver; that is what counts with them. The Russian bureaucratic culture is represented by a whole cadre of intelligent, educated, serious, focussed people. The individuals in it are extremely impressive.

MM: What is your impression of the current President, Medvedev?

AB: He and Putin are very different. Medvedev is extremely nice, charming, engaging to talk to. They are friends and have known each other for twenty years. I am unsurprised by

the relationship. There was an interesting and ambiguous period when Putin had decided to change the constitution and could have continued as President for longer. It speaks very highly of his commitment to at least observing the forms that he chose not to do that and decided to stand down. I am pretty sure that at one point he had decided that a man called Sedinov was to take over from him. Something abruptly changed very late in the process. I suspect that what changed was that he recognised the danger to himself of becoming the ex-president and of having no grip over what might happen afterwards. I also think he was mindful of the danger to Russia. He had huge popularity ratings so he decided not to hand power over to someone who might genuinely choose to exercise it but instead to choose someone as a place keeper. So he chose Medvedev who was head of his office and emerged to do the job and be the front man. Medvedev has played this very skilfully. He has allowed the main decisions to be made by Putin. There are a number of key questions of importance to Russia at this time. The question of the rule of law is an acute one. The question of human rights is also acute. It is possible that after further progress has been made with these matters that Putin will come back as president. That seems to be believed in certain quarters in Moscow.

MM: When you look at Russia and its simply vast extent, from Europe in the West to North America in the East, you realise that governing it must be an immense problem.

AB: Several time zones. It is an immense problem. It goes back to Russian political literature. Look at the size. It is the justification for hundreds of years of autocracy and tough government. You cannot manage a country of this size with a more forgiving political system. It needs a firm hand at the top and to some extent that feeling is still around. Under Yeltsin, there was a very strong impression that the place was on the edge of falling apart. Chechnya was the most conspicuous example. It was de facto independent. Other big bits of Russia, Tatarstan, and Dagestan also demanded huge amounts of autonomy. Other individual governments, particularly in the Far East, were basically bandits. One of the things that Putin has done has been to get more grip on these governments. When he took over and was directly elected he was able to act. Of course Chechnya is an example of a republic that has been brought back. And quite a lot of what Putin has been about has been re-establishing presidential authority. Russia was looking very ragged after Yeltsin's presidency.

MM: I understand the Chechens have had a reputation for being rather wild people, not the same as civilised central Russians.

AB: That's right. It is not just the Chechens. The whole of North Caucasus is the same mountainous rugged bandit country, with age-old feuds, mad mountain men whose idea of an enjoyable Saturday night out is to go and shoot up some neighbouring village. Chechnya is a particular problem because it is unlike Dagestan and Ingushetia where the feuds tend to be interminable. Again, this goes back a long way. There is a Tolstoyan story about the Chechens fighting the Russians. In Chechnya there was a movement towards independence and that, as seen from Moscow, was a mortal threat. Besides having lost the Soviet Union, all that having fallen off, if bits of Russia began to fall off as well, you are looking at the dissolution of the State. While they had to accept the loss of the Soviet Union, there was a clear red line in Moscow and this threat crossed it. Another place they were very sensitive about was Kaliningrad, not directly linked with Russia but de jure part of Russia as a result of an agreement with the Germans, so obviously difficult to ignore. They devoted a lot of effort and resources to deal with these movements in that part of Russia.

I finished in September 2008 and things had bottomed out by then. We had had Litvinenko and the British Council but things remained difficult. I rather hoped some of the pieces of our relations could be stuck back together again. Prime Minister Brown and the Foreign Secretaries are doing serious business with each other.

MM: How will it change if we have a Prime Minister Cameron? I suppose we shall have to wait until tomorrow.

AB: Our interests will not change. Our interest is in a civilised relationship. Good commercial activity is obviously important. It will not change Russia to deliver lectures about human rights. It is growing intercourse with trade and with a reliable supply of gas one must hope for improvement.

MM: Well thank you very much for that insight.