

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Sir Sherard Louis Cowper-Coles (born 8 January 1955)

KCMG 2004 (CMG 1997); LVO 1991.

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SIR SHERARD (LOUIS) COWPER-COLES KCMG LVO

interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Friday 4th March 2011

in his office at BAE Systems, London

Early career in the Diplomatic Service

MM: We are here to talk about your Diplomatic Service career. You joined in 1977 and went to Cairo after language training in Arabic at MECAS. What did you do in Cairo?

SC-C: Well, I was initially the Third Secretary dealing with the Egyptian press. I was the Press Attaché dealing both with the Egyptian media and also with the very remarkable group of British, American and other foreign correspondents we had in Cairo at the time. Over the course of three years there, I also covered Egyptian internal politics and at one stage I think I did a bit on Egyptian foreign policy as well. We had President Sadat there until October 1981 when he was assassinated, and then President Mubarak.

MM: So did it come as anything of a surprise to you when Mubarak was finally shaken from office?

SC-C: No. Sir Michael Weir, who was my first Ambassador from whom I learned a lot, actually sent a telegram soon after Mubarak succeeded Sadat, saying that Mubarak wasn't really presidential material. But the assassination was of course one of the first manifestations of violent Islamic fundamentalism. We sent a dispatch to London on that which was printed, and also one about the assassination.

MM: A pretty key moment in Egyptian affairs; Middle East affairs.

SC-C: Sadat had come too close to America and they had let him down by failing, really, to pursue the Palestinian track, the Camp David Accords that rapidly ran into the sands. So we had a separate peace between Egypt and Israel and then later on

Jordan. But nothing was really done for the Palestinians and, more than thirty years later, that remains the case. America has still failed to bring Israel to a just settlement in the Middle East.

MM: You came back from there in 1983 and joined the Planning Staff. That was a climb up the ladder, wasn't it.

Return to Planning Staff as First Secretary, 1983

SC-C: Well, it was a First Secretary job back in London and Pauline Neville-Jones, now Baroness, was the head of the Planning Staff. Initially I covered Europe and parts of Asia; I wrote a paper on European industrial policy, one on Turkey entitled 'One Country, Two Continents', and one on the Philippines after the withdrawal of the American air base there at Clarke Field.

What I really enjoyed in Planning Staff was being made a speech writer for Geoffrey Howe as Foreign Secretary, and then I also did speeches for others, including Mrs Thatcher. The thing I'm proudest of in the Planning Staff was that I wrote a paper for a seminar Mrs Thatcher had at Chequers on intervention. She was very upset about the way the Americans invaded Grenada and she was worried that they would do the same with Nicaragua. She believed in the rule of law, and she convened a seminar on this at Chequers in the format of outsiders being present in the morning, including Dame Rosalind Higgins, Professor of international law at the LSE. Then there was a lunch and then, in the afternoon, conclusions were drawn for policy.

MM: Were there any Americans at that seminar?

SC-C: No, it was a British event. I wrote the paper for it, which was later published, called 'Is intervention ever justified?', saying that it wasn't really justified. There were legal, moral and other arguments for what was called humanitarian intervention but, except in the case of an Article 5 need to exercise a right of self-defence, simply intervening in other countries was very difficult to justify legally or morally.

MM: That was incorporated in the UN Charter, wasn't it?

SC-C: Yes.

MM: Well that's quite a surprising insight, if I may say so!

SC-C: Yes, it was fascinating to be taking the opposite view to the one that Tony Blair took in his Chicago speech in 1999. Mrs Thatcher was really attached to the rule of law in seeing that things were done properly. There was also a seriousness about policy making then that we certainly didn't see in later years.

Appointment as Private Secretary to the Permanent Under Secretary at the FCO, 1985

SC-C: ... And then the Permanent Secretary, Sir Antony Acland, needed a new Private Secretary. He'd recently been widowed. I and somebody else were interviewed and, rather to my surprise, he chose me. So in February 1985 I moved to his office and had just over a year with him. Then, in the summer of 1986, Sir Patrick Wright took over as PUS and I went to Washington in the summer of 1987.

MM: And what were you doing in Washington?

SC-C: First I should say something about the PUS's office at a very interesting time. Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister; Geoffrey Howe was Foreign Secretary. They didn't have very good relations. We had to deal with Charles Powell and Percy Cradock; lots of memories of that. We had some very difficult issues like the Gordievsky affair under Antony Acland. We were supplying the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.

One of my favourite memories is the Geoffrey Prime spy scandal. I remember Geoffrey Howe asking David Goodall, the DUS Intelligence, for an assurance

that there were no more Russian spies in GCHQ, and David minuted back to the Secretary of State, "Only the deity can provide the assurance you need."

MM: Can we go back to Gordievsky? Did you say that he was supplying the Mujahideen?

SC-C: No, *we* were supplying the Mujahideen. No, Gordievsky was the KGB resident in London who was then recalled. But we had the operation to exfiltrate him from the Soviet Union, and Antony chaired the meetings on that and handled things extremely well.

There was a big contrast between the two bosses. Antony, I think, really had good judgement. He was a more introverted man in many ways. Antony's big achievement was that he secured from Mrs Thatcher, mainly by taking her a brace of pheasant one Sunday afternoon, the compensation for overseas price movements, which lasted until it was lost three or so years ago and then William Hague got it back. It was a really major gain for the Foreign Office.

Posting to Washington, 1987

Then I went to Washington and was First Secretary there, taking over from Nigel Sheinwald, and dealing with internal politics. Antony was Ambassador in Washington at that time, and I arrived at the same time as his new wife, Jenny. They were four very happy years. I covered for the 1988 Presidential election, travelled with Dukakis when he was a candidate, not because we thought Dukakis would win but because we wanted to get to know his advisers. I got to know Madeleine Albright whom I was later to come across when she was Secretary of State and I was working for Robin Cook; Jim Steinberg and a lot of others. It was a very interesting time.

We also introduced for the first time the use of lobbyists to deal with the McBride campaign of divestment from Northern Ireland. That was the big innovation. I persuaded Tom King, the Northern Ireland Secretary, to authorise us to hire

lobbyists, which we had never done before. We were fighting this campaign around the United States in the state capitals. So that was interesting.

I also covered bilateral relations and that meant organising and being in charge of all the different visits by Mrs Thatcher. Among my great memories is her final visit to say good-bye to Reagan in November 1988, her coming out over a year or so later and telling George Bush not to 'go wobbly' while we were on the way to Aspen.

And then the culmination was the Queen's State Visit to the States in May 1991, which I spent nearly a year organising. She came to Washington and addressed both Houses of Congress. She went to Florida and Texas and then on to Kentucky, and it was an enormous undertaking. It was a very successful visit.

MM: No trace, then, of any misapprehension about relations with Israel?

SC-C: On whose part?

MM: The Government and the Queen?

SC-C None whatever.

MM: So that was Washington.

Assistant Head of Security Policy Department in the FCO, 1991-93

SC-C: I then returned to London. I spent eighteen months dealing with European security where I took over in the Security Policy Department. It was really the run-up to the Maastricht Treaty and the attempts to build a European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI as it was called) under the Common Foreign and Security Policy. That was very enjoyable. I think I can take credit for one or two words in the Maastricht Treaty.

From there I was appointed Head of the Hong Kong Department. There was a year to wait. So I went off and did a study, of which I'm very proud, of the Foreign Office's Research and Analysis Department, and recommended that it be distributed round the office. That report was called 'The Need to Know' and I'm very proud of that. And I went to the IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies) and wrote a paper called 'From Defence to Security' which was later on the syllabus at the Staff College. It said that we needed to change the posture of our Armed Forces to move from being simply a territorial defence force, to promoting security of course, in the wake of the coming down of the Berlin Wall.

Head of Hong Kong Department, FCO, 1994

Then I had three and a half years dealing with the handover of Hong Kong. I was appointed because I was not a sinologist. Chris Patten didn't like sinologists; he'd fallen out with them. I inherited an appalling problem because the FCO had failed to warn Chris Patten of the dangers of his package on democracy. Worse than that, they had failed to draw his attention to a secret exchange of letters between Douglas Hurd as Foreign Secretary and the Chinese Foreign Minister on the pace of democratic development in Hong Kong. When I took over in 1994, the damage was already done. In 1993 there had been thirteen rounds of failed negotiations with the Chinese, to try to retrieve things, so we were just going unilateral, and the Chinese were going to tear down everything we had done at the stroke of midnight on 30 June 1997.

MM: You reckon that that was the fault of the Foreign Office?

SC-C: Largely. The failure of officials to recommend to ministers that they restrain the new and enthusiastic young Governor who was largely ignorant of China. David Gillmore, the Permanent Secretary, put out an instruction that everyone was to support Chris Patten, and supine officials took that as meaning that they weren't to disagree with him. Poor old Chris Patten didn't know what he was doing. He was new to the subject; he'd just lost his seat in Bath. No-one told him about the exchange of letters with the Chinese Foreign Minister. The Chargé d'Affaires in

Beijing sent a telegram warning that the Chinese would not accept this, and he was sent a personal telegram back saying that this sort of advice wasn't welcome.

MM: From Chris Patten?

SC-C: No. From an official in London. But that was all behind us, and I liked Chris Patten very much. He's my kind of politician. But then, in 1995, things went badly wrong over the Court of Final Appeal. I was out there staying in Government House in Hong Kong on my fortieth birthday and I was told by Patten that he wanted to go unilateral; ie break off negotiations with the Chinese for making sure that judges appointed under British rule remained on the Court of Final Appeal after 30 June 1997. I knew that, without agreement, the Chinese would sack all the British-appointed judges and make appointments of their own. The Permanent Secretary, John Coles, had to go to the Foreign Secretary and say, "Do you want objective advice or not?"

I was put under great pressure by Chris Patten to change my view, but it was the most difficult and agonising thing I've ever had to do. I didn't like disagreeing with him but I knew it was my duty to do so as an official.

MM: Did he accept your recommendation?

SC-C: Well in the end Heseltine and others weighed in, rather unfortunately, and Patten reversed himself and did a deal with the Chinese which made more concessions to the Chinese than we in London would ever have recommended.

MM: And would have been necessary in the first place.

SC-C: It was all rather surprising. He was given very bad advice by some of the people around him in Hong Kong. He was such a big personality that he dominated something called the Ad Hoc Group of advisers.

MM: That's what happened.

SC-C: He also sent a series of telegrams strongly disagreeing with an assessment by the Joint Intelligence Committee on the future of Hong Kong which was reasonably upbeat in the event, although it turned out that it wasn't upbeat enough. But he said it was far too optimistic, that the place was going to collapse. His political adviser met a friend of mine on the streets of Hong Kong just before the handover and told him that the British departure from Hong Kong on 1 July 1997 would be like the Americans evacuating Saigon in 1975. It was nothing of the sort. The Chinese behaved responsibly.

The complication was that Sir Percy Cradock was constantly sniping at the Governor from the sidelines. I deliberately had nothing whatsoever to do with Percy Cradock. But Chris Patten suspected that I was in league with him, and became very paranoid about it. Percy actually made our job more difficult by personalising it.

Counsellor (Political), British Embassy, Paris, 1997-99

My reward for Hong Kong was to be sent to Paris to be Political Counsellor there from 1997. I did some language training in Lille and I had a very happy just under two years there as head of the Political Section. I lived in the Gate House of the Embassy in Paris, working for Michael Jay who was the nicest of Ambassadors. We did the St Malo Agreement on Franco-British co-operation in defence but it wasn't, frankly, a terribly heavily loaded job.

Principal Private Secretary to Secretary of State, FCO, 1999-2001

At Christmas 1998/Spring 1999 I discovered that Robin Cook was asking about me. His first Private Secretary, John Grant, wanted a change from coping with Cook and, to my surprise and horror, I was flown out of Paris to the Ivory Coast to be interviewed by Robin Cook. He decided to appoint me as his Principal Private Secretary and I went back to London in April 1999. That turned out to be two and a half very enjoyable years. He was the most difficult of men but was intellectually honest. He got on very well with Albright and Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister, and Hubert Vedrine, the French Foreign Minister. He

was greatly respected by them. He did Kosovo and had a strong record of achievement on Kosovo, the International Criminal Court, Lockerbie, land mines, Sierra Leone and so on.

His style was to focus on what mattered, which was for him issues of substance, and speeches. Many senior officials in the Foreign Office thought and think that the job of the Foreign Secretary is to have meetings with them – they love trooping into his office and trooping out again saying to the Secretary of State on the one hand and on the other. Cook dispensed with office meetings. He had an extremely difficult relationship with the PUS John Kerr.

MM: What about the ethical foreign policy?

SC-C: Well it wasn't an ethical foreign policy; it was a foreign policy with an ethical dimension. Cook should never have said that; he should have said it after the event because in fact he did pursue a foreign policy with an ethical dimension rather successfully. I think, in the sweep of history, he will come across as Foreign Secretary with a record of achievement, which few others had.

HM Ambassador, Tel Aviv, 2001-2003

Then I went off to learn Hebrew. I asked to be Ambassador to Israel and wanted to be the first Arabist to go there. I was interested in the country. So I went and learned Hebrew in north London and enjoyed it enormously, and became really quite good, enough to do television and radio. I then had 20 very interesting but very difficult months in Israel where we had the second intifada reoccupation of the territories by Sharon's tanks; the assassination in a suicide bombing of Yoni Jesner, a young Jewish boy from Glasgow, and at the very end the killing or fatal wounding of Tom Hurndall and James Miller, two British citizens in the Gaza Strip.

But I really enjoyed being Ambassador to Israel; it's a fascinating country with fascinating people. But it was heartbreaking to see the country doing such

damage to its own long-term interests and those of its friends, mainly the US, but also the UK.

MM: In respect of what? Its failure to deal with the Arabs?

SC-C: Failure to reach a settlement with the Palestinians, and the failure of the Bush administration to get a grip on this in any serious way. I arrived there just before 9/11 and was there when it happened. I remember speaking to the heads of Mossad, the external intelligence service, and Shinbet, the internal service, and they both said that this had to be state-sponsored terrorism; it couldn't be done by al-Qaeda. They got it wrong.

HM Ambassador, Riyadh, 2003-07

Then, in February 2003, we were preparing for the invasion of Iraq and I was in Tel Aviv and got an e-mail at 8.00am from London from Simon McDonald who succeeded me in Private Office headed, "Congratulations!" The text of the e-mail read, "The Prime Minister has agreed." I didn't know what this was about so I pressed the 'reply' button and said, "What has the Prime Minister agreed?" I had to wait two hours for Simon to get into the office and he then told me I'd been appointed to Riyadh. I had no idea; I hadn't applied, I didn't know I was a candidate, I didn't know there was a Board meeting, and I found myself posted to Riyadh, which was a big promotion and, for an Arabist of course, to be Ambassador in Riyadh is a wonderful thing. But it wasn't what I was expecting, or had wanted.

So I then had to leave Israel in a hurry. Jack Straw had told me that they wanted me to stay in Israel for four years because I spoke Hebrew but, anyhow, I left in a hurry and went back to London to do some Arabic with Bedouin in the Jordanian desert. I arrived in Riyadh in October 2003 and had three and a half years there as Ambassador. I arrived there just after the al-Qaeda campaign that opened with the bombing of the compounds in May 2003. 2004 was an appalling year. I went to mortuaries in the west of Saudi Arabia to inspect the bodies of Brits who'd been killed to identify them. I went to a mortuary to identify the body of Frank

Gardner's camera man who was killed, and another in the eastern province to identify the body of Michael Hamilton, the investment banker who was killed. We had a very serious terrorist campaign. But professionally it was a very interesting time. I used my Arabic and got to know the Princes and a lot of liberal Saudis.

On 30 October 2006 the Permanent Secretary said that he would like me to leave Riyadh early and go to Afghanistan. They were going to upgrade our efforts there. Like a fool I agreed, more or less unconditionally.

HM Ambassador, Afghanistan, 2007

MM: But you'd done four years.

SC-C: No I hadn't. I had to leave early. It was three and a half years. So I left again in a hurry and had ten days' leave between jobs and went out to Afghanistan in May 2007. The Permanent Secretary had said to me, "If you go to Afghanistan, you will of course be a candidate for one of the top jobs in the service, Paris or Washington, in 2011, and we'll send you on a year's sabbatical to Harvard when you come back."

Afghanistan was very interesting. I've written a book about it which I hope will be published in May or June this year (2011), called '*Cables from Kabul*'. It is upsetting because the whole campaign is axed really on a misperception, the idea that the Afghan Government has either the will or the capability to secure and govern the country in an acceptable fashion when our troops aren't there.

David Miliband saw all that and it was a real pleasure to work with him. He was honest and open. The problem was that the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, got himself locked in a position of being bullied by the military into seeing it as a matter of more resources for Helmand. He was accused quite unfairly of being responsible for the shortages of equipment. He didn't want to talk about the need for a political approach, because it is essentially a political problem in Afghanistan and the country would be stabilised only if you bring together all the

internal parties, including the Taliban, and all the regional powers to avoid the great game round four.

Special Representative of the Foreign Secretary for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2009

Anyhow, again I was pulled out of that job early. David Miliband in January 2009 asked me to leave early in order to be his Special Representative to deal with Richard Holbrooke. I then had a year and a half chasing after Richard Holbrooke who was a very amusing man. I became very fond of him. But he was very difficult, very disorganised. His tragedy was that he had Afghanistan and knew that it was a political problem but he was unable to deliver the rest of the Washington machine. Obama had got it but had other preoccupations, and the American military thought it was a military problem that needed a military solution.

MM: So he was blocked?

SC-C: Yes. And then, in January 2010 a year later, I was asked if I would go back to Afghanistan on a second tour as Ambassador, although I was known as Chargé, because Mark Sedwill, my successor had gone to NATO to work as a special senior civilian representative. I went back out in early February 2010 and had three months there. I came back at the end of April and found that a deal had been done with the Tories in opposition for my boss to go to Paris, instead of me.

So I left at the end of October last year and I'm going to write a second book called '*Telegrams*' and everything I've told you this morning and a lot more will be in that book.

MM: Yes, very helpful. And I certainly look forward to reading the books. One final question: is your work in any way affected by this business of the leakage of confidential cables?

SC-C: No. Interestingly the Wikileaks cables I don't think have done any great net damage. In fact, in the round, they reflect credit on the United States because

they show good reporting, a great diplomatic service doing its job. I wrote a piece about it in *The Guardian*. They show a great diplomatic service at work dutifully reporting, in many cases remarkably honestly, back to Washington. And it shows America saying and doing in private what it says and does in public. It doesn't show that there's a hidden agenda. There are one or two surprises but, taken in the round, it's not at all shocking.

MM: The surprise is that they are shown to have been telling the truth!

SC-C: If I were the Americans, I wouldn't be too exercised about it, but it was very silly to put three million cables in a single place.

MM: One private soldier! Is there anything else that you would really like to say at this stage?

SC-C: Well, not at this stage but there is a lot more that ought to go into the records. I wasn't quite sure what you wanted and I've got a pretty good memory and a lot of insights on all sorts of events, but not at this stage.

Transcribed by Joanna Buckley