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CHAPLIN, Edward Graham Mellish (born 21 February 1951)

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF EDWARD CHAPLIN CMG OBE, RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS

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SR: It's 21 January 2021 and I am talking to Edward Chaplin via WhatsApp.

Edward, why did you choose to join the FCO? Unusually, you had spent some of your childhood in Baghdad. How did that come about and was that part of the reason?

EC: Yes, that was one of the reasons. My father joined ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) before the Second World War and then volunteered for the Army as soon as war broke out. And in those days, for most jobs, there was a guarantee that if you survived the war, they had to give you your job back. So he worked for ICI on his return from the war, married my mother and they started to have children. By the time I was born in 1951, he was in Welwyn Garden City. But I think the job wasn't very thrilling and he started to apply for jobs overseas. It could have been South America or Scandinavia, or anywhere else because at that time, ICI had offices all over the world, but it turned out to be Baghdad. So when I was four, in 1955, we went off to Baghdad. I have a few quite strong memories, because it's that sort of place. I went to a little kindergarten in Baghdad before being packed off to prep school in England aged 7. When in Baghdad, days were spent mainly at the Alwiyah club, full of expatriates and rich Iraqis. That's where I learned to swim very early. There were memorable trips out into the desert, down the Tigris river, and other visits out of Baghdad.

These early memories gave me an interest in the Middle East. I can't claim I came back speaking much Arabic, but it gave me a glimpse of another world. And when I came to do my traditional French, German and English A Levels and then to everyone's surprise arrived in Cambridge, I realised belatedly that I really didn't want to go on doing modern languages for another three years, particularly as the Cambridge French and German course (surprise, surprise!) was extremely academic and focused heavily on mediaeval literature. So I thought I'd change to Arabic and chose Persian to go with it. Launching into Arabic and Persian was quite a tall order because classical Arabic is quite difficult to get into. So although I was glad to have chosen it, it was quite a struggle getting going.

In those days, believe it or not, Cambridge didn't believe in sending you out to the Middle East as part of the course. Durham had a much more enlightened view, but Cambridge was really focused on classical Arabic and classical Persian and thought that going abroad was a waste of time. But I insisted and offered to organise it myself. Eventually, they reluctantly let me go, saying, 'We're afraid you'll forget what you have learned'. And I said, 'Well, I haven't actually learned very much.' I got myself a job through friends of my father from Baghdad days in Bahrain, as a UN volunteer, teaching in an Arab school in Muharraq, which is an island just off Bahrain and had a very happy year there.

It was 1971, quite a momentous year, the year of British withdrawal from the Gulf and so a historic moment for our relations with these newly independent nations. Inevitably, in that relatively small expatriate community, I got to know people in the Embassy (well, it was to become an Embassy, replacing the Residency, which until then had run our relationship with the Gulf states). So I got a glimpse of diplomatic life. Patrick Wogan I remember was there at the time. I also got a glimpse into the pros and cons of expatriate life.

So after returning to Cambridge for my final year and thinking about what I should do next, the Foreign Office was quite high on the list together, with a couple of oil companies. I knew I didn't want the sort of expatriate life that had you selling Rothman's cigarettes throughout the Gulf for 25 years, because I could see what that had done to certain individuals. That wasn't very attractive. But a job that took you abroad and left you in places for a reasonable length of time, enough to get to know the country and get under the skin a little bit was very attractive.

Middle East Department, FCO, 1973

So again, to everyone's surprise, I was accepted by the Foreign Office. And naturally, they gave me a Middle East label. The other factor, apart from all that, was I had an aunt, Brenda Chaplin, a spinster, the younger sister of my father, who was one of that cohort of formidable ladies who were taken on by the Foreign Office immediately after the war. Brenda and a couple of friends from the army (ATS) came into Protocol and Conference Department as it was then. They basically did all the organisation of big conferences, whether at home or abroad. And so Brenda Chaplin was one of the stalwarts of the Department. I remember when I was still at Cambridge, or possibly even earlier, her taking me into the quadrangle of King Charles Street and saying, 'Well, this could be a possibility.' That memory stayed with

me. So various reasons steered me towards the Foreign Office. I can honestly say I never regretted it.

SR: You say that obviously they put you into Middle East Department, but was that really an obvious choice?

EC: Well of course there were lots of colleagues whose qualifications were ignored and were sent somewhere quite different. But in my case I had had recent experience of the Gulf and there was a slot free in Middle East Department. It was a good choice really. Patrick Wright was the Head of Department. One arrives being very clueless, not so much about the subject matter — I knew a bit about the Middle East — but how you get things done. The arcane world of minutes and submissions and the hierarchy. I had two very good heads of section, David Tatham and then Rob Young.

That year was also very memorable for the crisis of the three day week: you may just remember it involved complete blackouts on the other days. It was the nadir of the Heath government. Alec Douglas-Home was Foreign Secretary. I can remember Rob Young with a candle on top of his own typewriter, the secretaries having been sent home, typing up some submission, which must have been terribly urgent, I suppose. Anyway, an early example of devotion to duty.

MECAS (Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies, language training), 1974-75

Britain was a pretty unhappy place in 1973 – 74. So it was rather a relief to be to be given an escape route out to MECAS. Despite my degree in Arabic and Persian and my year out in the Gulf, my spoken Arabic still needed some improvement. So they agreed that I should go on the last bit of the MECAS course. The full course for beginners is 18 months. But the last five months of that was the advanced course. So I joined that from September 1974 until February 1975. The timing, again, was fortunate in that things in Lebanon were still relatively calm. I knew MECAS a bit because I'd been there on my year out at Cambridge which had started with a month's summer course in Shemlan, before I then went travelling in Syria and Iraq, en route to Bahrain for my year teaching there. It was a very efficient way of getting my Arabic up to a reasonable speed before I was then posted to Muscat. If the system had been working perfectly, everyone from the MECAS course would have gone on to a post

in the Arab world. But that didn't happen to everybody. One colleague was posted to Rabat and had to go off and learn French.

SR: Was it good fun at MECAS? I've talked to other people who had a great time there.

EC: I was a bit of an outsider as I just swanned in for the last five months while everyone else had been there since the beginning. I didn't live in the school, which everyone else did, but lived out with a family, in a little village nearby about five kilometres along the mountain ridge with a wonderful view overlooking Beirut and the Mediterranean. Of course, only a year or so later, Lebanon was plunged into civil war. MECAS was closed down. Some of those villages, which were all very higgledy-piggledy with different political groups and religious groups, got caught up in a very messy, long civil war. I never discovered whether the family I stayed with survived: he was the local policeman. Few people were unscathed.

But anyway, while we were there it was great and included a bit of travelling elsewhere in the Arab world. I was as well prepared as I could be in terms of the language when I got to Muscat in 1975. The other person I should mention I did quite a lot of travelling with, both on an earlier MECAS vacation course and later was Mark Allen. He was an exact contemporary who then remained a good friend throughout and still is. He was passionate about hawking. He got to know the Bedouin living in the northern borders of Jordan, whose main income came from smuggling and trapping hawks. So he took me to introduce me to them in northern Jordan during that time. That was a fascinating insight into traditional Arab culture. He was then posted to Abu Dhabi while I was posted to Muscat. We had the occasional contact then, although communications between those two places was relatively arduous — a five hour drive along dusty wadis.

British Embassy, Muscat, 1975-77

Muscat was in many ways a dream first posting because, as a young diplomat you are scraping together the rent for your London flat and then suddenly your world is transformed. People are showering you with outfit allowances and advances for your car loan – although not immediately for those posted to Oman, as there were so few roads!.

The Embassy then was in the old part of Muscat town right next to the Sultan's palace, looking out on two Portuguese forts in the very picturesque bay of Muscat. I was told, 'Here are the keys to one of the Embassy Land Rovers so just get out and about as much as you can. And if you do have any leisure, well here is the Embassy pool and tennis court. Oh by the

way, we have an ex-Singapore harbour police launch at our disposal with a couple of boatmen.’ There were also a couple of speedboats so you could do water skiing, not that I was very good at that. To be there at that time was a great privilege really. The country was at an interesting moment because Sultan Qaboos had only just taken over in 1970 in a British-backed coup, mainly because the old Sultan was getting more and more remote from his people and wouldn't allow any development. And there was an insurgency raging down in Dhofar, the southern province of Oman which borders on Yemen. I knew a bit about this as my desk officer job in Middle East Department had been Oman and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf, as it was called, was fighting in Dhofar, with a view to overthrowing all those rotten sultanates and kingdoms in the Gulf. So, apart from anything else, there was the excitement of a Third Secretary going down to Dhofar to find out what was happening there. There were a lot of British loan service as well as ex-army contract personnel. All very exciting and the travelling around was also very good for my Arabic, of course.

I had an enlightened Head of Chancery, David Tatham, again and the Ambassadors were Donald Hawley, followed by Jim Treadwell, both very keen on the new Third Secretary getting out and about and being properly trained, house-trained in the ways of diplomatic life. So it was a good introduction and I enjoyed it very much. It only lasted two years.

British Embassy, Brussels, 1977-78

In those days, it was quite common for new entrants like me to have two postings overseas before coming back to London. David Tatham showed me a very rambling handwritten letter from the head of the section in POD (Personnel Operations Department) as it then was, explaining that they had got me lined up for a posting to Madrid as a good contrast to Muscat. But it had all fallen through and the Ambassador was changing or something and it wasn't going to happen. So, instead I was going to go to Brussels. I exchanged the blue skies and sunshine and exotic sights of Muscat for the grey skies and bureaucratic drabness, I have to say, of Brussels and of course not the most exciting post in Brussels because it was the bilateral Embassy under the rather formidable Sir David Muirhead. It was really quite difficult to work out what I was there for. I remember Michael Palliser, then the Permanent Under-Secretary, visiting and my sounding off to him (I must have been rather brave and rather desperate!) about how I thought this wasn't a terribly good use of my time. I think this was because my latest instruction from Whitehall had been to find out how the Brussels

authorities organised municipal gardening for some reason. Why that was of any interest? But it was an example of getting a bit lost as to why one was there at all. Of course, just up the road, there was the UK Mission to the European Communities newly established and the rather better established Delegation to NATO both doing rather more important and exciting things, one felt.

It had its moments, however: Belgian politics was an art all of its own. Very complicated and with the one advantage that all those British correspondents sitting in Brussels to report on European and NATO affairs were occasionally asked by their editors for a story on Belgian politics of which they knew very little. So they would come flocking to me as the supposed political expert on Belgian politics. So it was quite amusing seeing one's rather amateur analysis of what was going on in Belgian politics repeated in various newspaper articles. It didn't really matter if it was accurate or not, because Belgian politics changed very quickly.

The Belgians were very kind and hospitable. You will remember as you took over the job from me that there was this extraordinary sort of Belgian aristocracy, still carrying on a sort of modern Victorian lifestyle in their big country *châteaux* and entertaining a lot. There was fun to be had.

SR: David Muirhead was very old school, wasn't he?

EC: Yes, very. Amongst his traditions was that the junior member of Chancery was there to turn his or her hand to anything that was required. That might include showing up on the Residence tennis court on a Sunday morning, despite any other plans one might have. He was a formidable tennis player, but not very agile. So if you left the shot within his reach, he could then produce the most devastating spin shot which was very difficult to return. But out of his reach, he probably couldn't get there. I struggled to think if it was my duty to let him win.

The Residence in those days was the magnificent Rue Ducale which, of course, inevitably later became the Residence of the Permanent Representative to the European Union rather than the bilateral Ambassador who went elsewhere. In those days, Donald Maitland (the Permanent Representative) was housed rather modestly in the suburbs. Rue Ducale is in the centre of Brussels and a great place to entertain. David Muirhead did a lot of that, including Scottish dancing. His daughter was married to David Gore-Booth, who was up the road in UKRep at the time, so they were often there. All part of a Third Secretary's life, I suppose, to learn about the different forms of diplomacy.

There were other memorable moments. My French was reasonably good. I'd done A-level French and my family was in Jersey, so we'd visited France a lot. Not long after I arrived, there was a terrible fire in a hotel in Brussels in which a number of British tourists were staying. The fire spread very rapidly and a dozen or so British people died. It was a big consular case and they needed all hands to the pump. I was sent as I could speak French. It was my first experience of dealing with frontline consular work and meeting grieving families in the fairly grisly aftermath of the fire.

Visitors came and went. The Duke of Edinburgh, I remember, came through. My instructions were quite simple: to take him to the hotel, supply him with a bottle of scotch whisky and otherwise to make myself scarce. But it was more complicated than that because it turned out he'd managed to get on the plane without his passport. His private secretary wasn't concentrating at the time. So I had to persuade the Belgian authorities that yes, this was indeed the Duke of Edinburgh and it was quite safe to let him into the country for 48 hours. I think he was coming for a meeting of the World Wildlife Foundation, something like that.

ENA, Paris, 1978-79

But on the whole, I was quite glad when the PUS, Michael Palliser, insisted we had to fulfil our quota of seconding two diplomats each year to the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) course in Paris, the school for training the élites of the French civil service. There was one other already lined up for that, Tom Carter. So I was dispatched early from my Brussels posting to Paris. I can't say I resisted very hard. A year in Paris was rather wonderful really, because there you are being paid as a diplomat, but living more or less as a student. I had a nice flat in the Marais and from there I could take a bus or, on a fine day, walk to the Rue de l'Université where ENA was, to be part of this group of 25 or so diplomats mainly from the European Union.

The first stage was to be inducted, so there were very interesting courses on the French constitution and other aspects of French life. As I had reasonable French already, I didn't have to spend too much time learning that. And then in January 1979 we joined the main ENA course for French civil servants. I should explain it was a two and a half year course for them. The first year was spent in a *stage* (work placement) at a *préfecture* or an Embassy overseas. The following year they came back to Paris for 18 months. So it was at that stage that we, the *cycle étranger*, joined the French and spent six months doing the same courses as

them but without the dreaded exams that they were required to take every few weeks or so, all of which would contribute to their final mark which would determine how high a place in the French hierarchy they could aspire to. So a very elitist — one could say — but very efficient system for training your budding civil servants. Certainly much more elaborate than anything we had at the time or indeed since. Perhaps it couldn't work in the UK but it was a useful insight to have into the whole administrative machine of the French state. It was very efficient in the sense that people who graduated from there went into ministries. But often, after four or five years, they would go into political *cabinets* or into state controlled industries. So thanks to the ENA system, any French senior government official had this network of people he or she knew. And if you were in the same *promotion* as any other person, whether you knew them or not, you were allowed to *tutoyer* them. A good start if you needed that contact later on. Not that I got to know them well, but there were some famous people including François Hollande.

SR: Aha! So you were actually in the famous *promotion Voltaire*?

EC: Yes. We had François Hollande, Ségolène Royal. The one I got to know best was someone called Jean de Courcel. He was very Anglophile because his father was very close to de Gaulle and had been appointed French Ambassador to London in the 1960s with the result that Jean had spent several terms at Eton. He was very kind and introduced me to lots of other people. So it was a great year.

The *cycle étranger* had their own *stage en préfecture* for three months. In my case it was a bit less, but was in Albi in the Tarn, in the southwest of France. Again it was wonderful, a pretty new part of France to me. I knew Brittany and Normandy thanks to being brought up in the Channel Islands. But I didn't know southwest France at all. It was, as I've learned since, a completely different life. Life as a *stagiaire* consisted mainly of accompanying the *préfet* or one of his senior colleagues to a village or a town somewhere to transact a bit of business that seemed to be heavily concentrated on food and drink as far as I remember. But it did give me an insight into how the French administration works at a provincial level. This was before the great Mitterrand reforms of giving more power to the regions, so it was pretty much centrally controlled. The *préfet* was a very powerful figure with a lot of resources at his disposal — it was all 'his' as I don't think there were any female *préfets* at the time. So that was very interesting.

I made a few French friends, some of whom have stayed to this day. We now have a house of our own, not very far away in the southwest in the Aveyron, the department just to the north of Albi. Good fun. But the fun had to come to an end before too long, in that it was time for me to return to London.

SR: Normally, after ENA, they try to find you a job in the Embassy in Paris, don't they?

EC: So I'd hoped, but of course that would have been pushing my luck a bit since I had already had two postings overseas. I think the powers that be felt it was time that I came back to some real work at home. That would have been a dream, of course. It's much more efficient if you can do that, because once you've acquired your good French and your contacts through ENA, to be able to use them for three years in the Embassy would make a lot of sense. It was not to be. I always pleaded hopefully to Personnel Department that they really should make use of my excellent French contacts and my experience of ENA by posting me back to the Embassy in Paris. It never quite happened. Never mind. Other equally interesting things happened.

Private Secretary to Lord President of the Council, 1979-81

Chance plays a part in diplomatic careers and it had its role in my next posting. This was just after the new government under Mrs Thatcher had come into power and having a Cabinet that was quite short of foreign affairs expertise, and in particular European expertise, she had appointed to her Cabinet Christopher Soames. He was vastly experienced, including being Ambassador in Paris under the previous Labour Government and then the first British Commissioner and the Vice President of the Commission in Brussels after our entry. He was made Lord President of the Council. He'd have loved to be Foreign Secretary but Carrington had bagged that one! He had a remit to sit on all the foreign and European committees in the Cabinet Office. So, as he needed to be kept up to speed on European and foreign affairs, he said he would like someone in his Private Office to come from the Foreign Office. I was available and he probably liked the fact that I had come from Paris. We got along well and so he appointed me.

That was very fortunate. It was fascinating to be a private secretary to a cabinet minister at the start of a new government. A private secretary has a bird's eye view of what's going on in Whitehall, so it taught me a lot about how Whitehall worked. He was Minister for the Civil Service Department although he delegated most of that to the Minister of State, Paul Channon. He was leader of the House of Lords, so whenever the House of Lords was sitting,

we would transfer the Private Office across to the Lords. That was my introduction to the rather wonderful ways of the House of Lords. Bertie Denham was the Chief Whip who wrote novels in his spare time.

Soames was a great man to work for. He had huge political experience. He disliked handling anything on paper, but he was brilliant at handling anything orally. He had a very well developed political instinct as Churchill's son in law, indeed, his Parliamentary Private Secretary at a critical time, so he knew the politics of it all backwards. If you were trying to brief him for a Cabinet meeting or a debate in the House of Lords or whatever it might be, it was no good loading up his red box with lots of earnest papers, because he wouldn't read them. Occasionally, he managed to get through the top couple of documents in the red box that he took home with him, but the rest would come back more or less untouched. If you had ten minutes with him before going off to the meeting, he got it and reproduced the line to take as if it was his own, without apparent effort. So it was a great skill and a great lesson.

It was the same writing speeches for him. That was one of my jobs, so I would collect material from various sources. I remember going to Brussels once to a meeting of the British Chambers of Commerce, I think it was. I'd written an earnest speech full of not very interesting stuff. I was sitting at the same table as him. He stood up, looked across the table, looked down at my text, looked at me again, shook his head, put the text down and then just extemporised for 40 minutes in a speech that they all loved. Again, very good lessons.

But the most fascinating thing in many ways about that job was that I hadn't even started it before Soames was appointed Governor of Rhodesia. The Lancaster House Conference had been going on to try and find a solution to the UDI and Rhodesia as it then still was. It ended in success, rather to everyone's surprise. And that meant there was a transitional period before elections could be held and a new government sworn in. For those five months we needed essentially to recolonize the country, so Soames was sent with a relatively small team and the Commonwealth Monitoring Force to help keep law and order. Off we went in December 1979. We were there until April 1980 when, after the elections, the Mugabe government was sworn in.

That was my only FCO experience of Africa. I had been there on my gap year, visiting South Africa, Rhodesia, Malawi and Kenya. So I knew a bit about the area. I had, like so many of my generation, cousins farming in Rhodesia who had a very dim view of events and the fact we were handing the country over to black majority rule. But it was very interesting. In fact,

I went there not as Soames's Private Secretary, because he only needed his senior private secretary, Jim Buckley, for that time. So I was in the Chancery team, looking after repatriation of refugees from neighbouring countries, which was a hugely complicated and political issue. I was working under Duncan Slater. Various people had been seconded to the Governor's team, including Kieran Prendergast who came in from New York to do the press side. It was highly political, a very good experience. I spent a lot of time going out to the various entry points with Zambia and Mozambique and negotiating with a Rhodesian administration which, of course, was mainly staffed by white civil servants not enamoured of the direction things were going in, making all sorts of excuses on health and other grounds as to why only a handful of refugees per day could be repatriated. They could work out perfectly easily that anyone repatriated before election day was likely to vote for either Nkomo or Mugabe, depending on what country they were coming from. It was also my first contact with the UN in the form of the UN High Commission for Refugees which was central to the repatriation operation. I got to know the UNHCR rep, Nick Morris, well. He was a rather doughty Scot whom I met again in Geneva a bit later. A very effective guy.

Things more or less stayed on track thanks to Christopher Soames, I think it has to be said. The most senior British civil servant was Anthony Duff, with the redoubtable Robin Renwick underneath him. If one reads the literature of the time, it's fair to assume there was a Plan A being pushed by the Muzorewa regime, under which the opponents of Mugabe would team up, win a majority and keep Mugabe out of power. But, in fact, the politics of it were such that Mugabe won by a landslide majority that nobody could deny. There was a very tense period just before the election when there was strong pressure on Christopher Soames as Governor to ban Zanu PF, Mugabe's party, from taking part in the election on the grounds of widespread intimidation. Well, there certainly was widespread intimidation on all sides, not just Mugabe's. In fact, Soames confined himself to banning Zanu PF in only two or three districts, I think, but allowing the rest to go ahead. That showed his political instincts. Had he been a senior civil servant or a former general, he might have been rather more swayed by the arguments in favour of banning Mugabe, but I think his political instincts taught him that that would be very foolish. He was right.

The other remarkable thing that Soames did was form quite a constructive relationship with Mugabe. One forgets now, with the recent history of Mugabe and the years before his death when he went completely off the rails, that in those days (1979-1980) he was more open to reason. Some people would argue he was open to reason for as long as it suited his interests

and then when things stopped going his way, he became more extreme. But whatever the truth of it, at the start he was open to persuasion. He took a lot of advice from Soames, they formed this strange, quite close relationship. So, for example, he had no idea about how to form a cabinet. Well, of course, Soames knew quite a bit about that. And one of the crucial things I think he did was to advise Mugabe that the single most important thing to do to regain the confidence of the white population, particularly the white farmers whom you need in order to have them going on producing the food that the country needed — not just for itself, but for its exports — was to appoint a cabinet minister for agriculture who commanded their confidence. He did just that by appointing Denis Norman, who was Secretary of the Commercial Farmers' Union, the equivalent of the NFU in Rhodesia. He was Minister of Agriculture for a couple of years and that did give confidence to the farmers who indeed stayed put. For a year or two things went rather well. I remember we went back for an aid conference a year later. I think there were more white farmers on the land a year after independence than there had been before, because many had earlier decided to go and sit it out in South Africa or elsewhere.

Of course, later in that decade, a combination of political factors and severe drought and competition between Nkomo and Mugabe breaking down into strife, meant that things went horribly wrong. But I think it is reasonable to argue that Soames and his team gave the new Zimbabwe the best possible start it could. So that was all very creative, interesting, very memorable.

After that, I came back to London, to the Private Office job, which then became rather more traditional: speech writing, keeping up with FCO and especially EU issues and getting one's head around the various arcane topics that came up in the House of Lords. It was interesting being able to view how the political and government machine was working across Whitehall. The civil service strike started and, indeed, that was Soames's downfall or possibly the excuse for his sacking by Mrs Thatcher. But, for whatever reason, his job came to an end in 1981, in the aftermath of the civil service strike. He was very much one of the so-called 'wets', along with people like Ian Gilmour, the deputy Foreign Secretary and he did a lot on European affairs. David Hannay, of course, had been his *Chef de Cabinet* in Brussels and by then was the AUS in charge of European affairs. So he and his team and Gilmour's private office kept Soames — via me — pretty closely briefed on what was going on on the European front, so he could weigh in when needed. So that was an interesting two years.

Near East and North Africa Department (NENAD), FCO, 1981-84

The incoming President of Council, Janet Young, didn't need someone from the Foreign Office in her Private Office, thank you very much, so I went back to the fold, to Middle East affairs in the form of NENAD, where I was in charge of the section dealing with Israel, Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. This made for a pretty full agenda because, apart from the Lebanese civil war, there was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1981, after the assassination attempt on the Israeli Ambassador in London, which the Israelis blamed – wrongly I think - on the PLO. This led to the establishment of not a UN force (because you couldn't get that through the Security Council at the time), but a multinational force with us, the Americans, the French and the Italians to oversee the withdrawal of PLO forces. A relatively small force which planted itself in Beirut, from August 1982 until March 1984, withdrawing after the assassination of President Gemayel and then the Hezbollah bombing of the American Embassy and US and French barracks. So for a couple of years, the Lebanon crisis was quite a big part of my life, establishing the multinational force from scratch and the politics was all very complicated, explaining to our Middle East allies what was going on and why this was a good idea. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon stoked passions a lot, both at home and overseas.

It was a good introduction to fast moving political events and things that were very much under public and parliamentary scrutiny, requiring a lot of contact with ministers, briefings, parliamentary work and so on. Quite apart from Israel and the Occupied Territories, which also produced its share of grief and interesting questions impossible to resolve but which needed nevertheless to be dealt with.

Again, I was fortunate, I think, in my bosses and colleagues. One Peter Ricketts was on the Arab-Israel desk. The Head of Department was Oliver Miles, a brilliant Arabist and a linguist who soaked up languages effortlessly. Jeremy Greenstock was the Assistant Head, followed by Patrick Nixon. Oliver Miles was succeeded by Christopher Long. So I had some excellent colleagues who taught me a lot in my first job at this level in the Foreign Office. Because it was so busy, I had an assistant desk Officer who in the second half of my time was James Bevan, who also went on to greater things. I hope I put him on the right path!

The last part of my time in NENAD, although I wasn't dealing with it directly, was dominated by the Libyan crisis, with the shooting of WPC Fletcher, in St James's Square

where the Libyan Embassy was. This led to a break of relations - unfortunately for Oliver Miles, who had just gone from being Head of the Department to Ambassador in Tripoli. Overall, NENAD was quite a baptism of fire.

Meanwhile, I'd met Nicky. Early days living together in Kentish Town were punctuated by very regular calls from the Resident Clerk in the small hours reporting that some ghastly thing had happened in Lebanon (usually) or elsewhere in my patch which required some attention. She remembers those days not quite so fondly, although it was a good introduction to the realities of FCO life.

I should also mention that Douglas Hurd was the Minister for the Middle East in those days. Again, a very good person to work for. Just to watch him operating as a politician turning up to e.g. a lunch in the Lebanese Embassy and managing to say the right thing off the cuff with minimal briefing was an object lesson.

Head of Chancery, British Interests Section, Tehran, 1985-87

So anyway, I did find time to get married and have a honeymoon. And we started a family just before setting off on the next phase. Once again, chance played an important part. There had been talk — although we didn't talk much to Personnel in those days as you just went where you were told — that the next job for me, having done the Middle East a bit, might be in the Chancery in Washington. In fact, in Tehran, the then Head of Chancery, Chris Rundle, who was a fine Persian speaker from the Research cadre specialising in Iran and Afghanistan, had quite a bad car accident and had to be medevac'd out of Tehran. So there was a sudden gap as Head of Chancery. Someone in Personnel Department remembered that I had studied Persian, something I'd failed to delete from my CV!

SR: Presumably you hadn't kept it up?

EC: Not at all. But Persian is a much easier language for Europeans than Arabic. It's an Indo-European, not a Semitic language. It doesn't inflect and has a relatively easy grammar and vocabulary to acquire. So, a couple of months brushing up with a tutor in London gave me enough to be able to operate. We went out in January: the main timing factor was the arrival of our first child, Stephanie, who was born in December 1984. It seems mad now that six weeks later we should have gone quite so quickly, but nothing daunted! The ignorance of bliss, or bliss of ignorance rather, sent us on our way to Tehran with Stephanie in a Moses basket lined with bars of chocolate. Because the Iran-Iraq war was going on, there were

various well publicised shortages in Tehran. And you were not allowed to take alcohol. But we were well briefed on all this and duly emptied a litre bottle of gin into an innocent looking water bottle in our hand luggage.

We arrived in early 1985, to join what was technically the British Interests Section of the Swedish Embassy because relations had been broken off after the hostage crisis, the takeover of the American Embassy by the Iranians in 1979. Oddly enough, it was a rather lopsided arrangement because the Iranians still had an Embassy in London, but we only had an Interests Section in Tehran, although it was actually all a bit of a fiction because we operated very much as an Embassy. We were much larger than the Swedish Embassy that we were supposed to be part of, which was in another part of town and a much more modest setup, while we were still in the spacious Ferdowsi compound in central Tehran with the magnificent Residence. The Ambassador, or rather Head of the British Interests Section, was Michael Simpson-Orlebar, a delightful old school diplomat. His wife, Rosita, was from Colombia. They were extremely good news for a mission rather beleaguered by war and by difficult political circumstances

We more or less operated as an Embassy with a full visa section and quite an important commercial section. The other compound was in Gulhaq, in the northern part of Tehran, where it was much cooler.

It was a fascinating time. It was still relatively soon after the 1979 Revolution. The Iran-Iraq war was going on. There was intense political interest in what the Iranians were up to, so a very strong demand, both in London and indeed in Washington, for the few gleanings you could get from our very limited political access. It was the only time I've served in a capital without an American mission. Rather refreshing, I must say! A lot of our reporting was passed on to Washington via our Embassy there. The challenge was trying to make sense of a still relatively new revolutionary régime, trying to advance British interests, particularly commercial interests and make sense of what was going on in the war. I struck up a friendship with the Pakistani defence attaché who was very well plugged into things that were happening in the war.

I tried to get around the country a bit. Travel was limited with the excuse of the war, but also mainly because of intense Iranian suspicion of foreign — particularly British motives. Diplomats were not allowed to go more than 40 kilometres outside Tehran without a permit. You could apply for a permit and whether this was granted depended on the state of relations

e.g. whether you were having a row over a visa for a particular senior Iranian official going to London or some other excuse. Despite that and also having a young baby with us, we did manage a bit of travelling down to Isfahan and Shiraz and up to the Caspian. Iranian friends that dared to have open relations with us were very friendly, very hospitable. But it was limited, so I never got to Mashhad, for example, the important religious centre in eastern Iran. It was always very busy. Various hostage type situations arose. One was a British Financial Times journalist, Roger Cooper, who overstayed his visa and was thrown into jail. This sort of thing is still going on today — opportunist imprisonment by the Iranian régime, locking up a Brit to give them some leverage over us. It took a long time to get him out: he wasn't released before I left but was a bit later. A lot of British journalists would descend from time to time and there was a Reuters correspondent in Tehran. Of course, the Iranians were very suspicious of British journalists. But otherwise, journalists invited for particular occasions were taken down to the frontline of the Iran-Iraq war. Very dangerously, I must say. They would descend on the Head of Chancery's house, not so much I fear for my acute insights into Iranian politics, but because I had a supply of whisky and gin imported illicitly via Peter Justesen and other providers of goods to diplomats overseas.

It was fascinating for Nicky as well. Life didn't feel terribly dangerous, despite what happened later. You could go out and about quite freely in Tehran and subject to a permit elsewhere. Shopping was a challenge — it was rather a siege economy. We were on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rationing lists. Every week a ration of some sort would turn up, usually half a lamb. It was easy enough to chop it into two, although the front half was more of a challenge. Fortunately, we had an intrepid nanny with us. We had advertised for a nanny and got very few replies, as you might imagine. But we did get a reply via New Zealand House in London from Heather, who was a trained nurse, a very good cook and who had grown up on a sheep farm in New Zealand. So she was not at all fazed by anything that life in Tehran could throw at her. She was there for our first year and regarded this as an interesting way to get back to New Zealand. She was a great asset.

Life was difficult for families, though, mainly because of the Iran-Iraq war. Not long after we arrived, the Iraqis managed to extend the range of their air force to allow them to drop some bombs on Tehran, which they did from a great height - not very many of them, so the chances of one landing anywhere near you were statistically remote. But that doesn't make it any less scary for people sitting in the middle of Tehran. For a while, we had a complicated

routine insisting everybody should take shelter in the basement of the Residence whenever there was an air raid or a warning. We did this for a week or two, but when we were sitting there one night, we realised we were next to the very large oil fired heater for the Residence, probably not a very sensible place to sit if you were trying to protect yourself from bombs.

In the end, we resorted to the rather more sensible option of slimming down the community by sending wives and children home. We had to do this twice when the phase of bombing was particularly intense. So Nicky and Stephanie had to take refuge with her parents in Cambridge for a month or two at a time in those early days. She had to go back anyway because our second child was born, also in Cambridge in early 1987. And it turned out that was not very long before the end of our posting, which brings me to the tale of the kidnap which I'm sure you want to ask about.

SR: Well, only if you feel strong enough to tell me about it. I don't want to make bad memories resurface.

EC: I think it tells one a lot about the Iranian mindset, the state of Anglo-Iranian relations then and since. The incident became known as the Chaplin affair or the Ghassemi affair, depending which side of the fence you're on.

It started with the Iranian Consulate in Manchester. In those days, Iranians — like many countries in the Middle East — sent lots of students to British universities, especially in the north. There were a lot of Iranian students studying in Manchester and around and there had for a long time been an Iranian Consulate in Manchester.

One of the features of a revolutionary régime, it seems to me, is that it often becomes very insecure about opposition and about what its citizens overseas might be getting up to, no doubt fearing that they're being polluted by Western ways and so on and possibly plotting against the régime. Endemic insecurity of the regime was a particular feature in those early years after the Revolution. And therefore it was, I think, pretty clear to British authorities that the Iranian Consulate was doing more than it should be in terms of interfering with, or certainly monitoring closely, the lives of Iranian activists. For whatever reason, the police kept a close eye on what the Iranian staff in the Consulate General there were up to.

It turns out that one of their staff, a Vice-Consul called Mr Ghassemi, helped himself to some goods he didn't pay for in the Arndale Centre in Manchester. I can remember to this day what he took: two pairs of socks and a ladies' purse. Not exactly a big time crook. But

anyway, for whatever reason, whether they were looking for an excuse or whether they just caught him on camera, they arrested this Vice-Consul. He claimed diplomatic immunity (which he didn't have because you only have immunity as a Consul in the full course of your consular duties, as opposed to if you're a full diplomat). He clearly wasn't going about his consular duties in the Arndale Centre. So he was arrested, released and required to report to a police station. Seven days later, he failed to do so and the police went looking for him. And, in the phrase of the police report at the time, he 'resisted arrest', which I think can be loosely translated as 'There was a bit of a punch up'. I remember hearing later that Mr. Ghassemi tried to get away in his car, slammed his car door, trapping the wrist and breaking the watch of the police officer trying to arrest him. This rather inflamed things, I think.

So anyway, Mr. Ghassemi claimed he had been maltreated, beaten black and blue. His Ambassador in London paraded him in the Foreign Office to show off his bruises at a later stage of the saga. The Iranians took this as a huge insult and it tells you something about the sensitivity of the Iranian régime at the time. Indeed, Iranian régimes down the ages — not without reason — have regarded Britain and Russia mainly (and then America later) as having grossly interfered in Iranian affairs. And of course, at one level, they're absolutely right. We did interfere grossly in Iranian affairs in the past, including for example in the early 1950s, helping the Americans to overthrow Mussadeq, a nationalist leader, and then installing the Shah.

So the Iranians felt very strongly that their affairs had been interfered with too much in the past, particularly by the British because we were of course cleverer than everybody else! Cleverer than the Americans, as we knew what was going on and were secretly pulling strings behind the scenes. This theory persisted and could sometimes be taken to absurd lengths. I lost count of the number of times that senior intelligent, educated Iranians would take me aside at our meetings in Tehran and say that they knew perfectly well that we had organised the downfall of the Shah and the installation of Khomeini. As things didn't seem to be going terribly well, could we kindly reverse the situation? When you questioned what possible evidence they had for this and, indeed, why we would do such a thing which resulted in such a huge loss of British interest in terms of commerce apart from anything else, their 'proof' would be that the BBC had transmitted messages instructing people to demonstrate and overthrow the Shah. Actually, all that had happened was that the BBC had reported on what was going on and no doubt sometimes had mentioned that tomorrow there would be another demonstration. And, of course, if you're fond of conspiracy theories — the Iranians

are past masters — then you can easily interpret such a report as an instruction to people to gather at this new place for a demonstration the following day.

Anyway, for whatever reason, British influence and power was reckoned to be huge, even after the Revolution. One of the slogans of the revolutionary régime was ‘Neither East nor West’, meaning that neither Western powers nor Eastern powers’ interference in Iranian affairs would any longer be tolerated. This manifested itself in a very punctilious attachment to the protocol of diplomatic engagement. So they were very fierce on Iranian Ambassadors and representatives being treated exactly as other representatives, which of course they were when they were properly accredited. But it also manifested itself in this affair in a sense that they interpreted the Ghassemi affair as the British getting up to their old tricks, disregarding the rights of an Iranian diplomat going about his duties, acting as the arrogant big power and therefore had to be taught a lesson that there had to be complete reciprocity. And reciprocity took the form of finding somebody in the British Interests Section in Tehran to visit the same treatment on. I think it was just bad luck they happened to pick on me.

We were in the middle of moving house, from the central compound in the middle of Tehran, Ferdowsi, to the much more pleasant and larger compound in the northern suburbs, in a place called Gulhaq which was much healthier for families. As by then we had two small children, we decided to move up to the Gulhaq compound. There was a summer Residence where, in the hot summer months, the whole Embassy used to decamp as it was a much smaller mission than the pre-revolutionary Embassy. So the Ambassador of the Interests Section had his Residence up there. We were lodged in the old Defence Attaché’s house.

We were still in the middle of moving and that afternoon in May 1987 I was with Nicky and the two children, Stephanie aged 2 and Tom, a babe in arms, and another member of the Embassy, driving from Ferdowsi to Gulhaq. On the expressway a part of the way there, we were rammed by a large pickup truck, a 4 x 4 which stopped abruptly in front of me. Very foolishly, I thought it was an accident, just bad driving, as the standard of driving wasn't very high in Iran and got out of the car, only to be grabbed by a couple of thugs from the 4 x 4. They started dragging me away towards their car. I was resisting, insisting in my best Persian that I was a diplomat and they were not allowed to do this to me. To no avail. Nicky, meanwhile, very courageously got out of the car with Tom in one arm, tugging at the sleeves of the thug dragging me away saying, ‘You can't do this. He's a diplomat. You're not allowed to do this. Stop!’ The German Ambassador happened to be passing by with his

close protection team and also stopped to find out what was going on. But his Iranian guards or people with him who spoke Persian quickly discovered this was a political act by the government and therefore they should keep well out, which sensibly he did. The advantage of him passing by was that at least he reported it very quickly to the Interests Section. By that time, Christopher Macrae had arrived as Head of the Interests Section.

SR: In those days, mobile phones were not very common, were they? You weren't able to summon help.

EC: That's right. No mobile phones but I think the German Ambassador did have a phone in his car to call Christopher in the Interests Section.

I eventually couldn't escape them. They put me on the back seat of a car. I had a hood over my head and my hands were handcuffed behind my back. I think I was more angry than anything else, which was probably helpful. The car was driven away at high speed towards the north of the city. Meanwhile, they clearly hadn't quite worked out what they were supposed to do with my family in my car. So one of their people jumped into the driving seat of my car, a fairly solid Range Rover, with Nicky back in the front seat — this was probably the most frightening bit of the whole affair for her — and set off in pursuit of the car which had me in it at high speed, ignoring traffic lights and intersections, knocking off a wing mirror or two en route. But then, after a few minutes, they clearly decided it wasn't a very sensible idea to kidnap the whole family. So the driver was instructed to leave the car on the side of the road, which he did before getting into the other car and speeding off.

SR: Leaving poor Nicky and the children at the side of the road?

EC: Yes, leaving her very shaken to drive home to the Gulhaq compound and raise the alarm. I always say — and it's perfectly true — that this whole episode, which mercifully only lasted thirty six hours or so, was much worse for her having to imagine what was happening to me and keeping calm for the children's sake. The reality for me was that I was taken by these thugs. There was a theory that one of the people involved in taking me off the streets was perhaps a relative of the unfortunate Mr Ghassemi in Manchester, because there was a certain amount of anger and hitting me about the head in the early stages. But then we got to a villa in the north of Tehran. I could tell it was the north, because the temperature of the air was quite cool. So it was clearly high up somewhere, some sort of safe house. They replaced the hood with a mask, one of those airline masks, but my hands were still handcuffed. For a time I was left sitting in the sun, outside.

There are often moments of high comedy in such affairs. A bored guard sidled up to me and said in Persian, 'I understand you're from the British Embassy. Well, that's very interesting. Do you know, I'm very keen to get a visa to visit my brother.' What could you say? Well, I said I would be delighted to facilitate the issue of a visa if I was allowed to leave and resume my rightful place in the British Interests Section. I was then put into not really a cell, more a locked room. I think it was clear, working it out afterwards, that they actually hadn't planned this very carefully. They also had this exaggerated fear of the British being, of course, a great superpower in their eyes, sending the mighty SAS to rescue me, so they had to keep moving around. Chance would have been a fine thing! After an hour or two, just after it got dark, I was put in the footwell of the backseat of a car so that I couldn't see out or be seen. I was taken down to somewhere in the centre of Tehran – again, I could only tell really from the noise and the much warmer temperature. Somewhere past the airport. I suppose that was one of the lowest moments of the affair for me. I was being driven past the airport because I could hear the jet engines. This was the height of the hostage crisis in Lebanon, where people were locked up for long periods. And the gloomy thought occurred to me that it'd be quite possible for them to put me into an aircraft, take me to Lebanon and keep me in Beirut, where they might feel they had more control. Happily it didn't happen. So I was then delivered to a sort of neighbourhood jail somewhere in southern Tehran, handcuffed to a radiator and given a bit of food. It then became rapidly rather routine: I was clearly just another, perhaps slightly more interesting, prisoner. In those days in post Revolution Iran, people were constantly being hauled off the streets for misdemeanours of one sort or another involving alcohol or drugs and more routine crimes. The local revolutionary committees had powers of arrest to lock people up, at least for short periods. So it was one of those. I didn't actually see anybody else.

About midnight, I was moved again, back in the footwell of a car and taken up to somewhere in more central Tehran, back nearer the Embassy district I worked out. That was, so to speak, a proper jail. It had basically two very large holding pens that normally hold 20 - 25 people. They decided that I should have the luxury of solitary detention, no doubt for fear that I would talk to and infect the other prisoners. The result was a lot of discomfort for the other prisoners, who then found themselves in the other overcrowded pen.

I passed a rather wakeful night, interrupted in the small hours by a rather solemn and stern cleric who came to visit me. I've no idea to this day what his status was, but he wanted to interview me and told me that I would have to account for my various crimes. It wasn't clear

at that stage what they were but, fortunately, I knew about the Ghassemi affair. And knowing the Iranian propensity for an eye for an eye, I thought that this was clearly in revenge for what had happened to Ghassemi and that I would be kept in prison for as long as Ghassemi was. I didn't actually know that he had been let out on bail on the day of my kidnap. I thought slightly gloomily that, because it was a bank holiday weekend, I had better be prepared to be there for a few days.

SR: Can I ask how you were treated in prison?

EC: I was always perfectly adequately treated, apart from the interview clearly designed to intimidate me.

On the following day, sometime in the afternoon or early evening, someone arrived with a sheet of paper and, putting together the pieces later, it seems clear that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had taken a good 24 hours to catch up with what was happening, and had then persuaded the rest of the system that this wasn't a very clever idea to leave a British diplomat locked up, having kidnapped him off the streets. Since Ghassemi had been released, I too should be released, at least on bail. In order to do this — and every régime has its own bureaucracy — what they had to produce was a piece of paper, which described my arrest and the reasons for it. And then proclaim that I was being released temporarily out of the goodness of their hearts.

So this was all very good language practice, compiling this document which had such details as whether the Iranian local staff in the visa section had to wear headscarves or not and various wild allegations about whether I'd been involved in currency smuggling or distribution of pornographic literature, all of which appeared on the charge sheet in order to justify the fact that I might go on to a trial.

Anyway, my main objective, obviously, was to get out. So I happily cooperated with putting together this fictitious document which I was then required to sign. With that, again, I was bundled into a car and actually let out in the northern suburbs, not very far from the Gulhaq compound that we had just moved to. I was given a shove in the back and told not to look back. I didn't. I went to the end of the street, worked out where I was and then walked home to a startled but very relieved Nicky and colleagues.

This produced a great sort of media storm in both countries, particularly in the UK, where the general election campaign was in full swing. I think the unusual situation but also the

longing to have something else to talk about probably stoked it up a bit. And the row went on. We didn't insist on bringing Ghassemi to trial for his shoplifting, but expelled him instead for having carried out actions not consistent with his diplomatic duties, or whatever the phrase is. And of course, on the same principle of tit for tat, the Iranians started expelling people. Actually not me immediately, because they were trying to work out whether to stick to the fiction that I should be brought to trial for the crimes committed while I was a diplomat in order to mirror what was happening to Ghassemi in England. So they threw out three of our diplomats first and then we responded by expelling more Iranians. And so it went on.

About 10 days after the kidnap incident, I was also expelled officially. As with many things Iranian, there was an element of farce because we were expelled as a family in order to travel together. We were taken to the airport under the guard of the Swedish Ambassador who, I must say, was magnificent throughout and diligently did his best to protect our interests. We got to the airport and the Revolutionary Guard check only to be told that we were not allowed to leave the country, because there was an order saying that I had committed these crimes and had to stay in the country until I had accounted for them. I replied that that was absurd, because I had a bit of paper from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying that I had been expelled. No prizes for guessing which bit of paper won! So we weren't allowed to leave that evening. Another round of haggling had to take place with the Swedish Ambassador and Christopher Macrae, the Head of the Interests Section, which eventually resulted in us being able to leave 24 hours later. We had predicated everything on us being out by the first evening, including how many nappies to keep back for Tom. Disposable nappies, I should say, were like gold dust - rich Iranians would pay five pounds each on the black market.

So, anyway, we did eventually get out as a family and were very relieved to leave Iranian air space. We got back to London to another sort of media storm. There was a lot of interest for perfectly understandable reasons. We stopped over in Geneva and a lot of journalists got on board so they could travel with us and start the interviews. Someone from News Department had been dispatched to look after me. So I started giving interviews on the plane, although I wasn't allowed to say very much – given the human interest, Nicky and the children played a starring role.

So the posting had lasted two and a half years, rather than the expected three. Despite the dramatic ending it was a fascinating time and we had no regrets. But I felt sorry for Christopher Macrae who had literally only just arrived a month or two before. There'd been

a long hiatus, as there often was between appointments between us and the Iranians. I think we refused someone totally unsuitable being sent to London as Iranian Ambassador and they'd retaliated by refusing a visa for Hugh Arbuthnott who was supposed to come and take over from Michael Simpson-Orlebar. Eventually, after a hiatus, they eventually got Christopher Macrae to come out. But he'd only been in Tehran a month or so when the affair happened – although he did manage to climb Mount Damavand before being expelled! We left behind one diplomat in each capital.

So that was back home. Five minutes of fame soon faded away, although for a couple of weeks, I had to put up with total strangers coming up to me, saying, 'So glad to see you back!' I was allowed a decent chunk of holiday. We went off to Jersey where my mother lived and to the south of France, where Nicky's parents had a house. So we had some good relaxation, putting the family back together again and getting over it all.

I like to think that it didn't have any long lasting effect. I was actually more concerned about the effect it had on Stephanie, who was old enough to realise something bad was happening.

SR: How old was she? Two or three?

EC: Well she was only two and a half, a bright little thing. I remember when we came back, one of the things we had to do was find a new car. We went to a car dealer in Norfolk, where we were staying with my sister. The man showing me a car to go for a test drive had a beard and when she saw the beard, Stephanie went into hysterics, so there must have been some connection – nearly all Iranian men wear beards. Happily, I don't think she has any memory of those days now. So yes, it was a shock, but one from which I recovered.

SR: Extraordinary that you can now joke about it! And I take my hat off to you for being able so clearly to see the other side of things. It really can't have been easy, especially when the Office didn't really give you much help. There was no sort of PTSD counselling or anything was there?

EC: No, as I said, they just gave me some time off. If I'd wanted help, I'm sure they would have provided it. And from time to time, I did get calls from Welfare section to check if I was all right. At the time of the incident itself, Nicky was touched to receive a telephone call from Elspeth Howe. And when we got back to the UK, Mary Forbes (Welfare Section) offered her help if needed.

Personnel Operations Department (POD), FCO, 1987-89

On my return from Tehran, of course, there was no posting lined up for me. That's how my posting in Personnel Operations Department came about, where I took over from Peter Jenkins, in charge of the home area i.e. all Foreign Office postings at home, with particular responsibility for the fast stream new entrants. It was a complete change. But actually, apart from having fairly regular hours and offering a good bit of decompression after Tehran, it allowed us to sort out where to live. It was at that point that we decided to move to Cambridge the first year after we were back.

So there was plenty of time to look after the domestic side of life, although it was quite busy and a very interesting time in the sense that it was completely different. I spent a year as the Head of the home section then a year as the Assistant Head, under David Logan and then Edward Clay, both excellent.

It gave me an insight into the inner workings of the Foreign Office. It was one of the rare times in diplomatic life where the decisions that you take have some real effect. In the real world, that doesn't often happen. If you decide to send somebody on a posting and it doesn't work out, the results come back to haunt you. Whereas if you encourage someone to take up a posting leading to a glittering career, you feel a bit of pride when it all works out. I quite enjoyed that. It also gave me an abiding interest in how organisations nurture their staff. The FCO has veered from an over-centralised approach to leaving career development entirely to individuals: I fear we still haven't quite got the balance right!

Secondment to Price Waterhouse, 1990-92

The other interesting aspect of my time in POD was that I was in charge of the interchange programme. These fashions come and go. From time to time, there's great enthusiasm for seconding people from the Foreign Office out to the private sector and elsewhere in Whitehall. And then people lose interest and it all goes back, but this was one of the cases of a surge of interest. I was very keen on this, as it turned out, for my own good as well. I do think, as an aside, that the Foreign Office has a very strong culture. And, in many ways, that's a good thing in terms of the team spirit and the camaraderie and the looking after each other. Particularly in hardship posts, that works well. But the strong culture means it can be quite an insular culture, as well — you know, we don't need to bother about what's happening in the rest of Whitehall, let alone in the wider world about how things are done. I think one

of the ways you bring that down is to make sure that people get out of the Foreign Office and do other things, whether in the private sector or in other parts of Whitehall.

I had already done my bit in another part of Whitehall in my secondment to the then Civil Service Department under Christopher Soames. But I was very keen to have some experience in the private sector. At the back of my mind was the idea that, in my late 30s with a young family, I'd had a very interesting time so far in the Foreign Office, but perhaps this was the moment to take stock and think whether it was something I wanted to go on doing for the rest of my career, or whether this was the time to jump ship before I got too old to do so. So that was partly in my mind, but the main motivation was to have a break, do something different, learn something different. I was seconded to Price Waterhouse (before its merger with Coopers and Lybrand) on the management consultancy side of things. It was partly arranged through the good offices of Ian Beesley who had been originally in National Statistics Office, but then worked with Derek Rayner in the Thatcher government at a time when they were doing one of the first of many drives to increase efficiency in Whitehall. They conducted these efficiency reviews, which were quite effective, I believe. Anyway, Ian Beesley had gone from there to be a partner at Price Waterhouse. Having come from Whitehall, he was therefore quite well disposed to the idea of taking someone from the Foreign Office on secondment.

So for two years, from 1990 to 92, I had the experience of being outside the Foreign Office in a completely different environment. It was very instructive and I learned a lot. It was very healthy for me, certainly, to view the Foreign Office from outside, to be brought up against the reality of the popular view of the Foreign Office. People had very little idea — certainly then — of what the Foreign Office gets up to. They think mainly in terms of Consulates abroad to get Brits out of trouble. But, otherwise, they don't give much thought as to how foreign affairs are conducted. So to see the organisation I'd been in from the outside was good. And to be involved in completely different sort of work — quite fast moving, very meritocratic, you're only as good as the last job you've either landed or taken part in that has been a success for the firm. People worked hard, but not very long hours except when you had to. Interestingly, the culture was certainly to arrive early, but if you were working late for no apparent reason that was more likely to be a sign of your inefficiency than your devotion to duty.

It was the early days of open plan offices. So unless you were a senior consultant, you didn't have your own office. You just hot-desked in the open plan area. This was mainly to encourage people to be out and about visiting clients and drumming up new business and so on. That was interesting in terms of coming from a very hierarchical organisation to one that had very little hierarchy. There were some excellent people I worked with and we had some very interesting assignments.

I was on a team hired by the Ministry of Defence to do an analysis of the Royal Navy and their whole recruitment machinery. This was just after the end of Cold War and the Navy had this great fear that, with the main threat gone, so to speak, they would not be able to attract recruits and therefore wanted to reorient their recruitment campaigns. We did that by emphasising the excellent training, for example, for young engineers and others at all levels, not just officers. That was very good for me and took me a lot around different parts of the country, like big recruitment centres in cities which I had never set foot in before. I was given a lot of independence dealing with clients.

The main skill that it turned out I was useful for in this environment (apart from being a very cheap resource, because all they had to do was reimburse my Foreign Office salary, they didn't have to pay me a private sector salary!) was my ability to draft coherent English. It was surprising to me to find how low the standard of drafting was. They definitely covered the page, but it was full of jargon and gobbledeygook, sometimes unintelligible. The ability to produce a reasonably clear report on a meeting or indeed, the practice of taking minutes of meetings, was pretty unknown. It turned out occasionally to be useful when you could recall to the partner leading the assignment what we had promised in the last meeting, which otherwise would only live on in the folk memory of the people involved. I was also used quite a lot in drafting final reports for clients

I was part of another fascinating assignment on the BBC, at the time when the licence fee review was taking place with the usual to-ing and fro-ing as to whether it should be happen at all and how generous it should be. One of the ways the government squared the circle was to get Price Waterhouse to come and do a quick efficiency check on whether the BBC should be saving more money and therefore deserved a lower licence fee increase. It turned into a political negotiation at the end of the day. But I enjoyed being involved in that and delving into the BBC.

I also went to audit the National Audit Office to see how efficiently they had done in their review of the MoD. Answer, not very! Another interesting insight into Whitehall.

In the end, answering the fundamental question about whether I wanted to negotiate to stay on or whether to go back to the Foreign Office was not very difficult because, although I did enjoy very much the experience of being outside for two years as I had earlier in the Civil Service Department, it underlined for me the advantages of Foreign Office life, in particular the interesting issues you deal with, the politics of it (with a small p) i.e. the fact that you are dealing with political issues of the day, which are usually being talked about, are of interest to MPs and the press, the sheer interest of trying to get things done in bilateral relationships ...

SR: And the variety?

EC: The variety, exactly, from one job to another, the excellence of colleagues (not that the colleagues weren't excellent at Price Waterhouse), the sheer variety of moving around and not being stuck with the daily commute. With Price Waterhouse, one's ambition narrowed to perhaps eventually becoming a partner. But looking around, it wasn't clear to me that the partners, though they were very well paid, had actually much quality of life because even then — probably even more so now — the pressure on them to justify their very high pay by the number of new assignments and contracts they were bringing in was very intense. It didn't seem to me they were getting much fun out of their very senior status. So, in the end, I was very happy to come back but very glad to have had the experience.

UKMIS Geneva, 1992-96

SR: It's 25 January 2021 and I am talking to Edward Chaplin via WhatsApp. Edward, after your two years at Price Waterhouse, what was next?

EC: I started looking at what other Foreign Office postings were coming up. It was one of those stages of your career when people will say, 'Well, you should be broadening into commercial work or something different.' Multilateral work was quite an attraction. I'd never done that before and I thought it could be fun.

David Hannay at UKMIS New York was looking for a Head of Chancery and they said they'd put me on the list. I slightly balked at that. By that time, we had three small children, aged six, four and two and the thought of being in a New York apartment working those

UKMIS New York hours for a rather demanding boss didn't seem to me a very good recipe. Though I think people who've gone to New York with young families have had a perfectly enjoyable time in many cases, so I may have been overcautious. At any rate, coming up at the same time was the Deputy Perm Rep slot in Geneva which struck me as much more the sort of thing I wanted and also closer to home. My father had died, but my mother was still in Jersey and Nicky's parents were getting frail, so for all sorts of reasons, especially quality of life, Geneva was an attractive option.

I suppose there was also an element of cashing in, having had the horrible experience in Tehran — now was the time for POD to give me something I actually wanted.

SR: This was the still the time when POD determined who went where, wasn't it?

EC: Yes. There were selection boards, but they were very much run within POD, inviting people of the right level in to take part. You still had the post preference form, but it wasn't all as transparent as it later became. We can talk separately about whether we've still got the balance right or not!

So early in 1992, we drove out with our three children to Geneva.

SR: You drove all that way?

EC: Oh yes, it was easy enough to do with our new four wheel drive Renault Espace because we wanted to do lots of exploring in the mountains and so on. In many ways, it was our most family friendly and enjoyable posting. It was the last time we were all together as a family because by the time we went abroad again, to Jordan, the children had to be left in boarding schools.

It was wonderful because it combined a lot of interesting work and a very high quality of life. There were two Deputy Perm Reps, one covering what was then still the GATT before the invention of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which happened during my time there. This was Anne Stoddart. The rest was done by my slot. There were the UN specialised agencies like the WHO and the ILO and so on, which were rather 1950s-style institutions much in need of reform, which we and Americans were keen on trying to push, in something called the Geneva Group which my opposite number in the US Mission and I co-chaired.

On top of all that sort of nitty gritty stuff, there were various, more political things going on, in particular former Yugoslavia falling apart and the International Conference on Former

Yugoslavia, under the chairmanship of David Owen and Cyrus Vance, set up shop quite early on in my time there. For a time, we were quite involved in supporting that, sitting on various committees and so on, but not for very long. Of course, it was also a huge humanitarian crisis so our relations with UNHCR were particularly close, both for Iraq reasons, but also former Yugoslavia. And because we were in the happy position of having a lot of money to offer, we had very good contacts, there: we must have been one of the major donors to their various appeals.

The other great issue going on was the resettlement of Vietnamese boat people, a long running saga, negotiations on which took place in Geneva.

In many ways, I think the Deputy Perm Rep post is more interesting than the Perm Rep. Other people have commented on this, that Ambassadors themselves are a bit grand. You don't have anything like the Security Council equivalent. You just have a lot of these multinational, multilateral agencies and various other things going on, where normally the Deputy Perm Rep is the right level and you bring in the Ambassador for more formal occasions when ministers are visiting and so on. So I think that, in the case of Geneva, the Deputy jobs were more fun than the top job.

I had two very good bosses: Martin Morland who'd come from Burma/Myanmar and then Nigel Williams who came from Copenhagen. They were both on their last posts and they were very relaxed to work for. Nigel Williams made it clear that he was prepared to do anything he was asked to do, but otherwise he was very busy with his post retirement project, finding a Norfolk cottage to do up.

So it was a very good experience. The children were all at the Geneva English School. Our youngest started off in the local kindergarten in Coligny where we lived. Coligny was a swish area just across the lake from Geneva itself. The Deputy Perm Rep's house is just underneath the Ambassador's Residence with a wonderful view of Lake Geneva and the Jura mountains. So no complaints there. And of course, almost a Swiss caricature of predictable quality of life, a very easy place to travel around and get in and out of and very safe for a young family. It was a very happy time. We did a lot of skiing, more in France actually in Switzerland, as Geneva is right next to the Haute Savoie, where we rented a chalet. And it was a rare full-length posting for four years.

SR: Did you use your French? What was the working language you used?

EC: Yes, the working language was very much French. My French was okay after ENA. Actually, I did revive my German, not really for operational reasons, although you were allowed to take the language exam, which I did. But because travelling around Switzerland, it was one of those places where people in the German speaking cantons pretend that they don't know a word of French and would rather speak English than French. I found that very irritating! So I got my German up to operational level which made visiting other parts of Switzerland easier. But yes, I did use my French a lot. And of course, we worked a lot with other key missions of which the French was one. One of the oddities about living in Geneva is that you have very little to do with the Swiss, except for the ICRC. And Switzerland was not then a member of the United Nations. They were members of some of the specialised agencies and had very sensible ideas about how they could be improved. So there was quite a lot to do with the Swiss on a narrow range of things.

Head of Middle East Department, 1997-99

SR: So then you went back to the Office to become the Head of Middle East Department.

EC: Yes. After swanning around Geneva for four years, Middle East Department was a logical place to put me, taking over from Nick Browne who was being posted to Tehran.

This was 1997. So a new Labour government had come in and Robin Cook was Foreign Secretary with a flagship priority of a more ethical foreign policy, as if our previous foreign policy had not being ethical — perish the thought! In other words, to weigh human rights much more in the balance when taking decisions on foreign affairs. So that produced some interesting conversations. I remember taking Derek Fatchett, the Minister responsible for the Middle East, around the Gulf and having long discussions about Bahrain, where human rights were pretty awful, but it was probably our closest ally in the Gulf, for historical reasons. The debate was about how open you were in insisting on human rights improvements or whether better results could be secured by nudging in the right direction, giving a bit of help.

That was interesting, but the dominant theme was actually the Iraq crisis. The origins of this lay in the first Gulf War and various subsequent Security Council resolutions which had insisted on Iraq dismantling all its weapons of mass destruction capability. And that went very slowly. The more time went on, the more the other members of the Security Council wanted to ease things up, but the Americans insisted that that couldn't happen. So that culminated in the end of 1998 in, mercifully, only an air operation, Desert Fox. And this was

after a very long, laborious process in the UN Security Council, which was mostly done by Derek Plumbly, who was by then the Under Secretary in charge or Director as we would now call it.

He'd just come from New York, so knew the ins and outs of the UN well. We got the Security Council resolution through, but it didn't succeed in putting the necessary pressure on Saddam Hussein to come into line. So military action took place over a couple of weeks, which involved several weeks running the Emergency Unit and so on. It turned out to be a bit of curtain raiser for the later invasion of Iraq in 2003, which we'll come on to in due course.

But there were other interesting things going on. It was a very busy job and quite difficult to combine with commuting from Cambridge, which is where our home was by then.

In Iran, for example, there had been the election of President Khatemi, quite early on in my time, which gave hope. He was a very plausible, moderate figure and talked about the dialogue of civilizations and suggested various openings which we in the West should have been able to take advantage of. In fact, it all came to nothing in the end because, unfortunately, in the Iranian system presidents do not have much power. They have the illusion of power and a cabinet, but all the decisions are taken by the Supreme Leader. And a lot of the foreign policy is subcontracted — even more so now — to the Revolutionary Guards and their ilk.

So that was interesting, ultimately frustrating, but we did get one thing done, which was to resolve the Salman Rushdie affair. If you remember, there'd been a *fatwa* encouraging anyone, any good Muslim, to go and kill Salman Rushdie for his Satanic Verses book. The Iranians were rather stuck on this and we managed to negotiate — mainly in the margins of UN meetings where the Iranians could safely meet without drawing attention to themselves too much — a form of words which didn't cancel the *fatwa*, but gave credible assurances that the Iranian government would not do anything to allow it to be put into effect. I've forgotten what the exact wording was, but that was the gist of it.

I had two Iran desk officers in my time. One was Michael Axworthy who has sadly since died, much too young. After Middle East Department, he decided he wanted to go to academia and went to Exeter University and produced several books on Iran. And then Neil Crompton who had come from Research Department. So Iran was quite a big issue.

Human rights I've already mentioned. Saudi Arabia, of course, was another case where the dialogue could get quite tricky. It was very busy but very rewarding. Good people to work with.

SR: Did you do much travelling? You mentioned going round the Gulf with the minister.

EC: If ministers went, usually, I would go. I did go with Robin Cook a couple of times. There were trips to Washington as well to try and align ourselves with the Americans or nudge them in a more helpful direction in some cases. They remained very interested in Iran and our reporting on it, even more so than when I'd been in Tehran. We even hoped that with President Khatemi, Iran might move sufficiently to allow the resumption of relations with the US, because it was and remains an extraordinary lacuna that there is no formal diplomatic relationship between the world's then only superpower and one of the regional superpowers. The lack of it has led repeatedly to all sorts of misunderstandings, which could be avoided if you had missions in each other's capitals doing what diplomacy should do. But there we are. The trauma of the hostage crisis lived on and still, unfortunately, lives on. It's hard to see it being resolved anytime soon.

Ambassador to Jordan, 2000-02

Anyway, from there I escaped to Jordan. I was very fortunate. Of course, being an Ambassador is everyone's ambition when you join the Foreign Office, because it's the one time that you feel in control of your own bit of the organisation. In many ways, Amman was an ideal place to have that privilege, because it was a country that we had very close relations with for historical reasons.

It was a very interesting time. The new King, Abdullah, had taken over the year before, in 1999, from King Hussein, a long stalwart moderate in the Middle East. The new King was young, relatively inexperienced, so needing support from his allies.

It was an Embassy of about the right size, with 25 - 30 UK-based staff and 60 - 70 locally engaged staff. Small enough that you got to know everybody and have time with them. And some very interesting issues going on.

Internally, the King had lots of challenges. The Jordanian economy has always been quite weak, mainly because of its lack of natural resources, not just oil and gas but water — it's very short of water. So very much at the mercy of his neighbours and the outside world for help. There was constant tension between the Palestinian population, swollen of course by

successive waves of refugees from the West Bank and elsewhere. Although it was never officially admitted, by the time I got there they were in a majority.

It was a rather imperfect parliamentary democracy. Well, it wasn't a democracy of course, but it had the appearance of one: there was a parliament, a Prime Minister and Cabinet and so on, but it was still all controlled by the King. It probably had to be at the time, not that the King didn't have reformist ambitions, but he concentrated, sensibly enough, on economic improvements rather than political reform. But it meant there was a strong unofficial opposition — the Muslim Brotherhood and so on. I think they either boycotted the elections or weren't allowed to stand, I can't remember. But anyway, they were excluded from the political process.

And never mind the internal problems, they were exacerbated by the external problems. Jordan has always been unfortunate, being at the mercy of more powerful neighbours. Apart from Israel and losing control of the West Bank and still being technically responsible as the custodian of the Muslim and Christian monuments and institutions in Jerusalem, there was a bilateral treaty to keep in good repair despite the strains.

There was big disappointment in the first year we were there when the Camp David/Taba negotiations under President Clinton finally failed. And then Sharon took his ill-advised, but perfectly calculated, walk on the Temple Mount to suggest that Israel was not going to respect the sanctity of the holy places.

That was the spark for the second intifada in September of that year which had some direct impact on us because we had been planning a state visit by the King and Queen to England in the autumn of that year. The King understandably felt that he couldn't leave the country at such a very delicate time. So that had to be postponed at very short notice. The Royal Household and the Queen were very gracious about it. I remember ringing up Robin Janvrin, the Private Secretary, to explain that I just been told by the head of the royal court that His Majesty would not be able to come in two weeks' time. He said, 'At least you told me before I had to send down I don't know how many pantechinons of equipment and other things to Windsor!' The visit was going to be based on Windsor Castle, because the kitchens at the Palace were being refurbished.

But happily it was only postponed and we did the visit the following year. It was certainly one of the highlights of the bilateral side of the relationship. We stayed in Windsor Castle and the King, I must say, was a chip off the old block — very gracious, very good at

engaging with people, saying the right things and he thoroughly enjoyed it. It had some practical benefits as well. For the day out element, which always happens in state visits these days very sensibly, we took him to the Cambridge Science Park and made lots of contacts with firms who could help. He was very keen on promoting new industries, IT-based projects in Jordan, particularly down in Aqaba. So there were some practical benefits from that as well. It was great fun.

Coming back to what was happening in Jordan at the time, the other big issue was Iraq, because Jordan was very dependent on Iraq for the supply of the concessionary oil they desperately needed and also for the export of lots of Jordanian goods. So the King was in a very awkward position: he was supposed to be helping to apply the sanctions which were in place but, at the same time, he was in a very weak position vis-à-vis Iraq, so there was a lot of tension there and a certain amount of turning a blind eye to the amount of goods flowing in both directions. Because our overall aim, obviously, was to support Abdullah. Also there were Palestinians and others who were fiercely critical of the West and of us and quite supportive of Iraq and Saddam Hussein and thought the Iraqis were being badly treated. So that was a constant issue.

One of the joys of being Ambassador in Jordan was that you had extremely good access at high level. I saw the King, I suppose, at least a couple of times a month, sometimes more depending on what was going on. He was very open to calls by the British Ambassador. The intelligence relationship was very close. We had a growing commercial relationship and we tried to help him with his economic reforms.

There was even a small aid programme which we could use. We were rather proud, I remember, of setting up for the first time anywhere in the Arab world a project to establish refuges for women suffering from domestic abuse, one of the great unacknowledged problems in the Middle East. Such problems were considered as domestic family affairs in which the government should not interfere. But the Jordanians — and in particular the Royal Family — were very enlightened. It was a good example of how, outside government, members of the Royal Family could push things along in the right direction or what we regard as the right direction. With a bit of help, including experts who came out to help the Jordanians set up the scheme, it did eventually get off the ground.

As I mentioned earlier, it was the first time we had gone on a posting without our children. They were all in boarding school and that was quite difficult in some ways, but there some

compensations because school holidays in Jordan could be a lot of fun. Despite the intifada and so on, it was quite a peaceful time. We have happy memories of camping in the wilds of Wadi Rum, visiting Petra and snorkelling in Aqaba and all those good things. But unfortunately it didn't last as long as it should have done.

SR: Yes, only two years which must have been frustrating.

EC: Yes. It was my first time as Ambassador. You spend the best part of a year finding out what the job is about and how to get best value out of it. And then about a year feeling you're making the right contacts and doing some good. And you really come into your own in your third, or even if you can push it in the fourth year.

Director, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 2002-04

But things were moving on in London. The Director for Middle East and North Africa, Alan Goulty, had been asked to become a Special Envoy on Sudan, which was an area he knew well.

The negotiations were trying to bring an end of the war by devolution and a comprehensive peace agreement, including the setting up of South Sudan. So he went and did that and they needed, at a very busy time, to have someone take his place. The lot fell on me. It was hard to refuse. It was, of course, a very interesting time dominated by the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Unfortunately, not that it would really have made any difference, by the time I got there (May 2002), the die was almost cast.

If you read the memoirs of people like Bill Burns, who had been Ambassador with me in Amman and left about halfway through my time to go back to being part of the new administration with Colin Powell, by the late summer of 2002, the decision had been taken that there was going to be an invasion of Iraq. The only question was when and under what circumstances. So we worked very closely together. I went to Washington several times. Our main aim was to convince the Americans that it would be very foolish to go in with a very small alliance, just them and us and a few others like the Australians. And I always felt that the whole question about the legal basis for military action was very murky. Thanks to Tony Blair's pressure on Bush, they did support the attempt and successful securing of a second Security Council Resolution 1441, which talked about Iraq being in material breach of its obligations to dismantle WMD and being given a final opportunity to come into line. If not, serious consequences would flow — all the sort of language which was well known as

justifying military action. The French and Russians would disagree. It's all been very well documented, not least in Jeremy Greenstock's book. He was the Perm Rep at the time in New York.

But the problem was that the Americans were too impatient, even if one took the view that Saddam Hussein was never going to budge without military action from outside. What they should have done is what they'd done under President Bush senior in 1990 in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which was assemble a very wide or as wide as possible coalition and make the necessary concessions to achieve that, in order to give the whole operation greater legitimacy, not only in the eyes of the Iraqis, but in the eyes of the wider world, particularly the region. State Department was convinced and had no problem agreeing with us on that, but it was a time when the dynamics in Washington put State Department in the shade and US policy was all being led by Dick Cheney, the Vice President and Donald Rumsfeld at the Department of Defense and various ideologues like Wolfowitz, people who had absolutely no clue what was really happening in the Middle East and what the dynamics were. They were aided and abetted, I'm afraid, by London-based Iraqi exiles in London. One in particular, Ahmed Chalabi, had the ear of the Americans and maintained it would all be easy and a breeze. You just had to invade, topple Saddam Hussein and hand power to someone like him and it would all be fine. How wrong they were!

People did worry about the legal basis a lot. Indeed, one Foreign Office Legal Adviser, Elizabeth Wilmshurst, honourably resigned as did a couple of others. To my mind, the legal case was less important in the end than the legitimacy of the action proposed that really mattered. And the path we chose — or the Americans chose and we chose to follow them — didn't have that. That was the main flaw, I think.

There was a very close relationship between Jack Straw and Colin Powell, which was very useful. There was quite a close relationship, although less easy with the French Foreign Minister, Dominique de Villepin.

SR: Yes. Those dramatic moments in the Security Council where de Villepin was applauded!

EC: Exactly. Poor Colin Powell was really set up for this presentation on the basis of intelligence assessments which subsequently turned out to be either weak or simply wrong. So an excruciating time. We had the whole business of the dodgy dossier. It was a very fraught time.

SR: Just to interrupt for a moment, if I may. You were a witness at the Chilcot Inquiry, weren't you?

EC: Yes. I was asked about my views on the preparations for invasion and subsequent events. I made three appearances. My views haven't really changed substantially since then.

SR: Did you find appearing before the Chilcot Inquiry stressful?

EC: Yes, it was quite stressful. Quite interesting, in its way. The system was almost too efficient. Depending on what subjects you were being asked to concentrate on, you were sent every single piece of paper you had signed or been involved with from that time. There was an enormous amount of reading to do and these diplomatic bags would turn up in Rome and be spread out on the dining room table. It would take days to make any sort of sense of them and to make coherent notes. I remember I appeared alongside Peter [Ricketts] in his Political Director role, I think, for my first appearance.

How imperfect one's memory is! I found myself on at least a couple of occasions saying, 'Oh, my God, who on earth wrote this?', turned it over and found I had. And, rather more rarely, I thought, 'Well, this is quite well argued. I wonder who wrote this?' although I had absolutely no memory of doing it.

Rather more worryingly I had, against the rules, kept a few key documents, because everyone knew from the time of the lead up to the invasion that there would be an inquiry in due course. Everyone on the Middle East side of the Foreign Office had strong memories of the earlier Arms for Iraq inquiry. That was a rather different, judicial inquiry, rather more serious, I suppose, in many ways. So knowing the imperfections of the electronic filing system, many people were keeping some of the key documents: I think there were at least three or four that I had to supply to the Chilcot Inquiry which they didn't find in the official archives. Official archives are not, of course, perfect, especially with all the digital stuff, although perhaps they've got a grip on that now. Certainly, in that period, when the system was moving steadily from paper to electronic records, I think a lot of things fell through the gaps.

To return to Iraq. There was a lot going on on other fronts, particularly Iran, of course. One of the many mistakes or tragedies, depending on how dramatic one's feeling. This was a golden opportunity, I thought, to bring Iran on side. Iran had reason to hate Saddam Hussein more than anybody else, having been through the Iran-Iraq war and the use of chemical

weapons against their soldiers. But the Americans were determined not to go down that road. And worse, Bush stood up and gave this speech about the axis of evil — North Korea, Syria and Iran. That killed stone dead any attempts to build a pragmatic alliance. The State Department was quite in favour of initiating some sort of dialogue with the Iranians. The Iranians would, I think, have been interested in coming to some sort of understanding about the future of Iraq. But after they were labelled part of the axis of evil, of course, they were much less interested and determined to ensure that our intervention in Iraq was as painful as possible, with some success.

The only other thing I wanted to highlight to show that it wasn't all about Iraq was the fact that I did manage to launch (with DfID money mainly) something called the Engagement with the Islamic World project. This consisted of resources, including enough money to put people in key Embassies like Cairo to support civic reform projects. It was carefully called 'engagement'. I banned the democracy word. Democracy is a much abused term, I think, and too many democratic reforms have turned into dictatorships. But what the Arab world was crying out for then was more accountable government, stronger civic institutions, like a free press and a legal system that was independent of the government and so on. There was quite a lot that could — and can — be done to encourage home-grown institutions and make them stronger and improve governance overall. It sounds rather idealistic now, but it was, of course, the thirst for that which in the end led to the Arab Spring some eight years or so later. But we did do some useful projects with that initiative, I think, although they are probably forgotten now.

So that was a very busy time. Not very family friendly. It was also the first time I had to do what I'd sworn I'd never do, which was abandon commuting from Cambridge. Life was so unpredictable over those two years. The children were still away at school, so we resorted to buying a small flat in London. Nicky would come up for a couple of days in the middle of the week but, otherwise, I was there Monday to Friday and Cambridge for weekends — often interrupted, inevitably, by Iraq-related calls.

Ambassador, Baghdad, 2004-05

So my time as Director MENA led inexorably to my next posting, after the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. I didn't go to Baghdad immediately, because for the first year Iraq was under something called the Coalition Provisional Authority, which was run by Paul Bremmer. Not a very good choice, as it turned out. He ran the show with Jeremy

Greenstock as his deputy. There was a determination in Washington to ignore the great expertise they had in the State Department and elsewhere. Bill Burns and others including Ryan Crocker, one of his deputies, had set up a very elaborate Future of Iraq project, for which they had gathered together experts and a lot of Iraqi exiles as well, in London or in Washington. It went through all the relevant issues systematically and produced a 17-volume piece of work, suggesting the ways in which the new Iraq could be put back together again in education and agriculture and really, across the board. A very sensible piece of work, which we tried to help with. It was all completely ignored by Rumsfeld and Cheney, who didn't even want State Department Arabists to be part of the US mission in Iraq after the invasion. It was crazy. We had our own problems as well, given that DfID under Clare Short didn't want to admit the possibility of UK participation in an invasion and hence didn't want to think about the aftermath.

In the end, the US system had to accept that State Department Arabists had their place so that the Iraq operation did eventually become more professional. So, for the first year, there was the Coalition Provisional Authority, during which our influence on the Americans was not negligible. But we were a very small player. We had taken part in the military invasion and we were running the southern part of Iraq, based in Basra. But overall, we were a very junior partner. The Americans would listen to us, but we didn't have much leverage in the end.

I suppose if you could make one criticism of Tony Blair, it was his failure to exert more influence on President Bush, by insisting that we wouldn't be alongside them in the invasion unless x, y and z. In particular, one of those would have been a much more serious effort on agreeing in some detail how we were going to handle the aftermath. Could we have done more to nudge the Americans towards a more sensible policy? Perhaps – but people now tend to forget how the terrorist attacks on the US in 2001 fundamentally changed the dynamics, including how much risk to take with dictators armed with WMD. And Tony Blair decided in the end that we had to be alongside the Americans at this crucial moment.

There were three critical events after the invasion. The first was the killing of the UN representative, Sérgio Vieira de Mello. I had known him quite well from the UNHCR in Geneva. A brilliant operator, he was head of the UN operation in Baghdad and we were very keen to promote the UN. We and the Australians had tried to persuade the Americans to give a UN face to the whole operation as far as possible post-invasion and largely thanks to Sergio made some progress. But the Americans were congenitally suspicious of the UN and all its

works, so his death and the rapid scaling down of the UN operation (though it later built up again) was a rather fatal blow to the idea that you could put the UN in the lead. The Americans were left carrying the main burden.

The other two events were own goals by the Americans. As far as I can remember, we were scarcely consulted and certainly not listened to. The first was the dissolution of the Iraqi army. The Iraqi army was the one institution which commanded widespread respect, despite its role in internal repression (which was more often done by the Republican Guards). The regular army was an institution which all Iraqis could take pride in and which, with a slightly more intelligent approach, could have been the bulwark of greater stability after the invasion. Instead of which, Bremmer took the decision — I think with very little consultation with Washington — to dissolve the army and just send them away with no compensation, no salary. So, of course, these highly trained people had an instant grievance, no money and access to all sorts of weapons. Rumsfeld was also very keen to demonstrate that régime change could be done with minimum effort — ‘shock and awe’ if you remember the phrase: huge military might up front, massive bombing from the air, relatively small numbers on the ground to achieve your objective with much less loss of US life. Well, the first bit worked fine. The toppling of the Iraqi régime was not in the end difficult. But the lack of troops on the ground, as well as the lack of a broad coalition, meant that there was no security on the ground: they didn't even have to have the wherewithal to guard the various arms dumps around the country, so weapons were freely available and were now being picked up by the disgruntled soldiers dismissed from the Iraqi army — the one institution around which one could have built some sort of national consensus. That was a big error.

The other big error was on de-Ba'athification. This was a particular hobbyhorse of people like Ahmed Chalabi who, lo and behold, was put in charge of the de-Ba'athification programme by Bremmer. He carried it to extremes, using it for his own purposes or certainly promoting those he favoured. Being a member of the Ba'ath party was in Saddam Hussein's time a necessity for anyone who wanted to survive, let alone get on in public life. So if you were a teacher or a policeman, or in almost any part of public life, it would certainly be in your interest to become a member of the Ba'ath party. Refusal to become a member would instantly attract suspicion or dismissal. So the idea that everyone in the Ba'ath party was likely to be working against any sort of change was ridiculous. But it was carried to extremes by Chalabi and his mates. That, too, did a lot of damage, because it produced an even larger number of very disgruntled people who no longer had access to their government salaries.

So, as I say, that was the first year and then in early 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority officially came to an end and an appointed Iraqi Interim Government took over. That meant that proper bilateral Embassies could be established in the case of the Americans and ourselves, as well as others who had gone away. The French Embassy had been there throughout.

Our Embassy had been closed since the first Gulf War in 1990, so I was the first British Ambassador back after a gap of 14 years to re-establish the bilateral Embassy. It was unique and fascinating in many ways.

It was a huge mission. My hope as Director had been to keep the bilateral UK mission visibly separate from the US mission, outside the so-called green zone protected area on the banks of the Tigris, which was heavily fortified. And our old Embassy was outside that area. We did start off there with a British Office in Baghdad, as it had to be called initially, under the direction of Christopher Segar, an exact contemporary of mine. But in the end, the security situation became too dicey, so we had to bring the Embassy back into the so-called Green Zone, a heavily fortified area where Saddam's palaces had been.

So when I arrived, the Embassy was being set up in an old school inside the Green Zone. I was housed in one of the many palaces – this one had, I think, belonged to Saddam Hussein's sister — all marble and gold taps and so on, very bizarre! It was, at the time, our biggest Embassy in the world. It had, of course, a long security tail, because the security situation was quite fraught. Anyone going outside the Green Zone had to have protection. I was very well protected by a Royal Military Police close protection team. I suspect that British Ambassadors to this day still have to have some personal protection.

So it was, of course, a unique, fascinating time. And in the early stages, not without hope, not without some sort of progress. Our main task, apart from trying to stabilise the country, was preparing for the first democratic elections in January 2004. We had a very large part in setting up the Electoral Commission and our military efforts were largely focused on ensuring smooth elections. Those did actually happen in January 2004. One of the more memorable episodes of my time there was to see that, despite all the intimidation, there was a huge turnout of Iraqis for these elections. People did want to exercise their democratic rights in the hope that better government would follow. There was also a good Prime Minister at the time, who had been appointed as head of the interim government, Ayad Allawi. We were very instrumental in giving him practical support. We had a project run by Adam Smith

International, with some consultants and seconded diplomats, providing him with the support he needed. Having come from a dictatorial system, the Iraqis had no idea about how to set up a prime ministerial office. We were very central in helping them, putting in place the simple mechanics of how to run a government.

The American Ambassador and I were not quite part of the cabinet, but took part in a lot of the security discussions. The first most pressing issue was what to do about the problem of Fallujah, which was a city quite close to Baghdad. Intelligence suggested it was the main factory for the car bombs that were going off all around Baghdad and elsewhere and where some American contractors had been caught and brutally murdered. The Americans were thirsting for revenge, so it was a question of how that operation was approached, in a way that didn't make things even worse in Iraq. So it was very intense.

It was also quite stressful: things happened over which you had no control, including the awful kidnap and murder of two British citizens, Ken Bigley and Margaret Hassan. I had met Margaret, who had run various projects in the Middle East for the charity, CARE International, when I was Ambassador in Jordan. She was kidnapped for no other reason than having a British passport. Ken Bigley was a contractor. We didn't even know he was in Baghdad. He hadn't registered with us, despite the invasion. It was all very unfortunate. I think that's all covered in the Chilcot evidence as well.

SR: From a personal point of view, Edward, you say it was fascinating and exhausting, but was it also frightening? You were unaccompanied?

EC: Being unaccompanied was a plus in the sense of not having something else to worry about. It was one of those seven days a week jobs. The IT was good enough so I could work from my Residence inside the green zone and keep in touch with home. So I did work very long hours because there was a lot to do. But of course, in some ways, there was nothing else to do!

It was stressful for the family. I was very well protected. That's not to say you didn't have moments of fear of incoming attacks. A few times in the Embassy there would be an alert and we had to put ourselves into whatever protected places we could find inside the Embassy. Incoming missiles would swoosh overhead. They were usually aiming for the American compound rather than ours, but they weren't very accurate so we had a few close calls. At one of my morning meetings there was an extremely loud bang at one of the entrances to the

Green Zone, which was only about 300 yards away. It was loud enough to send everyone flat onto the floor for cover. It was dramatic.

One of the things that I'd insisted on and Michael Jay (the PUS) and Jack Straw, to their credit, agreed to facilitate was for Nicky to come out and visit me. She came out on the RAF plane from Kuwait and helicoptered from the airport into the Green Zone. We were able to have a week together, most of which was up in the north. It was the time of the Kurdish new year, which was a wonderfully colourful celebration, so we were guests of President Talabani. Visiting Kurdistan was always a relief because life there was more or less normal. The Kurds had for a long time been in charge of their own security. Things were much more relaxed there. For a time, things were relatively relaxed down in the south and Basra. Anyway, when Nicky came out, that gave her some assurance, as she could then envisage how well protected I was and how relatively safe the Green Zone was. Travelling around the country was, of course, not risk free, but not that dangerous. I think that helped reassure her for the remaining period of my time there.

Everyone else was on six month tours. There's an interesting phenomenon, while we're on the subject, of being head of mission in a dangerous environment, where it's not so much a question of gently encouraging people to go out, despite all the risks, but actually discouraging people from taking too many risks and being rather gung-ho, because the adrenaline makes life very exciting and you want more and more of it. I remember a couple of occasions where people were keen to stay for a second six month tour, but when you looked at it carefully, you concluded this wasn't actually a very sensible idea because they were becoming more and more cavalier about security and this was going to get not just them but others into trouble, if we weren't careful. So, from all sorts of angles, it was a unique and fascinating experience.

I worked very closely, of course, with the Americans. John Negroponte was the Ambassador there until he was recalled to be the Director of National Intelligence. He was a very good colleague and did listen, although he didn't often follow up on our suggestions, but was very open to dialogue. The relationship on the military front was also very close. A British general was Deputy Commander of the Multinational Force. He had a key role and our commanders down in the south were all excellent and did what they could, including a lot of good on the civic side, helping civic institutions to stand up again which had long been neglected, not destroyed by the invasion but destroyed by neglect.

Ambassadors often complain about not having enough access to ministers. If anything in Iraq, the problem was the opposite — it was having too much contact or too many worried phone calls coming in from Number 10. On the other hand they were very good if you really needed something. I had weekly calls with Jack Straw and less often with Tony Blair, although almost daily contact with Nigel Sheinwald, who was the No 10 Private Secretary for all the time I was in Baghdad. There was a critical time when we needed more helicopters to allow the shuttling between the green zone and the airport to be adequate: the security situation was so bad that you could not safely drive without very heavy protection between central Baghdad and the airport. So it all had to be done by helicopter which, of course, was extremely expensive and complicated. When you had a situation like that, on which the mission critically depended, Whitehall would deliver the goods. Never was it so easy to ask for things and have them granted. There was a lot of pressure to put the resources into trying to make things go a bit better.

For the first year, it was a mixed picture. But at least the elections were held on time and various Iraqi institutions successfully established. But some flaws, if you like, of democratic systems were evident. When people as traumatised as the Iraqis were, after all those years under Saddam Hussein and his predecessors, get the chance to exercise the democratic right to vote, they understandably tend to vote not for people who are most capable of making things better, but those whom they trust. The people they trust will tend to be their tribe or their religion. So it was inevitable that, at least initially, the people who were elected represented sects, tribes and different interest groups, rather than people who were capable of collaborating to produce something that would benefit all Iraqis.

However, it was a great achievement to have the elections take place and then the Iraqi Assembly, newly empowered, had as its main task the drawing up of a new constitution, on which subsequent elections were based. At least elections have continued to take place in Iraq under their new constitution. And the situation I just described has evolved. Iraqis now desperately want people who are just competent, never mind their ideological or sectarian basis, to make life better.

Some good things were achieved. But, of course, life for most Iraqis has been hellish and remains so, because on top of everything else they've now had to contend with a plummeting oil price, as well as continuing malevolent attention from an unreformed Iran. Iraqis, however, are extremely tough, so one should never give up hope that they will turn things

around and emerge, eventually, with a government structure which will start to serve the interests of all Iraqis. But it's still a long way off, I fear.

I was probably there at the best time. My successors, William Patey initially, then Christopher Prentice and others, had a tougher time with more difficult Iraqi prime ministers to deal with, and handling the whole question of withdrawing our military effort. So there have been ups and downs, but things are pretty grim still. Not a happy time but professionally a uniquely interesting time.

Sabbatical, Cambridge University, 2005-06

I came back from Baghdad in May. I asked to leave a bit earlier than scheduled, because two of our children had exam years and it was stressful enough, with your father away in dangerous country, just trying to get on with life when you're trying to prepare for exams as well. Anyway, the Office was very good about that. So I was back in Cambridge in May 2005.

SR: Did you organise that yourself or did the Office do it for you?

EC: I organised it really. I'd said before I went, in a conversation with Michael Jay that, firstly, if I went to Baghdad, I was going to need time off after the combination of two years as Director and then the year in Baghdad before getting straight into another job. He was very sympathetic to that. And I had also said that, by the way, if they sent me direct from Baghdad to Riyadh, I didn't think I will be able to sell that to my family. I trusted that people would not forget that I did have some European experience and that I might want to go for a European post after Baghdad. He accepted this and the Office more than kept their word.

Because I lived in Cambridge, I knew some of the people involved. I went to see the leading professor of international relations, who was very happy to have someone with my recent experience in the Middle East helping them with their work on international affairs. So I was given a sabbatical position in that department and also became an Associate Fellow of Darwin College (one of the Cambridge postgraduate colleges).

So that worked well. It also worked well for family reasons because Nicky, in the time I'd been in Baghdad, had revived her teaching qualification. Before she was snatched away to diplomatic life, she had wanted to train as a teacher. So she was able to complete the graduate scheme the year I was in Baghdad and then the year I was on sabbatical she was

able to have her first job as a French and Spanish teacher at a local Cambridge school. That was another reason for not going straight into another overseas posting.

I was able to think and do a bit of writing. I produced a learned article on the new Iraqi constitution, which is no doubt gathering dust somewhere on the shelves of the university library. But I suppose the main benefit for the institution here in Cambridge was be able to hear from someone who'd recently been on the front line. One can teach a lot of theory about international relations, but it is sensible for that to be leavened with accounts of what happens in practice and I had a certain amount to contribute on that front.

Ambassador to Italy and San Marino, 2006–11

Then, happily, it was confirmed I was going to be the next Ambassador to Italy and San Marino from 2006. So the other thing I was able to do during my sabbatical was to start some Italian training.

SR: Was that from scratch? Had you done any Italian before?

EC: I had very basic Italian from visiting the country. I started with a tutor here and then it was followed by month's immersion in Siena — there are worse places! I lived with a family and had one to one tuition at the local Dante Alighieri Institute. So that was great fun and got my Italian up to a more or less operational level. The key goal is to arrive with sufficient Italian to initiate yourself conversations in Italian without an interpreter. Italy is fairly monoglot, as we are. Whilst Ministry of Foreign Affairs people have good English, that wasn't the case in most of the other ministries. So if you want to make your mark, both centrally and more widely, you have to be able to operate in Italian.

I thought, rather arrogantly, that having done Arabic and Persian as well as French and German, how difficult could that be? It was more difficult than you might think. Although it's quite easy to get Italian up to a level whereby you're quite confident of ordering in restaurants and doing the tourist bit, to have good enough Italian to give speeches and talk about unemployment and trickier commercial and economic issues, requires a lot of hard work. But it's a gloriously beautiful language. It was great fun learning it and then improving it while I was there. I carried on having lessons after I'd arrived, so I got to a reasonable level, I hope.

Rome was wonderful on lots of different levels. It was great to be posted at long last to somewhere the family approved of. Not that they disapproved of Geneva or Jordan — they

had a lot of fun in both places. But Rome was somewhere close, where they could bring their friends. A glorious Residence in the Villa Wolkonsky with acres of gardens and a first century aqueduct running through it. All very good news as far as our children were concerned — especially for our youngest, Juliet, studying classics at Oxford — and then the ability to travel widely in that glorious country and try and get to know it.

From a professional point of view, it was a good time to be there. The UK network included Consulates in Florence and Naples and commercial work was run out of the Consulate-General in Milan. Sadly, no more, in Florence or Naples. There was a lot of pressure in the Office in those days to shift FCO resources out of Western European or OECD posts into the growing economies in China and Latin America and so on. That was fair enough. But it meant that a lot of my time was spent devising the least damaging way of reducing UK-based staff, which I think in my time there reduced by almost 50%. Not that the jobs were necessarily abolished, some were localised. In some ways, this wasn't too difficult to do as there was a large British expatriate population who came to Italy for their holidays, married Italians and stayed, continuing their professional development. So, on the commercial and cultural side and the press and information side, a lot of people were qualified for that.

So I was presiding over that and there was quite a lot of reform to be done to the mechanics. For example, I set up a Board including outside people — such as the local Shell representative — to come and help us. That was an interesting time from an internal point of view, keeping everyone's morale up as those changes took place.

There was a fascinating range of bilateral issues you could get involved in. It really was a mini Whitehall in many ways as European posts often are with lots of people from other departments. Organised crime, of course, is an Italian speciality so we had colleagues from SOCA (Serious Organised Crime Agency) billeted with us who did a lot of a lot of good practical work with the Italians on combatting organised crime. Collaboration to stem the flow of illegal migrants across the Mediterranean was another key area for bilateral collaboration.

On the political side, there was plenty of stuff going on, particularly in the run up to the G8 Summit in 2009. Handling the impact on bilateral relations of the transition from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown and then to a new Conservative government was another interesting challenge. The thing about bilateral relations with Italy is that Italians have a well-founded fear within the EU of being left out, with key decisions being taken between London, Paris

and Berlin. As a founder member of the EU and an important player, they didn't want to be left out. Sometimes, you could exploit that to get various bilateral things going and get the Italians on side on things we wanted both from the EU and more widely. So with decent contacts on the right issues and the right support from London, you could get things done. We could also use the annual Anglo-Italian summit, presided over by Lord Patten and a former Italian Prime Minister, Giuliano Amato, to engage at high level on important issues of the day.

On the commercial side, there was a lot going on, although it was more about encouraging Italian investment into the UK than in the other direction. Investing in Italy has always been fraught with difficulty, though many have managed it with success. So there was quite a lot of traditional ambassadorial stuff of giving advice and having the right contacts and explaining the background to visiting chief executives and so on and setting them up with the right sort of openings. There was a lot of detailed support from the Consul General in Milan, and the opportunity to promote the UK at events such as fashion exhibitions, a big part of a hugely important British export.

SR: Did you do any travelling to see local politicians in their fiefdoms?

EC: Yes. I did as much travelling as I could, taking advantage of the fact that Ambassadors are accorded exaggerated respect in the Italian system and in any case you can't understand a country as diverse as Italy by sitting in Rome. The *eccellenza* could open most doors and, of course, it was a very good way of getting under the skin of what was going on, particularly down in the south where you could do small things which had disproportionate impact. For example, there were campaigns to encourage people to resist intimidation by the Mafia by helping set up businesses which made a virtue of the fact that they were selling goods from land or assets that had been freed from the clutches of the Mafia. So it was one of those places where, with the right contacts and with a decent level of Italian, you can make a disproportionate impact.

The G8 summit I mentioned was a big event made more dramatic by Berlusconi's decision to move it at very short notice from Sardinia to L'Aquila, which had just been struck by a terrible earthquake. The environment and climate change were coming into great focus, thanks partly to the impact of the Stern report. We were very keen to have the Italians on side and committing to the two degrees target. It didn't quite happen that time, but they moved in the right direction. Italy is a much more industrialised country, still, than the UK

and therefore were rather loath to do things that would in their eyes damage Italian industry. But they could be persuaded.

One of the more challenging things was promoting a working relationship between Gordon Brown when he became Prime Minister and Silvio Berlusconi who was Prime Minister for most of the time I was there. Two senior politicians less alike would be hard to imagine: the son of the manse and the playboy businessman! It kind of worked and they did see eye to eye on some aspects, including some of the G8 agenda.

Of course, we had no lack of visitors at all levels in a place like Rome, from Cabinet Ministers to friends you never knew you had or who had not been in contact for 20 years!

SR: Yes, I can definitely sympathise with that!

EC: We had a range of visitors. The Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall paid a visit which had significant impact on the Italian approach to the G8 summit. The Governor of the Bank of England at the time, Mervyn King, was very Italophile. In things like high finance and, indeed, science, the Italians are held in very high regard, rightly so. So you had businesses of all sorts at that time, on the financial side, including the Bank of England, helping to rally people around the response to the 2008 financial crisis.

The power of attraction of an Ambassador's residence like the Villa Wolkonsky was an asset to exploit. You could use something traditional like Queen's Birthday Party to attract all sorts of people. Foreigners love what they regard as typically British foibles. We had a fish and chip emporium from David Miliband's constituency in the garden of Villa Wolkonsky with rather bemused Italians eating fish and chips out of cones.

Most memorably, one of my brilliant local staff had some sort of family connection with Paloma Faith. She was then not so well known as a singer, just a rising star who came and sang at the Queen's Birthday Party.

But there were plenty of other occasions from the launch of a new Jaguar model (involving tricky calculations about how to crane a car into the ballroom) to highly successful charity events which Nicky organised to raise funds for a local children's hospice, which demonstrated how to raise the UK's impact in a crowded market.

The hangover from Iraq persisted. Being identified as one of the main allies of the US in the invasion of Iraq meant that it was deemed that I needed close protection. So the *scorta*

(actually provided, bizarrely, by the Ministry of Finance) were a constant companion. Any time I had to go out of the Embassy or the Residence, I had close protection following in a car behind. This took some spontaneity out of life. But in other ways you always had a companion if you were in danger of getting lost and useful support if you wanted to take visitors to the crowded centre of Rome! So it had its advantages.

Even so, it was good to get out from time to time. It was at that time we acquired our house in France. I can remember the feeling of liberation when we crossed the Italian border into France. You could drive on your own and stop when you like and not have to think about your accompanying escort. But they did a very good job. It also meant if you were ever stuck in a traffic jam on the way to the airport or something, they would be able to wave their badges to insist on clearing a path through the most impenetrable traffic with you following behind. So it had its moments!

It was part of the deal that I would be allowed to bid for such places after Baghdad. The Office came through on its promise. We had a very happy time up until retirement in 2011 when we came back to Cambridge.

SR: Very good. Such a long and very varied career, but you often didn't stay in places very long. I think Italy was the longest that you'd had.

EC: Yes. Muscat was only two years. Brussels was cut short. My time in Iran was cut short. Geneva was excellent. Jordan was cut short. Baghdad was only a year anyway. I suppose the plus side is that I had greater variety than some colleagues.

SR: When they look back on their careers, the thing that most people say is that they have loved the sheer variety of roles and also the intellectual stimulus. You touched on this when talking about your secondment to Price Waterhouse.

EC: Yes, I think both those things are true. Also, you're dealing with issues of the day, not some sort of arcane activity that those outside the close circle don't understand or are not interested in. In many cases, you're dealing with issues that are being hotly debated in the press — that was particularly the case with everything surrounding Iraq, but also Iran. Human rights, environmental change, making the international system more fit for purpose — there was no end of things to get your teeth into, trying to add your two pennyworth to try and make a difference in the right direction. Or, as is often the fate of diplomats, stopping things getting worse!

It was a fascinating career. These days people can stay on beyond their 60th birthday. I knew that if I decided to stay on longer, I was unlikely to be rewarded with Paris or Washington. It was much more likely to be Riyadh. In any case, I thought 60 was a better time to get out and do other things while I still had reasonable health and energy. That proved to be the case. I've done an interesting variety of other things since leaving the Foreign Office, including something completely different back in the civil service with a part-time job as the Prime Minister's Appointments Secretary, of all things, dealing with the appointment of Bishops and Deans.

SR: That sounds straight out of Trollope!

EC: Yes, the weird and wonderful world of British institutional life. That was fascinating, not least because it took me to parts of the country which I didn't know. One of the downsides of diplomatic life is that although you're back in the UK quite frequently, it is not usually with enough time to travel. This job took me to all parts of England at least, in pursuit of consultations for the appointment of this or that Bishop. And then I dabbled with the traditional sort of consultancy role for a few years. There's a limited shelf life, I think, for those presenting themselves as experts on any region of the world, in my case, the Middle East. But there was quite a strong appetite for that in the years after I retired, particularly on things like Iran and what might happen in Iran if it went the right way with the Iran nuclear deal and would that lead to a surge of opportunities. It should have done until Trump pulled the Americans out of the deal. So for a time I was a consultant. But I've also done a variety of other things like the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, being a governor of a school, a couple of Middle East charities and so on. So all things where I felt I could put my experience to some further use but in a different context. I think that's all rather healthier than hanging on in an institution, late into one's 60s. Of course, it's a personal choice, I've enjoyed the last 10 years a lot.