

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Fean, Sir (Thomas) Vincent (born 20 November 1952)

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR VINCENT FEAN KCVO, RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS

SR: This is Suzanne Ricketts recording Vincent Fean on 7 May 2019. Vincent, tell me why did you join the Foreign Office?

1975: Foreign Office

VF: I joined the Foreign Office largely because I studied languages - French and German - at Sheffield University between 1971 and 1975. I came back from my year abroad in 1974, having spent six months in Lyon and six months in Münster. I wanted to keep using the languages I'd tried to learn, so I went to the careers advisory people and said, "Hi, what can I do?" And they said, "Teaching, insurance, banking. And there are the Civil Service exams - good for your interview technique, if you get that far." I was an undergraduate, in my final year. In those days, in the 70s, it wasn't a big problem getting a job. It was a sellers' market for jobs. I didn't care very much whether I got in or not. Naturally, I was attracted by the prestige, not knowing anything about the Foreign Office whatsoever. And I was attracted by the idea of the Civil Service and living abroad and working abroad. So I tried and I didn't fail.

I have one story to tell about my final interview. There were seven people in the room staring at me. Three talking and the rest scribbling.

SR: How intimidating!

VF: Absolutely. This was in Northumberland Avenue. Somewhere near the Nigerian High Commission these days. I did my bit. I was a little cheeky in the interview. One of the interviewers put me down and I tried to put him down. That seemed to get a laugh. Then I stood up to leave, after 40 minutes of torture. I found myself facing two brass-handled white doors, one of which I'd come in through. I couldn't remember which one it was. So I opened the one on the left. It was the broom cupboard. I thought to myself, "Will they notice if I just go in here and wait until the interviews are over and then emerge? They probably will." Then there was a voice from behind saying, "Mr Fean, the other door!" I walked out of the other door, blushing. That was it. The end of the story and the end of my assignation

with the Foreign Office. But an envelope landed through my door in Burnley a few weeks later telling me I had passed the Home Civil Service exams and that I could be a home civil servant. Foreign Office to follow. And then, a few days after that, a letter saying the Foreign Office accepted me. I was young and idealistic enough to think maybe I should do something useful in my time before joining the Civil Service. Something useful like charitable work. So I explained this to my mother, who was incredulous at the idea of giving up the Foreign Office for a year to do something else with some charitable body. I wrote to the Foreign Office saying thank you very much for having me, and could I defer for a year. The answer was, "Of course you can, but you will have to take all the exams again." So, at that point, my mother won. I joined in August 1975.

SR: You started in West Africa Department and you were Third Secretary in Chad. That was presumably non-resident?

VF: That's right. What had happened on the Chad story is that the Ambassador to Chad was normally in Yaoundé, Cameroon and ran four or five posts, one resident and the others non-resident. He was ill, so the Head of West African Department, Mark Heath (who was 6'8"), assumed the role of Ambassador to Chad. The Deputy Head of Department, the Assistant, became the Number 2 and I was the Number 3 of 3. So non-resident. Occasional forays to Chad. Four times in the year that I was doing that job, which was quite a lot. I flew for the first time in my life to get to Chad, via Paris, with the Ambassador. I was very respectful. The other part of the job was to be assistant desk officer for Ghana and the Ivory Coast, the two main places (after Nigeria) where we had something to do. So that was my day job. I can remember David Lewis, the Assistant, approaching me early on in my time, saying, "Vincent, when you write a minute to Mrs Smith, don't write *Dear Mrs Smith*. She'll love it, she'll appreciate it, but it's not what we do!" I took due note.

There's one story about Chad. I was the emissary, if you like, of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. We had an Honorary Consul in Chad, who was French. The French ran Chad and our Honorary Consul was a local businessman. He was not able to do very much other than arrange our meetings with the local authorities. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission had established that a Lancaster bomber flying from French West Africa had crashed in Chad in about 1942, killing all five crew. In the N'Djamena cemetery there were five crosses, but it transpired that one of the five was Jewish. His name was Flight Sergeant A E Obrart. He deserved the Star of David over his grave rather than the cross. So

the Commonwealth War Graves Commission wanted to send a new headstone to Chad, and I was the lucky traveller to carry it. It arrived wrapped in brown paper at the Foreign Office on one of the days I was set to fly to Chad via Paris. A pink and black granite headstone, just a bit bigger than a Chubb security pouch which I had to put it in, so it went into my suitcase.

SR: How heavy was it?

VF: Maybe 10 kilos? I wasn't travelling with very much, so that wasn't the problem. The problem was two-fold: my suitcase, which I had inherited from my father, consisted mainly of rust and cardboard; and on an earlier visit, I had promised the wife of a ConocoPhillips oil man to bring her a tin of golden syrup. I was not very familiar with the pressurised and unpressurised nature of flight. So I arrived in Chad, with this 6'8" Ambassador for whom I had great respect, and we went to the hotel. I knew there was a problem when I could see the corner of the headstone sticking through the top of the suitcase. In the privacy of my mosquito-infested room, I opened the suitcase and found that my smalls were swimming in golden syrup. Naturally, the granite was unharmed. So one of my tasks was to fit this thing at the graveyard. I got a local handyman to put in concrete and a two prong fitting. I don't know if it's still there. I took a photo and sent it to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I also sent them a bill for two shirts which had been impaled by the gravestone. They paid up. Honourable people.

So that was one of my recollections of Chad. It's a very poor country. We didn't have a lot to do there. There was the UN and not a lot else. We visited cotton plantations and so on and met the very few British expats living there.

SR: Before we move on to Arabic language training, can I just ask you what the Foreign Office was like? Was there any special training? Do you remember a cold, dark place where there were still fires lit by the messengers?

VF: Just about. There wasn't any training to speak of, except a week's induction course at the beginning when a couple of people who'd entered the year before popped up and said that it was OK. I was one of an intake of 16 and we had a glass of sherry with the PUS.

My recollection of West Africa Department is that the radiators stuck out a yard. There was a fireplace, but I don't remember it being used. There was central heating by then. I came from Burnley via Sheffield and my accent was stronger then than it is now. It has been honed by marriage of 41 years to a Londoner (Anne) and overseas travel and London work. But in

those days I had quite a strong Burnley accent: I was quite rare in that regard. I earned the title of 'The Northerner'. If people couldn't remember my name ... on the telephone, Fean is quite a hard one ... they would ask if the Northerner was there.

So that was the very first job. Just on the issue of choice and so on, I was one of 16. Roughly half and half Oxbridge and Russell Group universities. I never felt any discrimination. I did feel less clever than my peers: the truth was that quite a few of them were cleverer than me.

SR: Simply more self-confident, perhaps?

VF: Yes, I think so. I hadn't learnt anything about public speaking or debating.

SR: Were there any women?

VF: Yes, four or five. Caroline Elmes, who became Ambassador in Angola. Two or three more who, either by marriage or for other reasons, drifted away. It wasn't that long before that women had to resign on marriage. Patricia Long, who was the wife of my Deputy Head of Mission in Syria, had to resign on marriage: that was a big loss.

What I remember fondly is that there wasn't any sense of competition. You were in, part of a team, you were doing your best. Your Department looked after you and taught you what you needed to know. I never felt any direct competition, either with the other entrants or the people around me. My Head of Unit, John Brown, was a Grade 10 who had come up through the ranks. He was a voice of sanity. He ended up as Consul General in Chicago or San Francisco, I think. He had no pomposity. He taught me a lot about, for instance, drafts: drafting seemed to be quite a big thing. Getting the punctuation right has always been a big thing - I'm with William Hague on that! John Brown basically said, "There is a typing pool. Use it." This was in the days of typing pools. "If you don't like what you've done, ask them to change it. Only when you are happy, let it go." So I did. I changed a lot of things. I was not quite certain of getting it right. In those days there was a filing system.

SR: You had a registry clerk sitting with you in the room?

VF: Yes, filing everything as they went, incoming and outgoing papers. Everything was on paper. There might have been fax machines but not much else. There was a PA to the Head of Department and a PA to the Assistant: they did other people's work as well. Now officers

are expected to type their own work. I've always been just one step ahead of that. Good for me, if bad for the typists.

1976 - 78: Arabic language training first in Beaconsfield 1976, then MECAS, Lebanon

SR: Thank you. Let's move on now. Tell me how the Arabic language training came about. Were you given an aptitude test? Did you express an interest in doing a hard language?

VF: Yes. I took the language aptitude test after joining. Since then, the system has changed so that it's part of the application process. In my day, it was an afterthought. Towards the end of year 1, we were told - lots of things we were told in those days, not asked - that those of us who had passed the test could apply for a hard language. About half the intake did: there were future Sinologists, Japanologists, Turkish speakers ... There were four slots for Arabic - quite a lot. First of all, they offered me Persian. This was in the time of the Shah and I wasn't too keen on the Shah, although I didn't know much about him other than the fact he was an autocrat. So I thought that perhaps I didn't want to work in the same place as the Shah. So I turned Persian down and David Reddaway took it. He went on to marry an Iranian ... Having turned it down, I wasn't quite sure whether I'd be kicked out, or what would happen.

SR: A brave thing to do!

VF: It was in the era of 'if you don't do that, you must do this.' So I opted for Arabic, on a kind of safety first basis. There are twenty or twenty one Arabic speaking Embassies in the world - or were, as I think we've got smaller in terms of Arabic over time, in Francophone North Africa and the Gulf and so on. But in those days, if you went to Abu Dhabi, you spoke Arabic. I thought two things. First, the chances of getting to be Ambassador in China or in Japan were pretty infinitesimal. The chances of becoming an Ambassador in the Arab world were higher by a big number. Second, they had oil and I thought we would need that and I would keep a job. So for those reasons, not particularly a love of the Arab world as I hadn't been there - although later I did fall in love with the Arab world - I opted for Arabic and thoroughly enjoyed it. I was a student again and being paid! The task was not too onerous: I had an ear for languages, having studied French and German. I like languages. Spending 16 or 18 months learning Arabic was a pleasure.

Because of the Lebanese civil war which was still rumbling on in 1977, we started our studies in Beaconsfield, in an army camp at Wilton Park. So I lived in Jordans, a Quaker village,

where the Jordans cereals come from, with three other people: Tony Brenton, Andrew Heath and a female store manager from Marks and Spencer. The three men travelled into the army camp every day. It wasn't exactly immersion: we were in the countryside in the UK for a year and then 6 months in Lebanon in Shemlan - I was in the last intake to take an exam there, in March 1978. Even in Shemlan, we were in something like a hall of residence with fellow students, so it wasn't immersion. There was syndicate work: four of us competing to learn words and remember them and repeat them. I was in a syndicate with Tony Brenton, Andrew Heath and Bill Henderson: we vied with each other for word-learning victory and I didn't lose! At that time, the Syrians were in charge of Northern Lebanon and West Beirut. The Christian militias were in charge of East Beirut and the adjoining area. So we could go to the Corniche, we could go to West Beirut, we could go to the American University of Beirut (AUB), we could go to the Embassy, all in West Beirut. We were advised against going into East Beirut because there was still trouble. We were around Syrian conscripts who didn't guard the school, but were in the village and on the roads. Occasionally, we would see tracer fire, rocket fire between East and West Beirut from our hilltop school of an evening, though we were not affected by it. The school closed, because after we left in March 1978, a Lebanese family was killed, murdered in the village. It was mainly a Druze village, but there were some Christians there too. I don't remember the detail, but the murder of the family was the signal for the school to pull out. The staff and students left in a convoy to Jordan and the school never reopened. The PLO took over the building for a while. I've not been back. That was a nice era. Very happy days. A lot of freedom.

SR: But quite an intensive regime?

VF: Yes, four hours a day, five days a week of more or less constant syndicate work. Not one to one but four to one. With good teachers who wanted to teach and we wanted to learn, competitively, but it was honest competition. And then homework and some freedom. And a squash court.

So that was the Arabic. I should say that, at this point, in August 1977 I proposed to my wife, Anne. She said yes!

SR: Where had you met her?

VF: At Sheffield, at the university, in 1974. She was studying English and history at that point and then did a PGCE up in Sheffield. But came home during the vacations - she lived

in Ealing. By that time I was down in London with the Foreign Office and took her to theatres and cinemas. We got married in March 1978. The sequence there was Arabic exam at Shemlan in that month, come home, get married, a brief honeymoon on Sark in the Channel Islands and then a Third Secretary posting to Baghdad, our first posting.

1978: British Embassy, Baghdad

This was a short stay which ended with me being declared persona non grata by Saddam Hussein. I arrived in March 1978 for my first overseas job, speaking some Arabic. Not remarkably Iraqi Arabic, because the stuff I'd learned was close to it, but not quite the same - Levantine Arabic, Palestinian/Lebanese.

SR: But could you understand, mostly?

VF: Yes, I could get by. They could understand me. I think someone said once that I spoke like a Lebanese book and I wrote like a four year old! We had one car, no phone, lived away from other Brits in a place called Jadhriya, in a flat, near the Australian Ambassador. There was an old-fashioned cooling system - necessary in Baghdad in the spring/summer, when the noonday temperature could be 50 degrees Celsius - which consisted of water and raffia which let columns of cool air come in at the top of the room.

Our landlord was Christian. Essentially, I took the car in the morning and left Anne in solitude, with no communication. Anne very quickly got a job at the International School teaching mathematics and keeping one step ahead of the students. We got by and enjoyed it.

The Ambassador was Alex Stirling, who went on to be Ambassador in Morocco. He was a Scot and an extremely well-trained, effective diplomat.

SR: So why did you have to leave?

VF: At that time Saddam was No. 2. General Bakr was the President. He was a cypher and the real power was with Saddam Hussein, who ran the Ba'ath party. They were having running battles, first of all with the Canadians and then with us, about spying. The system under the Iraqi Ba'ath party was that Iraqis abroad were strictly monitored and controlled. If they stepped out of line, they were in trouble. There was an exchange of diplomatic expulsions with Canada a couple of months before our episode, which was in August. I can't remember why that happened. The result was that in the Baghdad Times, the state-controlled local English language paper, there were headlines which said that 'Iraq is a serious state and

refuses to be kicked around by the West'. The incident which led to our departure was this. Saddam decided to murder a former Iraqi Prime Minister, a refugee in London, General Abdul Razzak al Naif. The killing was committed by members of the Iraqi Embassy, two people from Iraqi Airways and an Iraqi mature student from Dundee University, who was monitoring the Iraqi students up in Scotland. He was shot on the steps of a London hotel. The Special Branch picked up the group of about seven, locked them up for a very short time and then kicked them out. I don't really know why they weren't prosecuted: some of them had diplomatic status, which would have made that hard. But the whole lot were expelled and given a week to leave, with the exception of the man who pulled the trigger. He went to jail.

In retaliation, inevitably, the Iraqis summoned my Ambassador, who took me with him. We thought that there would be trouble. It turned out to be a polite encounter. The Deputy Secretary in the Foreign Ministry handed over a piece of paper. I was under instructions to read it and if it insulted anybody - the Prime Minister, the Queen, anybody - I was to throw it back. It had eight names, but no insults. We were the eighth name. The Ambassador took the paper and returned back to the office to tell each individual concerned that they were leaving. He himself was not leaving. So there was then a gathering and lots of talk: people knew that something was up. Anne remembers hearing a conversation between two spouses saying that they thought it was one of them who would go: the reality was that both of them were going.

SR: This must have made a big dent in the personnel in the Embassy.

VF: Yes it did. That's a very good point. Let's compare and contrast. In the Iraqi Embassy in London there were seventy five Iraqis with diplomatic status. So they lost, let's say, five. Our Embassy had thirteen UK based staff and we lost eight. So it was what they call in Arabic *mu'aamala bil mithl* - reciprocity, but reciprocity plus. What did they want? They kept the Ambassador: they didn't want to break relations. They kept the Consul General: they wanted visas. And they allowed the registrar to stay. But we lost the Defence Attaché, the Head of Chancery and the gopher - I was the Third Secretary gopher. So we lost our Arabists, apart from the Ambassador himself, and had to pull in our belts. Alex Stirling stayed and did a great job. The rebuilding of the Embassy team took a long time. And, in the meantime, the Iraqi Embassy, because of its size, sailed on really. They didn't suffer much impact.

At that time - and this wasn't the only reason that we were in Iraq, of course - we were selling £300 million worth of civil kit to Iraq and Iraq was building universities and hospitals: it was a major market in the Middle East. So that stopped. Saddam could turn the tap on and off.

That was the Iraqi experience. I then came home with Anne. We were photographed by the Daily Telegraph walking with our suitcases across the tarmac at Heathrow. When I was expelled, I got a phone call from a colleague in Personnel Operations Department, Adrian Fortescue, to say that he and his wife were going to be abroad for a fortnight and we could have their house.

SR: That was very thoughtful.

VF: Yes, remarkably kind. As it happened, my wife's mother and father in Ealing were able to accommodate us, so we didn't need to take him up on his offer. The other thing to mention about that time is that Antony Duff who was a Deputy Secretary in the Foreign Office, a very senior figure who ran the defence and intelligence side, came into my office in Botswana a few months later and told me I had done something he had never achieved: to be thrown out!

So back we came. I was offered an opportunity to learn Spanish and took it, although not with great intentions to go to Spain or Latin America. But it was a good thing to do while people in POD worked out what to do with this extra body who'd come back on to the books without warning.

1978: Temporary duty, British High Commission, Botswana

What they did was pleasant, though it was more direction than consultation. We were sent to Botswana for three months, filling in for the High Commissioner who was away. I didn't take on the role of High Commissioner: I was a junior Second Secretary by then. I was the assistant to the Chargé d'Affaires, Peter Raftery. We lived in the High Commissioner's house and looked after his cat. We accidentally killed his protea in the garden by not watering it enough: I hope we were forgiven. I did a bit of work on the refugees from Rhodesia.

That was a small post, a little bit smaller than Baghdad. A Commonwealth country. We were free to travel where we wanted. At that stage in Botswana there were just 80 kilometres of tarmac road: it's all very different now. It was an interlude as we knew we weren't

staying. We kept busy. And then, thanks to nice Personnel, we flew from Botswana to Damascus, via Cairo, without coming home. So we switched from one Ba'ath party to another, from the Saddam Hussein version to the Hafez Al-Assad version of Ba'athism. The reason why Personnel were nice was that Botswana should have been a solo trip: I should not have been accompanied. But we asked to stay together since we had just got married. Personnel agreed as long as we didn't come home and went straight from Botswana to Damascus. That's what happened.

My main recollection of our Botswana interlude is of diamonds and cattle: they have diamonds and they love cattle - it's a mark of respect and wealth to have cattle. A very pleasant experience.

1979 - 1982: British Embassy, Damascus

Damascus was Ba'athism but with a different face. My recollection is that Syrians were far more talkative about their regime - and critical - than the Iraqis. Just harking back to Iraq for a second, I was trying to practise my Arabic with the Embassy driver and idly asked, as we drove along, who lived in a house guarded by two sentries. I could say in Arabic 'I wonder who lives there?' He sighed and said, "Mr Fean, if I tell you, I have to tell them I told you. So let's not bother." We agreed not to bother.

In Syria, it was different. We got the feeling that as a Syrian you could say what you liked, as long as you did nothing. Again, my wife Anne has a recollection. The job I did was by then First Secretary: promotion happened by age and not doing it wrong. The job was press, politics and ODA (Overseas Development Administration). I was the ODA officer with a budget of £300,000 to spend in Syria, carefully monitored by the ODA in London with visits. Part of the ODA programme was to work with Syrian engineers - upgrading training in Syria. We had dinner with some Syrian engineers early on in our time. One of the engineers, a man sitting next to my wife during the first course, said, "We don't like our government very much." Anne came home at the end of the evening and told me this and I said, "Well, so what more did he tell you?" She replied, "I didn't ask him any more questions, in case anyone was listening." She looked rather suspiciously at the vase in the middle of the table. In Iraq, there might well have been a microphone there. But in Syria I don't think there was.

We had two children while we were there, both born in Damascus: two girls, Catherine (1979) and Louise (1981). We travelled in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan. We didn't get as far as Turkey. It was an enjoyable posting.

At the time, the Muslim Brotherhood were trying to kill Russians. The Soviet Union was Hafez Al-Assad's main supporter. The Muslim Brotherhood were quite strong, particularly in Hama in North Syria, and there were attacks. The regime was a dictatorship, consisting of Hafez and his family and Alawites. We, the British, had a relationship with Syria, a relatively sound relationship. We heard that, in the context of the Middle East conflict, there could be no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria. This was at the time of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and his speech to the Knesset, so Egypt was out of the equation. Syria was part of what was called the front of steadfastness and opposition with some other countries, one of which no longer exists - South Yemen - Algeria, Iraq, Libya and not many more. Syria was the leader of that group. American statesmen and British ministers came and talked to Hafez Al-Assad, partly about Syria but mainly about the conflict. So we had a relationship.

In our time there, I worked for three Ambassadors: James Craig, the great Arabist, Patrick Wright, very good but summoned back because of the Falklands to work in London, and Ivor Lucas. All very different characters. James Craig was always an Arabic teacher as well as a very good diplomat. He was slightly swarthy, albeit a Liverpudlian, and was occasionally mistaken for the Ambassador of Syria instead of the Ambassador to Syria because his accent was so good. I decided not to compete with him. He was very perceptive. Occasionally his dispatches leaked, particularly in Saudi, which came after Syria. He was on top of his game, on top of his job. Patrick was a different character. Very meticulous in recording who he met. I am sure in his attic there are several shoeboxes full of postcards with the names, marital status, children's names and jobs of everybody he's met as a diplomat. Formidable. He did the job very well. Differently from James. And then Ivor Lucas was the last of three. Again, a consummate diplomat. He had been Head of Middle East Department and Ambassador in Oman. Very pleasant with a lovely wife, Christine.

What I remember about both Baghdad and Damascus is that they were relatively small posts, under pressure. We were under more pressure in Baghdad than in Damascus. There was a family feeling, a togetherness, an 'all for one', a willingness to go the extra mile by everybody, including local staff. There was a feeling that we were contributing and that our

contribution was appreciated, certainly locally and, to the extent that we knew, back home in London. We were visited, not over visited, by Ministers in Damascus. Because of the Palestinian conflict, we were a topic of interest and on the circuit for ministerial visits.

SR: Were you ever called on to do interpreting?

VF: Seldom. With James Craig, it wasn't needed and the conversation flowed. I think, once or twice, with a trade minister I had to busk it. We got by. But I didn't volunteer because there were people in the Embassy who could do it better: Syrians, who did it all the time. My recollection there, again Baghdad and Damascus, is that among the local staff, Christians tended to congregate around the Embassy in terms of getting the jobs; not all, for Muslims were the majority in the team. But Christians were a heavier minority than numerically they would normally merit. And that's because, for Arab Christians, the British Embassy was regarded as a safe place, a haven where they could find help in case of need. Generally speaking, that was true.

Politically, in our time in Damascus, the Hama massacre was the biggest and the worst incident. Hafez and his brother Rif'at decided to bombard the Muslim quarter of Hama. This was in 1982, following a sort of uprising. This was at a time when the media were not really present in Syria. My job was partly media relations and the Syrian media took their tune from Hafez only: there was no dissent and no free media. Hama was the epicentre of the uprising and, in order to quell it, Hafez, his brother and other Alawite leaders decided to bombard with tanks and artillery from the outside for about ten days, killing men, women and children and wrecking the centre of Hama. And keeping quiet about it. So we didn't know much about it. We knew it was bad. We couldn't get there: the roads were blocked and there was no way in. I was sitting in my office one day and in came Robert Fisk: he'd just got into Hama by stealth and bribing a taxi driver coming in from the North, rather than from Damascus. He'd been shot at, his taxi had been shot at. The driver said at one point, "I am leaving. You can stay if you like." He came out and wrote a shocking report about the deaths and the devastation. Syria in those days had a deserved reputation for brutal vindictiveness about negative media coverage. It controlled Beirut and if Lebanese journalists spoke ill of the regime, they suffered ... death or torture. So Robert Fisk wrote his report from Berlin under a pseudonym. It was the first foreign eye-witness account of the Hama massacre.

We left Syria soon after, in April of 1982. The massacre had been in February. The story, sadly, was one where repression worked and didn't really set Hafez Al-Assad back. Today, I think he would be vilified and the UN Security Council would seek to confiscate his assets. In those days, sadly, people shrugged and moved on. That was Syria.

SR: Yes, your longest overseas posting to date. And then you moved to something completely different.

1982 - 84: Western European Department, Foreign Office

VF: That's right. I went to Western European Department in April 1982. Domesticity. We had another child, Dominic, in 1983 in the West Middlesex Hospital, a change from the Razi Hospital in Damascus. We settled into not a 9 to 5 existence, more a 9.30 to 7 existence, with an hour's commute either side. The job was fun: West Berlin and the GDR. So somewhat ambivalent in that the main task was to conserve West Berlin as an oasis of democracy and the second part of the job was to maintain diplomatic relations in London with the Embassy of the GDR and to send instructions to our Embassy in Unter den Linden in East Berlin.

At that time, the GDR was the showcase of Communism. Honecker and then Egon Krenz were in charge of what was essentially an integral part of the Soviet Union, taking instructions from Moscow. There was rivalry in the sense that the GDR had an army, was flexing its muscles and occasionally wanted to extort money from the West Germans for access to West Berlin, which could be reached by train, or by air into Tegel airport in West Berlin. In the late 1940s there was the air bridge between West Germany and West Berlin. In my time, it wasn't like that: there were well-established systems of communication. But the East Germans did want to demonstrate their independence, not from the Soviet Union particularly, but their independence as a state, and they occasionally would fly helicopters in the air corridors between West Germany and West Berlin, disrupting the civil traffic. Our task then was to complain. But not to complain to the East Germans because, under the Four Power Agreement that followed the division of Berlin at the end of World War II, the ruling powers over Berlin were the Soviet Union, the United States, France and the UK. In Bonn there was what the Germans called the *Vierergruppe* - the Federal Republic of Germany and the three Western allies, who cooperated over managing the tensions, of which there were a lot. Part of my job was to send instructions to Bonn, to our Embassy and to Berlin, to the British Consulate General (BCG) in the 1936 Olympic Stadium, for discussions with Soviet officials. The Deputy Secretary in London was a Russia hand, Sir Julian Bullard, a great

man. I once witnessed a discussion in English between him and the Soviet Ambassador. I was the note taker when he was ticking off the Soviet Ambassador for the incursions by the East Germans. He did it with great skill and precision, in half an hour. Masterful direction of the conversation.

One of the other issues on the agenda was Rudolf Hess. He was the only inmate in a prison, guarded each month by one of the Four Powers. In my cupboard, behind a combination lock, were the plans for what to do when he died. He didn't die on my watch. The plans were to bulldoze the prison, to prevent it from becoming a memorial to Nazism. That happened after my time. I got regular reports from the medics and from the people who were guarding him.

SR: He was a grumpy old man, by all accounts, wasn't he? Frank Berman has told me about him.

VF: Yes. A lonely man. Still loyal to Hitler. I never met him.

On the GDR side, I didn't have a clue that the GDR was going to collapse and that it was going to become one Germany again. We took the GDR seriously: it was the showcase, it was the young kid on the block of the Soviet Union and we wanted to keep in touch with it. So I had to try and remember two ways into Berlin: one was flying into Tegel from West Germany and the other was flying into Charlottenburg, I think it was, the East Berlin airport and keep them separate in my head. I went to East Berlin a couple of times, not so often.

I can remember one incident, just walking in the Cecilienhof in East Berlin, seeing the difference between the Soviet troops and the East German troops. It was on a Sunday. The East German troops were spruce, very well turned out in uniform, walking with their proud parents. The Soviet troops - Central Asian conscripts - were there, off duty, no guns. Ill-fitting uniform, no socks, no shoelaces. I remember one of them had a camera with no film and was pretending to take pictures of his colleagues. The contrast was very stark.

I also remember Friedrichstrasse in Berlin and the several layers of Soviet soldiers with rifles patrolling the upper gantries, looking down on the station below, because at that time Friedrichstrasse was a crossing point of a kind, not for pedestrians but for trains, overground and underground trains.

1984 - 85: European Community Department (Internal), Foreign Office

The WED job lasted a couple of years and was my training ground, frankly, for how to write a submission. That stood me in good stead when I went into European Community Department (Internal), which was a less sedate place. Every month, there was the Foreign Affairs Council. ECD(I) would prepare the briefing one month and ECD(E)¹ would prepare it the next, with tight deadlines and the need to consult the Treasury, Cabinet Office, DTI, Home Office etc. Pressure.

My job was the single market. At that stage, President Mitterrand was seeking to reconquer the French single market. He had a particular animus against the Japanese and wanted to keep out Japanese tape recorders and promote domestic products. So at one stage he decreed that all Japanese electrical equipment needed to pass through Poitiers, where there were just two Customs officers. That was that. They were there. They did their job. It took a long time. That was his attempt to control the flow of Japanese goods. The Commission took exception to this, but rather slowly, so he was happy for a time.

The job was interesting. Lord Cockfield was Commissioner. Under the direction of Mrs Thatcher, he sought to make a reality of the single market and, to a large extent, did. We were pushing.

I said that the London job in Western European Department was 9.30 to 7. The job in ECD(I) was the same start, but finishing about 8. I would come home to a wife and three small children. But the children were asleep. And my wife would say, "You've been a long time." To which my only real answer was, "Yes, but those in Brussels are still working, and it's an hour later, there."

We pushed some stuff: insurance directives, things that people told me were very important and would open up the European market for British insurance companies. Patrick Fairweather was the Head of Department and John de Fonblanque and then Stephen Wall was the Deputy Head. It was a high pressure, high productivity place. David Hannay was the Under Secretary. I respected him. Just as well, since he became my boss at UKREP Brussels.

¹ European Community Department (External)

1985 - 89: UKREP Brussels

At the end of the period in ECD(I), it was time to go abroad again. At one stage, there was a thought that I would go to Washington and do the Arab-Israel job: there is an Arabist slot for a First Secretary in Washington. That was on offer and then went away for reasons that I've never quite followed. Instead, partly because I had done the ECD(I) job, UKREP came up and I took it. Near home, convenient, hard work. But having spent two years in ECD(I), I was a convinced European and believed that the European Union was, broadly speaking, a good thing and that we should make our mark there. I still think that.

I began as the Presidency Coordinator, spending time in Brussels but partly also in The Hague, liaising with the Dutch Presidency and preparing ours. That involved driving to The Hague and listening and attending and contributing to their preparatory meetings and then coming back and getting ready for the UK Presidency of 1986. That phase lasted about a year. I was immersed in the UK Presidency under the direction of John Goulden who was the Antici man, preparing COREPER 2 and the Foreign Affairs Council. I was his sidekick. We shared a room, we shared the ups and downs. I wrote some incredibly obscure telegrams about comitology, the way in which Commission-led committees take decisions. Very complicated depending on the Treaty article. These telegrams were written at a very small hour in the morning. They were remarkably difficult to read the next day, even by me! We had a same-day reporting regime, so that was that. You just got on with it and did it. The day was long.

David Hannay was our Ambassador. He was a very genial host with his wife. He was a hard worker who expected hard work from his team. My recollection of the 1986 Presidency European Council in London - those were the days when the Presidency actually had some control of the agenda - is of being in the QE2 Centre. Mrs T came into the room, a big room where we were busying ourselves, and thanked us at the end of the day. She gave the press conference with Delors next to her. Her ambition at the December 1986 European Council had been to be intergovernmental: no Commission initiatives. She succeeded. So the themes were intergovernmental cooperation on immigration, justice and so on, not areas where the Commission then had the right of initiative. So she gave her press conference, went on at some length and then turned to Delors who said, "*Madame, vous avez tout dit*" and went away and slagged her off at his own press conference in another part of the building. So their

relationship was one of creative tension, with the emphasis on the tension. I was also around for the PM's Bruges speech. I listened to it and it had some very good bits.

My main recollection of Brussels and UKREP was of dedication, of people in our mission who believed in the European ideal, saw difficulties but wanted to do the right thing. My immediate destiny after the Presidency had been to deal with Mediterranean fruit and vegetables because that was what was ordained for me. At that point, Emyr Jones Parry jumped ship from UKREP and moved on from being Counsellor (Institutions) to become Deputy Chef de Cabinet to Lord Plumb, President of the European Parliament - the only time the Brits have held that presidency. So that left a gap in the UKREP team and, happily, I was chosen to succeed Emyr in that job. It was essentially lobbying the European Parliament. I had two assistants: a secretary and a number two. Every month we took a week-long trip to Strasbourg by train, with lots of lobbying and same-day reporting of the debates. The Parliament met for two weeks in October because they had the budget to debate. I also dealt with the Economic and Social Council and did a little bit on culture, although culture was not a big theme in the European Union at that time. Culture was mainly intergovernmental, with some Commission efforts to boost it, particularly as regards film and media. I was the First Secretary (Culture) as well as the other stuff. That was quite fun. Again, disruptive, being away with three young children at home. David Hannay visited the European Parliament regularly. So did Europe Ministers Chris Patten and Lynda Chalker. In my time, the European Parliament gained in importance.

There was an occasional local difficulty involving Irish MEPs. This was in the late 80s. We didn't always have the best of relations with the Republic: this was before John Major, and well before the Good Friday Agreement. The European Parliament was one of the areas for political skirmishing. The Irish MEPs voted in one block, the British less so. Sometimes we lost in Plenary debates which, happily, quite soon afterwards no one remembered. The European Parliament in those days would have its themes and debates and reportage, then a month later would turn up and do something new, not following the previous script. My job - which was not the easiest - was to persuade British MEPs to support Mrs Thatcher, whatever she was doing. The difficulty was this: the Conservative MEPs were mainly wetter than her and had gone to Brussels to get away from her, while the Labour people knew they didn't like her. We had 81 British MEPs at that time and most of them knew what they thought. And they didn't think what my instructions wanted them to think. So we tried and lobbied and

sometimes we won. It was a good experience of political lobbying. That was four years in Brussels.

My recollection of living there is of listening to Radio 4 in the morning, driving into work, reading the Independent and being in an extension of Whitehall with foreign accoutrements. The relationship with the Belgians was interesting. The Belgians we knew best were ones we had met somewhere else, in Damascus or wherever. We didn't get to know many ... one or two in the Council Secretariat and the Commission. For us, Brussels was a microcosm of 12 or 15 states, with Belgium thrown in, rather than being a bilateral posting: it was everybody else plus the Belgians. None the worse for that.

1989 - 92: Personnel Operations Department (POD), then Personnel Management Department (PMD), Foreign Office

SR: So in 1989 you moved back to the Foreign Office, to POD.

VF: Yes. Edward Chaplin asked me if I would replace him in what was then called Personnel Operations Department and subsequently became Personnel Management Department. I did. In those days, if you were going into Personnel, you knew your file had been scrutinised by your future superiors and that they had deemed you capable. It was a compliment. It was also the case that if you went into Personnel, you had the faint hope of a good posting afterwards.

SR: Perhaps not so faint, actually?

VF: Yes, perhaps not so faint! Indeed, Paris came my way, which was a very plum posting.

Edward Clay was the Head of Department. He managed the transformation from Personnel Operations to Personnel Management. He is a man I greatly respect. Howard Pearce was the second in command who looked after what we used to call Grade 4s, or SMS 1 now. I was the Assistant and my job was to manage the people who ran the home area and three overseas areas for postings but also for personnel management career advice because, in those days, POD did both. In other words, they put people in places and managed their careers. And we talked to individuals about what they wanted: something we now don't do. This is a sadness.

So I came home and Edward Chaplin talked to me about the job. A word of respect about Edward Chaplin. He lives in Cambridge and he would commute daily and he would leave on time. His career interviews lasted half an hour and were comprehensive. My career

interviews lasted an hour and were comprehensible, but painful for me to record. He covered the ground far faster than I ever did. Nevertheless, I was honoured to be his successor. I found Edward Clay a very pleasant, hard-working and creative boss who, I think uniquely in my experience, would offer to draft first. So the Head of Department would draft and clear, rather than asking me to draft and then run it past him. This wasn't always the case because he was a busy man, but he would on occasion do tricky submissions or minutes.

To begin with, POD had a reputation for smoke-filled rooms and cabals (although by that time, I think we were non-smoking) and outcomes which were to the detriment of the individual. That wasn't so, but the stories eventually led to change and led to committee work and committee decisions, which inevitably led to gaps in postings and gaps for posts to carry. Whereas one of the beauties of POD had been a relatively seamless transition because of the daisy chain.

SR: The daisy chain?

VF: A daisy chain is when you are faced with the need to replace somebody. This was in the days of diktat rather than committee. So Personnel would attempt to replace X with Y.

SR: Rather like a chain when buying a house?

VF: Yes. The creators of the daisy chain would sit down, often on their own to begin with, with a pile of files and try and work out who could do what and who was available when, respecting the merry-go-round of people moving on from job to job, trying to restrain the merry-go-round and not make it go faster. They would decide who fitted what job. Although it wasn't a democratic process, the individual would have the opportunity to say no. If they were on a first posting, that was quite hard because the theory was that they had come in to go abroad and that they ought to go abroad anywhere because they were young, in their first job. There was an increasing tension between the instinct to send and the right of the individual to choose. Also the increase in spouse/partner choice. I mean that the spouse or partner would have a job, a career, so the officer would need to take this into account when accepting or bidding for jobs. When I began, it was the old system.

SR: Was that the cards with the holes punched by knitting needles?

VF: Not quite, but very much paper driven. Thick files called Indiv files - meaning individual files for each FCO employee, containing appraisals since the year dot, since they

joined. Minutes by colleagues and seniors about individuals that the individuals never saw. You never saw your own file: that was a POD house rule.

I remember learning things about people that I didn't want to know. There was a habit which eventually went away, which was banned, of appraisal writing which, for instance would include talk about the spouse. Now I am bit mixed on this. I believe that the spouse contributes to the work of the officer, whether paid or not, and is quite relevant to the achievement of the task. Therefore, ignoring the spouse entirely seems to be an oddity: but you're not marking the spouse, you're marking the officer.

The job was varied, and satisfying. Inducting new entrants in the fast stream ... looking after them, talking to them. The research cadre ... keeping them sweet or trying to, sometimes with jobs abroad or in the Cabinet Office. The economists and DS5s, as they were in those days - abroad, First Secretaries. Howard Pearce did DS4s and Edward Clay did the senior grade. We talked a lot. Pearce and Clay would check my ideas about who should go where, which would not just come from me but from the four DS5s who between them ran the home area and the three overseas areas. They would come up with ideas from their patch.

There was an inherited system called foxes and geese, internal to POD, which involved the four DS5s, me, Howard Pearce and Edward Clay. The DS5s are the intellectual workhorses of the Office. To move them around, at home or abroad, we would propose and argue at a set meeting once a week the case for X to happen to Mr or Ms Y. We would be interrogated by Pearce and Clay, bearing in mind they had probably seen these Indiv files before. They knew the posts. They knew the people. They would either say yes or no. We had a right of appeal, of argument, during the meeting. But the meeting took decisions and the decisions were transmitted. That was the deal: it was understood that was the way it worked. Your thinking needed to be clear to say who should go where, and why. You could afford to be quite terse and quite rude about the strengths and weaknesses of the individual. There was no time to mess about and be too polite.

When the decision was taken, it would be submitted to the Under Secretary to approve. It was Veronica Sutherland in my time. Then it would be communicated to the individual and, if the individual said no, there was a sharp intake of breath. The old system had the merit of clarity. It had the merit of foreseeing gaps. It was, to my mind, relatively fair: nobody had a favourite son or daughter who needed a job and would get a better job because you were in

POD. I didn't sense that. The downside was that the individual was the end receiver of the process, not participating in the process. It was on a take it or leave it basis at the end.

There were one or two exceptions: if you were a flyer, like Jonathan Powell, you were consulted. "What do you want next, Jonathan?" But, in the main, people were not consulted. People were considered.

There is one other element which has changed: there was a genuine effort to diversify colleagues. Take my own case as an example. Coming out of Damascus with that bilateral background of Arabic, I was emphatically not destined for Middle East Department or Near East and North Africa Department. Instead I was destined for a multilateral job to broaden me and to give me more scope. I think this is good: it wasn't my direction, or chance decisions, it was the centre directing. I think that has gone: we are into cones and whom you know, to a certain extent now, e.g. in the Middle East, the area that I know best.

That was then. In came some consultants who said we were too big and that people didn't like us. The world had moved on from offering career advice: people drove their own careers, for example in the Treasury. There was a perception that we worked in smoke-filled rooms and that we were cheating. So the system changed, and so did the name of the Department, from POD to PMD.

SR: That's when the boards came in?

VF: Yes. I was involved in them. They naturally created more paper, because if you are going to show hard-working Heads of Department on a selection board what candidates are on offer, you need to produce several candidates - offer a choice. You need to produce the appraisals of each candidate for them to read in advance. So a few more Norwegian trees went and the process became heavier, clunkier. If the board took a decision that wasn't in accordance with the preferred option - the board was sovereign - that might create a gap, and then the gap had to be filled. You couldn't do it at the same board, so you had to wait at least another month to decide - maybe quite a lot longer. So it became more routine for posts and Departments in London to carry gaps: that's now intrinsic in the system.

I understand the desirability of choice. I'm in favour of bidding - which was present in the old system, but through career advice. We would ask candidates where they would like to go next and write it down on their career minute. So when the question of where this individual was to go, we would read it. So it wasn't exactly blind science.

We adapted to the new system. We ceased to do daisy chains. We still felt that we were contributing, we felt involved: it wasn't a mechanical process. We were intent on something which may or may not have been good: the instinct was not to sack people, the instinct was to put them in a job that they could do. By and large, the candidates - our colleagues - didn't deserve sacking and were not sackable. They didn't deserve sacking because generally they were competent and they weren't sackable because they hadn't done anything wrong. So, in those circumstances, the question was, when the time came: where do they go? I admit that, on occasion, we would put a mediocre person under a top person, in the hope that the duo would get by. Because the mediocre person might not be mediocre in Home Civil Service terms. He or she could be competent, but just not a flyer. So one tried, in that first period, to match posts, people and bosses in a way that worked. Those ingredients are still there. But the process of choosing is a bit more serendipitous now than it was then. I'm happy with the changes, but it isn't black and white.

Just to go back to Edward Clay. He was the best boss I had. Clear, informal, polite, encouraging, team player, inclusive, diverse in his approach, a word for everybody, hard-working. I can't say more!

That was POD/PMD.

1992 - 96: British Embassy, Paris

SR: So how did you get Paris? Did you pull strings in POD?

VF: A very good question! Paris happened, rather than being planned. I ran for Deputy High Commissioner in Nicosia. I didn't get it. That was presumably under the committee process, towards the end of my time. Stephen Lamport had replaced Howard Pearce as the Grade 4 manager. He approached me casually one day and asked, "What about Paris?" I said, "Yes, what about Paris?" He said, "Well, Dick Wilkinson is coming back to be Director, Africa. So we need a French speaker for the press job in Paris. You speak French, don't you?" I did.

SR: But wasn't it a bit rusty by then?

VF: Yes, a bit rusty but not bad. In Syria I used some French. But I had done half a degree in French and spent six months in Lyon. When I was asked if I wanted to be Press Counsellor in Paris, having been in Brussels and having young children, I jumped at the chance. The Personnel Dept were in a hurry. Dick Wilkinson needed to be back yesterday to

do the Africa job. They ran it past the board: I think I was the sole candidate. So that was a fix. For us, a very nice fix. Could they have tried harder? Maybe. Did they need to try harder? They chose not to. The Number 2 board backed it. This was in the days when moving from First Secretary to Counsellor didn't involve an ADC², so off I went. I managed to keep one step ahead of the ADCs - a blessing! So to Paris. Paris was fun.

SR: You had that wonderful flat overlooking the Elysée Palace.

VF: Yes, in the Rue de Miromesnil. I hope they've still got it. Our kids were with us. We haven't talked about that, but we were in nice places when it was easy to keep them with us, and we did. We were in Damascus at a good time to have children and we were in Brussels and Paris with children. So we weren't faced with the choice of Lagos, Riyadh, Tehran: what do you do with schooling for a teenager? We didn't have that. We were lucky. The three children stayed with us and went to the British School in Paris, a far longer way from our home than my journey to work.

Three and a half years there, under Christopher Mallaby. He came with his French wife, Pascale, from Bonn. Early on, he said of the Paris Embassy structure, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." He found an Embassy which was functioning effectively. I was essentially coterminous with him. I had nine or ten days with Michael Jay at the very end and helped with his arrival by destroyer sailing into a French port - Michael's father had been in the Royal Navy. He arrived that way to emphasise the strong bilateral defence relationship.

I wrote speeches for Christopher. The point I would make to contrast the styles of Christopher Mallaby and David Hannay is this: Christopher Mallaby would listen hard to a problem and then would quickly and quietly ask for your recommendation (i.e. don't come to me with a problem, unless you're bringing the solution as well); David Hannay, in my days in UKREP dealing with the European Parliament, would listen hard to the facts and then produce the solution without further involvement of the junior officer. I found that contrast intriguing, but both were effective in terms of outcome.

So back to Paris, drafting speeches and learning Christopher Mallaby's technique. I had to get up early in the morning because he liked going on the radio at dawn with people like Jean-Pierre Elkabbach and jousting with the journalists in perfect French. All good clean fun. My job was to know what was in the media. You had to read the media before he got there.

² Assessment and Development Centre

So it was an early start for me, not every day but perhaps once a week. Getting the British message across at the start of the day. Sometimes on TV - France 24 and others.

We had an in-house translation section which was good. I think it's got smaller. I was in charge of that. The three women worked there producing our letters and our speeches in fluent French. I travelled around the Consulates General: Bordeaux, Lille, Marseille and Strasbourg. They've now been localised, but in my time there were UK-based Consuls General.

I liaised closely with the rest of the Embassy because they were doing the work and I was trying to write it up or talk it up. I needed to know what was going on. It was good fun.

SR: But BSE wasn't fun!

VF: No. BSE was not fun. This may be confession time.

There were two episodes on the media side. We had a line to take in the event, which was predictable, that the French would test their nuclear weapon in the South Pacific. We had a supportive text in that regard. In other words, we were willing to say that if the French wanted to try and prove that their nuclear weapons still worked, we - as a fellow nuclear weapons state - would understand and support. They did a nuclear test explosion, somewhere near New Zealand and Australia. We had the line to take. I took it and put it out as an Embassy statement. Naturally, the New Zealanders and the Australians complained because it was nearer them than us: they didn't like the idea. This was in John Major's time. He defended the Government line because it was the agreed line, but he didn't initiate its use.

Then came episode 2 - BSE. Our friend President Chirac, who had been so appreciative of our support on the nuclear testing, was the first to ban British beef and we then went into a kind of war of attrition where we never had the upper hand. We didn't deserve it on how we had handled BSE - London was forever drawing the line then moving it.

BSE is not the main memory of Paris. My main memory of Paris is thinking "Here we have a Diplomatic Service - the French - that functions very well, and maybe is less good at sharing information than ours." We were very good at knowing quickly what Washington thought, what Moscow thought, what Damascus thought. Our telegram service was fast, furious and terse. So the Ambassador or the Head of Press would know what Washington thought overnight, what the President of the United States was doing and where he was going. I

think, in the French system, knowledge was power and therefore was conserved, kept rather than shared. Sharing was one of the virtues of our system.

But if you look around the world, the French Diplomatic Service functions. The British Diplomatic Service functions. So being in a place where you are watching the workings of the French Diplomatic Service at home was a great pleasure and a great feeling of emulation. You would attempt to (a) persuade them to join you or (b) if you couldn't do that, then you'd try and beat them.

The other thing I remember which is related to my time in Brussels is that if the French and the Germans got together, which they frequently did behind closed doors with blood on the carpet, we would seek to befriend whoever could be on our side and create a *ménage à trois*. We never quite managed it. I was told once or twice, "Listen, Vincent, we don't love them. We have big rows. But we don't do it in public. And we come out with something." That was life.

In Paris, we were strong on defence. We were strong on nuclear. We were strong on the Entente Cordiale: I remember producing a booklet on the 90th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale with the French Foreign Ministry. But if there was one phone call for the French President to make, it was to Helmut Kohl: you had to live with that and make the best of it.

1996 - 99: Counter Terrorism Policy Department, Foreign Office

SR: So you came back from Paris in 1996 and went to Counter Terrorism Policy Department (CTPD) in the Foreign Office.

VF: Yes, I had two home jobs, for a total of six years. Financially challenging, but good for the children's education - they all got through A-levels in that time. CTPD was a relatively new creation. It had been part of another department but was a freestanding department by my time. A functional department, with no particular geographical focus other than the Middle East, from which quite a lot of terrorism had come.

We were a small department - I think we were thirteen. I was the Head, SMS1. There was a Deputy, a couple of First Secretaries, and a crisis training unit. We were working to Patrick Nixon, who had the portfolio of crime and terrorism as Under Secretary. I made the occasional foray to Brussels for the EU Working Group on counter terrorism (not remarkably effective). In London there was a lot of liaison with Ministers and with the Security Service,

SIS, Special Forces, the Metropolitan Police and with the FCO geographical departments, Consular Department and News Department.

This was the job in which I needed the mobile phone the most. I kept it on in church because people could ring at odd hours with difficult things to say. Kidnaps happened and kidnaps involving British nationals were our prime responsibility, wherever they happened abroad. The thing about kidnaps is that they happen in places where you don't have control, like Chechnya or Yemen or DRC. One legacy case I had was in Kashmir. Very time-consuming, rightly so, requiring meticulous coordination with every agency and, to a certain extent, the host government. A lot of liaison with Consular Department and the Consular Affairs Minister - the one I remember is Liz Symons. Also Liam Fox. I talked to the families of the kidnapped British citizens about why the British government wouldn't pay under any circumstances, adding that the British government would not - in my time - prevent payment by others to criminals motivated by money, but would not permit payment to terrorists. So the distinction between a terrorist and a mercenary money grabber was important.

It was hard work. Life and death, not to be taken lightly. One of the big things that happened in my time was the arrival of Robin Cook in 1997 as Foreign Secretary. He decided to rework Lockerbie. The Lockerbie sanctions regime imposed on Libya by the United Nations Security Council was falling apart. Mandela visited Libya and said, "This siege of Libya must stop", as he flew into Tripoli from South Africa. Arab leaders were also objecting to the sanctions regime, which was beginning to crumble. Robin Cook, with Tony Blair, decided that the way to go was to invite Qadhafi to send the two Lockerbie suspects to The Hague, to Camp Zeist, for a trial by Scottish judges, at some expense, overseas, with Scottish law prevailing. That took a lot of work. Most of it was done by a good First Secretary in the Department whom Robin Cook trusted. The Department worked hand in glove with Robin Cook to make it happen. Madeleine Albright was his ally on the US side. It came to be. It was remarkable that it led to an outcome. The verdict was not proven for Fhimah and proven, guilty, for Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, who came back to haunt my work in Tripoli a few years later when he was released from a Scottish prison on humanitarian grounds.

The job was fascinating. Challenging. We had heard of Usama bin Laden and were interested in knowing where he was. He was one of many. The liaison with the US, but also with France, was strong. Looking at it now, that area of FCO expertise and knowledge has grown. It's an area where the UK, with very few others, is competent. Whatever happens in

our relationship with the European Union, those bilateral relationships - which are the ones that really count - need to be preserved for the sake of British citizens abroad and for the good of European and American citizens abroad.

I was glad to stop. It was hard work and unpredictable. Largely a reactive job, and reactive without warning. The team, particularly Rupert Joy followed by Mike Gifford as my Deputy, was strong and the fact that the Department has grown by four or five times since then tells me that (a) our knowledge has increased and (b) the media pressure on Ministers to be seen to be active has increased. Therefore, not only are we doing more, but we are being challenged to do more. I found that job the nearest one to direct ministerial contact that I have had, because they needed to know instantly what the situation was and what they could say in public or in private lobbying to avoid endangering the life of the kidnap victim, but also to try to take the issue forward, to resolve it.

My last point and my lesson from the job dealing with kidnaps is this. It's quite important when something good happens, like a release, to work on the assumption that something bad is about to happen next. I know that from bitter experience. In Chechnya, a couple were released after a long spell in captivity. But within three weeks, four other Brits were kidnapped and murdered. Had I been a little more attentive, aware of the likelihood of bad following good, I could have thought through the probability that the people who had taken the two and released them might want to restock with new hostages. That thought struck us as a group, but it was not given the urgency that it needed. I passed my lesson on to successive Heads of CTPD.

SR: On that sombre note, thank you very much.

1999 - 2002: Trade Partners UK

SR: Good morning. It's the 3rd of June 2019 and this is the second session with Vincent Fean.

What was Trade Partners UK exactly?

VF: I was in soon after the start of Trade Partners UK. Before then, trade promotion and trade development and investment were the domain of the Foreign Office overseas. There were linkages between the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the FCO back in London. But they were two separate entities, so businesspeople who wanted to find out what

the market looked like overseas went to the FCO for a political briefing and then the DTI for a more commercial angle. Overseas, as now, the local Embassy was the focal point.

So what changed? There was a decision to try to bring together the trade promotion element of the DTI with the FCO in London. The first Chief Executive was a diplomat, Sir David Wright, a Japanologist. He brought together a team. I was looking for a change of direction after Counter Terrorism Policy Department, which was the toughest job I have ever done. I was staying in London because our kids were of secondary school age, doing GCSEs and A-levels. The Office kindly allowed us to stick around for six years to see that all happen. So Trade Partners UK looked good: I'd always been interested in trade promotion, in British jobs and British business. Although I'm an Arabist, I never really wanted to be the merchant of death - which is what they used to call the Arabist DS officer seconded from the FCO to the Ministry of Defence who did overseas defence sales with BAE Systems and so on.

SR: Were you based in the DTI? Or the Foreign Office?

VF: Neither. It was at 64 - 66 Victoria Street, a separate building. Ministerial direction was by the two Secretaries of State - the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Over time, the system evolved so that there was a Minister of State who was in both ministries.

I was a Head of Department there, initially Africa and the Indian subcontinent including Pakistan and then, after about a year, Asia/Pacific. I travelled quite a lot long distance to meet businesses but also to talk to our Embassies and High Commissions in post and to try to find a way of strengthening our links to these markets. The main customers in the African and Indian subcontinent were Nigeria, South Africa, India and Pakistan. Then I moved over to Asia Pacific, which covered China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and Australia. I found myself making short visits to most of those places.

The interesting thing about the job was twofold. One was the difference in culture between the DTI in London and the FCO teams abroad. For the FCO, trade was still part and parcel of the political and other work of the mission, as it is today I think. For the DTI, not much used to travel, the idea of having a joint Department in London was to mix the two cultures at home. That worked, up to a point: the cultures are quite different. To give you an example: the DTI staff were used to presenting themselves, to offering themselves for interview to get jobs, while the FCO staff were totally the opposite. We were not used to the interview

format. We used to be given jobs. We might have to write two pages of purple prose about why we were any good, but we didn't really expect to be interrogated about it. So when candidates were offered or canvassed from both sides to fill a job in London, the DTI staff shone because they could present. They were very articulate. Whereas I do remember one FCO colleague, a very good one, Box 2 as we used to say in the old system, who came in for interview from a post in America for a job in my Department. I was quite keen to have him on the team. But, in the middle of the interview, when he had got lost for words, he opened a briefcase and produced a file and began to search through it for a piece of paper that he needed to remind himself of what to say. So he didn't get the job. It was impossible to give him the job, although he would have done it well. There was one other thing that nagged me a bit. When the DTI staff got another job, off they went. I wasn't quite used to that. I was more used to handovers and a regimented system. My Deputy found another job and off he went. I said to him, "Why can't you stay until we find a successor?" He replied, "I'm sorry, that's just not the way it works here." He left! We carried a gap for 6-8 weeks at least.

The job was interesting. Rather amorphous, by which I mean it was very hard to know whether you were succeeding. Businesses took their decisions on the basis of many factors of which Trade Partners UK might be one, particularly on where to look, where to prioritise for markets. But we couldn't really claim direct responsibility for increased trade or investment. It was fun. It was not life threatening, unlike Counter Terrorism Policy Department. It was quite exciting, with a lot of travel. I can remember the jetlag because the Asia Pacific travel was long distance. Being loyal, I used to travel out on weekends and come back late on a Friday, leaving Anne with three kids and not a lot of support. (She was particularly irritated by Prime Minister John Major's vow that civil servants should not get air miles, because she certainly didn't get me for long periods of time when I was travelling and there was no benefit to her or to the family from my absence.)

Over time, the job became a little bit more obscure in that market promotion was no longer deemed to be a desirable objective. It was more about trade development, with more focus on small and medium-sized enterprises and getting them into exporting. That's okay, but what it means if you're starting as an exporter is that you probably don't start in Asia Pacific or in Africa and the Indian subcontinent. You might start with Ireland or elsewhere in the European Union. The impact of that change of focus from trade promotion, market promotion, to trade development was on funding for markets ... I should add that the Treasury always had some animus against this organisation - if there was funding to be cut,

then it would be cut there, as it wasn't the strongest part of the Whitehall machine. What we faced was a dwindling budget, a focus on SMEs which meant more domestic work around the UK and less money actively to promote markets in terms of sending trade missions or attending trade fairs.

So, an exciting episode in my life and one that was of particular use when I went to Libya, where oil and gas reign supreme. In my time, that was an area of growth for British business. So having that background and those contacts was useful.

That was three years of my professional life. Then it was time to go abroad.

2002 - 06: High Commissioner, Malta

The personnel system had changed into the bidding process: you bid for jobs and offered multiple choice. The next job was Malta, as High Commissioner in the time when Malta joined the European Union and when Tony Blair was Prime Minister.

Before then, the offer from the centre on next jobs was, "Would you like to run for Libya?" Why not? We thought about it quite hard. So I bid for Libya with some trepidation, because Libya was Qadhafi, who was unpredictable. But for an Arabist it was an attractive place and I couldn't think of a very good reason to say no. Happily, somebody else got the job, and I went to Malta instead. It was the right sequence as a Head of Mission for a beginner as a smaller, European Union/Commonwealth country. Malta was an easier place to come to understand what being a Head of Mission is and Libya is a bizarre place. We also discovered when we came to Malta that our staff in the Embassy in Libya came to Malta on holiday for rest and recuperation, so we could talk to people about what turned out to be our next posting.

We turned up in Malta, Anne and I, bright-eyed, keen to represent Queen and country and do well. We had a happy time in Malta. We arrived to a stable, highly competitive political environment between the Nationalists and Labour, with the Nationalists in power and the prospect of a referendum on European Union membership. That happened in 2003 and then they joined in 2004. My recollection is, early on, the presentation of credentials, being driven in a black British limousine from the 1950s along Republic Street, waving and Anne waving too to the crowds of mainly British tourists who were wondering why this car was on a pedestrian precinct heading for the Presidential Palace and a discussion with President Guido de Marco.

We felt welcomed. There are two foreign countries that are the core of passion and life in Malta: the UK and Italy. Whenever there is a football match involving either Italy or England, the supporters will parade, car-cade with horns blaring particularly after the game if their side has won. And I have to say, because this was a highly competitive country, that the opposition would come out and car-cade if the team that they didn't really like had lost! This has its relevance to the referendum. The political situation in Malta is that there are maybe 400,000 Maltese. The gap between Nationalists and Labour tends to be 10,000 roughly in terms of votes: it's always tight. In the referendum, what happened was that the Labour leader, Alfred Sant, argued that Malta should be the Switzerland of the Mediterranean, close to Libya, close to Europe, an entrepot, a free spirit. The Nationalists argued for membership of the European Union. Since then, the Labour party position has changed: there is now a Labour Prime Minister and they are firmly ensconced in the European Union. But in 2003 it was to play for.

The referendum led to an episode which is as bizarre as anything I have seen. On the day of the referendum, there was the voting. Because we were cursed with the FCO requirement of same day reporting, we had to send something back to London at about midnight. Both sides claimed victory. That's quite hard to do. The logic went as follows. The Nationalists actually won in terms of people who came and put their cross on the ballot paper. They won narrowly, but they did win. Labour claimed victory as well on the grounds that, if you add together everybody on the electoral register, including people who had spoiled their papers and people who didn't turn up, then that was a majority and the people who had come and voted positively for the European Union were less than that. So, on the day, both sides claimed they had won. This led the Chief of Police, whom we knew - it's quite easy to know a lot of people in Malta - in effect to turn into a traffic policeman, directing one massive carcade of the Labour people to the working class area known as the Three Cities and sending the Nationalists down to Sliema, a fairly posh area. They didn't meet, so all was well. This odd situation went on for about five weeks, with both sides saying that they'd won. Then the Nationalists, whose turn in terms of politics it wasn't to win the next election, called a snap election and said, "Hello. We voted yes. So did the majority of you. Why don't you vote for us and then you get what you asked for, membership of the EU?" Labour persisted in saying, "No, we won. We are going to be Switzerland." So in the election, there was a relative landslide for the Nationalists. After that, the Labour Party changed tack and leader.

In 2004 Malta became a member of the European Union. We were there until early 2006. Life was good. There was a lot to be done in terms of lobbying. Malta is a trade-focused, tourism-focused banking centre which needs to maintain its reputation for probity and does. We found there was a lot in common within the European Union. Malta's voice was small, but when you need a consensus that's important. And even with qualified majority voting, it's nice to have friends: they were a friend.

Towards the end of our posting, we struck very lucky in the sense that Her Majesty the Queen came to Malta on a state visit, linked to a Commonwealth Summit. Prime Minister Tony Blair came too. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw accompanied the Queen.

SR: Malta is a place that is very special to the Queen, isn't it, as she spent her early married life there?

VF: Yes, she was there as a Navy bride, with no security requirement. She could drive her own car: there are pictures of her driving, with headscarf flying in the wind. It was a very happy time. We got involved in the visit, as Embassies and High Commissions do.

SR: That's an understatement!

VF: Well we probably spent 90% of our preparation time on the Queen and 10% on Tony Blair. We opened our home to Tony Blair and his Private Office, which worked very well. And we spent many hours on meticulous planning of the visit of Her Majesty. The visit went well. I am honoured to say that, at the end of it, I was knighted, with a KCVO, in November 2005.

One particular thought about Her Majesty and the relationship with Malta. There were times in the two or three days of the state visit when she had a bit of down time, her space. Not much, but enough to do one or two other things. On the first day there was a gathering outside the Palace where she was staying. The Queen and Prince Philip came out on to the balcony to acknowledge them. In the crowd, a woman held up a handwritten placard which said something like 'This is Maria. I used to work for you.' I heard about this and thought nothing of it. But then I discovered that Her Majesty had asked one of her staff to find Maria and to invite her and her family to tea in the guest palace. I found that really touching.

There is a story about Prince Philip. He went to Gozo, the second island of Malta. He toured the museum with the Minister for Gozo and needed to 'retire', as I learned to put it. Like

everything else in Gozo, where he was going to tread had been carefully prepared, cleaned up, painted, decorated. So he went to the loo, washed his hands and remarked to the Minister, "You've done up the loo. Where's the plaque? I'd like to unveil it!" Laughter all round.

We left Malta in January 2006. Malta was set fair in the European Union. Relations were strong, although I do remember one issue on which the Maltese sought assistance, but we didn't give it, related to Libya. There was, and still is, a big migrant issue. Illegal, economic migration from Libya, not of Libyans, but of third country nationals - Eritreans, Somalis, Ethiopians, Malians, Nigeriens - to Europe. Mainly to Italy, but depending on where the currents go, some of these rather ramshackle wooden fishing boats, or dangerous inflatables, would reach Malta. Malta, as an island, could not do what Italy, frankly, could: give migrants a €20 note and tell them to get on a train to Germany. So there was an issue about resettlement of these migrants. The Prime Minister of Malta came to the UK seeking assistance. We stuck to the line that the place of first arrival was the one that deals with the issue. We turned them down. This was a sadness to the Maltese, but it didn't spoil the overall relationship.

SR: As the British High Commissioner, I expect you were invited to pretty much everything?

VF: Yes, absolutely. My predecessor, Howard Pearce, would go to many things. At that stage he was in his 50s and single. (He is now happily married and retired in Scotland.) He was an extrovert and gregarious - what you expect diplomats to be. So he would go to most things: the joke was he would go to the opening of an envelope ... But there is much to be said for getting around the place - it's important to be seen, to be present.

The social whirl. Lots of people want to talk to the British High Commissioner - even to entertain the British High Commissioner. They're all nice, so it's quite hard to say no. There is also a large group of retired British people living on Malta, enjoying the equivalent to the NHS: they too like to see the British High Commissioner. So much so that there were two Queen's Birthday Parties: one organised by the High Commission and one organised by the British Residents' Association, the second one being a paying affair, on our premises, a few days afterwards. Anne and I hosted both. Many hands to shake.

My memory is of a bevy of parties and dinners. There is a Maltese habit of getting you in a corner and talking six inches away from your nose. There was a different concept of

proximity to typically British reserve. So there was no escape! A Mediterranean country. Lots of passion, and none the worse for that.

SR: Can I just interrupt and ask you about the High Commission?

VF: We were maybe ten UK-based people in the mission with another forty from Malta, locally engaged. I think the numbers dwindled over time, then went up again because of the Libya crisis when Malta became our focal point, with Tunisia, for the issue of the fall of Qadhafi.

The High Commission was in a place called Whitehall Mansions. A pretentious building, but a nice one, which used to be the home of the Wrens during and after the war. Close by the inlet where Royal Navy submarines used to gather. Malta was a strategic port and haven for British shipping, naval and merchant, in World War II. There are many memories of the Gloster Gladiator aircraft Faith, Hope and Charity defending Malta from German and Italian fighters and bombers.

The High Commission was not huge, but certainly respectable. We had a small commercial section, although Malta does fall into the category of Ireland and the rest of the European Union, in terms of ease of communication, English being the first language, alongside Maltese. The outward looking nature of the Maltese people means trade and investment are easy. Indeed, right now, Malta is doing exceptionally well, with very low unemployment and high tourism rates with EasyJet flying in. And the decision by George Osborne, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to tax online betting meant that the online betting companies moved to Malta, where the tax is lower. There are quite a few jobs in that.

Back to the High Commission. It was a pleasant experience. Busy, respected. Not every EU state was present, although that has increased with EU membership. From the Middle East - Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine (the brother of Yasser Arafat's widow became Ambassador to Malta). And Malta does look both north and south, towards Europe and North Africa.

SR: Did you enjoy being a Head of Mission? It's quite different, isn't it?

VF: Yes. It's very different from being in the team to being the team leader. I always saw myself more as a team player than a team leader. I like sharing. I like sharing responsibility, sharing the burden. It was different, even more so the further on we went, because Malta was a good baptism and an easier baptism than many. It's important to have a good Deputy Head

of Mission and I was blessed with that. People who knew the score, who had common sense and who could offer advice privately.

So yes it was different, but the situation in Malta was almost entirely positive, with the one exception of migration that I mentioned. Otherwise, we were on all fours with the Maltese Government and people. They wanted a strong relationship with the UK, by and large. We wanted to show we cared and we wanted to do business, political and trade. So it was not a taxing task. But loneliness, yes. There is loneliness. Less there, but cumulatively, over three successive overseas postings, it did grow. Not because of any real change in circumstance, but you get a bit tired as time passes. Twelve years of postings overseas is what we did.

Can I just add one thing on the issue of EU future financing? The UK Presidency of the European Union was faced with finding more money from member states. Future financing it was called. Because we were the Presidency, we were the people writing the words. That's changed now: there's more centralisation of drafting and chairmanship of meetings. But in those days - this must have been 2005 - we were important as EU Presidency and quite important for the well-being of Malta. What did Malta want? Naturally, like any contributor to the EU budget, they wanted to pay less. They certainly didn't want to pay more. The outcome was a clever one. Good British diplomacy. David Frost, who was Director Europe at the time in the FCO, with Treasury approval proposed that those with a contribution of less than x should maintain their contribution with no change. Then the focus was on the big players. Malta benefited from that: it didn't lose, it didn't gain. That was portrayed as a victory, as often happens in the European Union: if you don't lose and you don't win, you claim victory. It was a very positive outcome in terms of our bilateral relationship, because they were relieved that we hadn't picked on them or anybody else from the smaller population member states. That was the end of the era for me in Malta.

2006 - 10: Ambassador, British Embassy, Libya

While we were in Malta, as the FCO system requires, we had to think about what next. Libya popped up again. It wasn't the only option, but it was the logical one. Malta is a home from home for rich Libyans. In the time of the UN sanctions against Libya after Lockerbie, Malta was an outlet for Libyans. In those days, if you were a Libyan and wanted to get a visa for the UK, you made the trip to Malta to Tunis to secure your visa.

There were quite a lot of Libyans in Malta. Quite a strong relationship between Malta and Libya. Our Ambassador to Libya, Anthony Layden, who happily had taken the Tripoli posting that we might have had back in 2002, kept a small yacht in Portomaso harbour in Malta. He would come over and chat about Libya. That meant I had a three-year induction to the place. Libya seemed logical after Malta, rather than the other way round.

We left Malta in January 2006, with much regret. I left rather fatter than when I arrived: the farewell lunches and dinners started over a month before we left, and happened every day. We came home, but were already aware that we would be going to Libya. For several months, I brushed up my Arabic. (Dotting back to Malta, I should say that I tried to learn Maltese. My successor, Nick Archer, did a lot better. But I did learn enough to get by and to make a speech at the Queen's Birthday Party. The sequence of praise went from "You sound like an Arab" to "You sound like a Gozitan", which I took as high praise.)

SR: So to brush up your Arabic, you had a private tutor?

VF: I went to the FCO. This was before William Hague's recreation of the Language Centre, of which I strongly approve. In 2006 training was outsourced, often to people who had done it for the FCO before, but now were employed by middle people. That was fun for three or four months. I did the normal pattern of briefings in Whitehall.

Libya. What was on the British Government's mind? This was the time of Tony Blair. He left office in 2007, and we got to Libya in 2006. Tony Blair as Prime Minister had already been to Libya once, in 2004, in the time of Anthony Layden. The political relationship was unusual. You have to remember the Lockerbie bombing in 1988 and the tragedy of 270 people murdered. You have to remember WPC Fletcher, murdered in 1984. But what had happened in between times, before we got there, was that Madeleine Albright and Robin Cook between them had created a channel for Qadhafi to return from being a renegade to some sort of political mainstream. That involved the creation of a Scottish court at Camp Zeist in The Netherlands and the dispatch by Qadhafi of the two main suspects to Camp Zeist for trial, one of whom was found not proven, and one of whom, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, was found guilty of the Lockerbie bombing. So those things were on people's minds. Also the fact that Qadhafi had given up his rather feeble efforts at acquiring weapons of mass destruction: centrifuges and nuclear experimentation. He had given that up to the United States in a move which was coordinated by the US and the UK, again before our time. So the timing for our arrival was good. I was the third Ambassador since the renewal of relations.

Sir Richard Dalton had opened the Embassy after a gap of fifteen years. Hard work!

Anthony Layden continued the development of relations, and we were next.

Commercially, Libya was important, and still is. A population of only six million people. Rich in oil and gas as a country. That money didn't reach all the Libyans, but it was the case that Libya could actually pay its way. There was no aid programme: Libya didn't need it. The oil and gas sector in my time was multinational. It still is. The British interest was BP and Shell and BG (British Gas). BG didn't find anything and withdrew gracefully. Shell were drilling and BP, partly as a result of a major effort by the British government, were active in negotiating to acquire some blocks of land and sea for exploration: that was the big deal in the desert in 2007. My work in Trade Partners UK bore some fruit in the sense that I tried to help Shell and BP in particular to find their way. Big companies like that are perfectly capable of finding their own way without more ado. But in the context of Libya, politics always obtrudes, and it obtruded. So having a close relationship between those companies and the Embassy was important, because the Libyan government would mix economics with politics and use their commercial clout to try and get their way politically.

Stepping back from the commercial to the big picture, Qadhafi during our time marked forty years in power. He came in a bloodless coup in 1969: we were still there and so was he. You don't get to do that by being mad. You don't get to do that by being stupid. He ran the country in a not particularly efficient way: there was one gun and it was his, one law and it was his. And certainly in the case of criminal law or anything to do with politics, the judiciary were in his pocket. It was a system based on personal relationships, a close circle of confidants, people he had taken power with at the age of 27 back in 1969 and who were still with him. His "comrades", those he trusted. So talking to them became necessary: some of them would talk to us. We found that there were quite a few who didn't want to talk to foreigners and some who did, so we talked to the people who wanted to talk to us. There was a strong European Union presence, a strong American presence - the Americans came back soon after we did. They had an even more turbulent relationship than we did with the Libyans. In our time, Congress blocked permanent appointments of US diplomats as Ambassador to Libya. So, instead of having a career diplomat who still had some career to run, twice the State Department appointed retired diplomats who could only stay for 6 months each.

It was the twilight of Qadhafi, although that wasn't obvious then. In our time, there was the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, with the tragic death of that shopkeeper who burned himself to death. And then, a sort of odd domino effect of the Arab Spring, which went past Libya and found Egypt. Qadhafi looked as if he was not going to fall, although Ben Ali to his left and Mubarak to his right did.

Qadhafi fell in 2011, but in our time there was no real sign of that. His system was a mixture of patronage and repression. Patronage - he would send four or five thousand postgrad students to the UK, the US, Malaysia and Australia every year, some of them on merit, some of them because they were the sons and daughters of his comrades. Repression - from the beginning, he outlawed political parties and maintained that throughout the 41 years. So there was no official opposition structure, no public structure for any opposition to him. He maintained the idea of committees in every place, People's Committees, leading to a General People's Congress. That made that entity quite malleable. In the end, when things reached the General People's Congress, it did what he wanted.

I have one story of the Health Minister, appointed by the 'General People's Congress', in fact by Qadhafi. The first the Minister knew about it was when the strapline appeared on the TV, to his surprise. That was Qadhafi.

Qadhafi would shake things up. I remember on one occasion, I was drinking tea with a Berber hotel owner - Berbers are about 10% to 15% of the population of Libya, mainly in the top left-hand corner, towards Tunisia. We got talking. The hotel owner was quite frank. Not dangerously frank, but quietly, one-to-one. He said, "The way in which this man controls us is like a leather bag with a lot of mice in it. If you leave the bag where it is, they'll eat their way out, they'll eat the leather and get out. So you don't leave it where it is - if you're Qadhafi, you shake it. The mice spend so much time chasing and falling over each other that they start biting each other, rather than the bag in which they are held. Well, that's the way we are." That was a rare insight into political ... not opposition, but just despair. Most of the place functioned in a ramshackle way. There was always a competition, in the sense of difference, between Benghazi and Tripoli. Tripoli was the capital, the richer place. Qadhafi, fairly on in his time, took against Benghazi: he invested far less there, was more suspicious and there were occasional outbursts of public protest in Benghazi which were suppressed. We learned, after our departure, that Benghazi was the starting point for the revolution which finished him.

What did we do for relaxation while we were there? We travelled. It's quite hard to travel, not in the sense of any physical obstacles or political obstacles - you could travel anywhere in the country. But Qadhafi, from the beginning, had taken down road signs in case of invasion. I'm not sure where he would have been invaded from - Egypt, perhaps. He was fairly paranoid. Anyway, when travelling, we had to look around and make it up as we went along.

A word about the Arabic language in Libya. It was a mixed blessing being able to speak classical Arabic: they could understand me, but I couldn't understand them, unless I was in a parlour or an office in Tripoli with them trying to use their classical Arabic back on me. Mainly English was used and Qadhafi himself could speak English.

Anyway, back to finding one's way. Anne and I would drive around. There was no need for any security. We would just go. We might tell the DHM and we might have a very clunky satellite phone. We would often get lost. We would ask a passer-by, usually a dignified and very pleasant male, where we were and how to get to where we wanted to go. He would explain to us very carefully in colloquial Libyan and we would thank him and wind up the window. Then we'd look at each other and say, "You got that? No!" Then we'd find another one to ask, and on we went.

We went to Leptis Magna. And Sabratha. We went to the South, to what had been jungle and was now desert with stone carvings of elephant and antelope, bison and giraffe carved into the rock ten thousand years ago. We were blessed with that privilege which the Foreign Office gave us.

Other than the travel and the fun on the weekend - Friday and Saturday - apart from the commercial and the management of bilateral relations which I'll come on to, there was one issue which we inherited and which Anthony Layden had done a lot of work on. It came good in our time, not particularly through British dealings, but there was one angle that was British. That was the case of the Bulgarian nurses and one Palestinian trainee doctor. The five women and one man were condemned to death before we arrived. The Palestinian man was actually on death row. There had been a case of contaminated blood in Benghazi. The truth is not that easy to establish, but we think that people in authority bought contaminated blood, not knowing it was contaminated, and then gave it to kids in Benghazi, which led to HIV or cancer. The national health system of Libya was in very poor repair and nurses tended to come from abroad, partly because the culture in Libya is that Libyan women are not supposed to meet strange men. So nursing was not highly regarded by Libyan society. Libya

could afford to import nurses, particularly from the Philippines, but also from elsewhere. What happened with this case, I think, is that there was a perceived political need to find a criminal who had committed this murder of young Libyans in Benghazi. The nurses and the Palestinian doctor who was born in Libya stuck around, because they didn't know any better. They were arrested, and tried. (I said earlier that the judiciary, in terms of criminal cases, was in Qadhafi's pocket.) They were sentenced to death. There was then an international outcry at this decision, which looked highly arbitrary. And against the death sentence. There was a retrial, and the retrial led to another death penalty. So what to do? Well, the European Union worked hard.

SR: Didn't President Sarkozy's wife get involved?

VF: Yes, Sarkozy's first wife, Cecilia, was in at the dénouement. Before then, the European Union tried hard. Benita Ferrero Waldner, the Austrian former Foreign Minister who was EU External Relations Commissioner, appointed the EU Ambassador in Tunis, who also covered Libya, to mediate and try and find a way out. Bulgaria, being by that time a member of the EU, used the machinery of the EU to seek help for its citizens.

What happened in the end? After many ups and downs, Saif al-Islam, the most liberal of Qadhafi's sons, and an honest Minister for Europe called Abdul Ati al-Obeidi, found a way of finding compensation for the families of the victims - blood money. It was a very Libyan story. The blood money was mainly from Libya, the Economic and Social Development Fund, one of Qadhafi's creations. A million dollars for every relative - there were about three hundred. That money was paid: it was smoke and mirrors. It was Libyan money without the truth being told to the great Libyan people. The French offered to pay for a hospital in Benghazi - €30 million. The UK, being the UK, was neither asked nor inclined to give in this regard.

What was our relevance? First Anthony Layden, then we befriended Frenchman Marc Pierini, who was the EU Ambassador to Tunisia and Libya, and gave him a home whenever he wanted to come to Tripoli for talks. We would talk. So of an evening he would come back and tell us how he had got on that day. We would confer as to what he might do the following day. It worked. It took a long time, but it worked.

We inherited the practice from Anthony Layden of visiting the prisoners, particularly the women, Anne and I. It was partly to boost their morale - showing them and their captors that

they were not forgotten. It was partly goodwill by us. It didn't change the politics, but I think it - and other visits by other diplomats - showed the Libyan government that these people could not simply be played with.

One day, they left. It took effort, and it involved Cecilia.

SR: How exactly?

VF: She arrived with Benita Ferrero Waldner, the EU External Relations Commissioner, who had worked very hard on this case. Cecilia met Prime Minister Baghdadi and European Minister Abdul Ati al-Obeidi. A deadline was set for the departure of the nurses and the Palestinian. The deadline passed. Libya under Qadhafi was very good at deadlines passing. But Cecilia didn't go. She refused to go until the six prisoners had gone. She got her way in the end, with a fair amount of forceful language in meetings that I was not present at.

Qadhafi, who used to surf the web regularly as part of his way of knowing what was going on, thought that the deal was that the Bulgarians in particular would go home and disappear. What actually happened is that they went home to a state welcome with the President and the Prime Minister of Bulgaria on the tarmac to greet them as they landed. Qadhafi saw this and he was not happy. But there was not a lot he could do about it by then. I met Abdul Ati al-Obeidi about a month later and he said, "Vincent, I've been in the doghouse." I'm not sure quite what happened to him ... detention or prison, quite likely? He was the man at 5 o'clock in the morning, when Qadhafi was asleep, who said, "Okay, they can go." Then the dénouement was not what Qadhafi had expected.

We had a lot of bilateral issues directly involving British interests. But looking at the day-to-day work of the Embassy, part of our task was to see if we could find ways to improve the well-being of Libya. How could we do that in a way that would not be very expensive and be actually of some relevance to the UK? One issue that we worked on - again something inherited from Anthony Layden - was improvement of conditions in prison. You can imagine Libyan prisons, and you will be right. No clinic, or education facilities for the rehabilitation of prisoners. We brought experts from the UK, not in politics but in prison management - ex-Prison Governors, people who'd thought about programmes of teaching, people who understood hygiene. We introduced them to the Justice Ministry. We said that we were not there to tell them to detain or release people, but we were there to see if we could keep them healthy, to see if we could help to ensure that they had a future, vocationally and

professionally, after release. It was a small thing but we were proud of it. It did good. It did no harm. It gave us access to the Justice Minister. Apart from that, there were other projects, but that was the one I remember.

There were lots of trade missions. One a month. People seeking access to the largesse of oil and gas. Lots of universities seeking Libyan postgrad students who paid their way. It was a productive time. Parts of the system were not allowed to speak to us. The National Oil Corporation, the goose that lays the golden eggs for Libya, couldn't come to our house, although politicians could. The NOC could go to BP and they could go to Shell, because that was their stock in trade. But they could not come our way. I could go and see the Chairman of the National Oil Corporation, Dr Shukry Ghanem, an ex-Prime Minister, very keen on the British Council. (The British Council did good in Libya.) We could talk to him about what BP and Shell wanted: that kind of worked.

We had a lot of visitors. Here, I suspect I'm not alone in the Diplomatic Service in saying that Private Offices expect rather more than is possible. The particular issue is that Private Offices tend to expect a programme and to be told what's going to happen before it does. And in Libya we didn't know. So we made it up. If they wanted a programme, we gave them a programme. It was our best guess, maybe a fortnight, a week or a day before. At the end of the visit, when they'd got on the plane and flown home to general relief, we'd send them the real programme of what they'd actually done, so they had a record of what really happened. And we'd do the same day reporting.

Among those was Tony Blair. Here I learned something from the French. Tony Blair came. In 2007 it was his farewell tour of Africa. I think he went to Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Libya. He had a meeting with Colonel Qadhafi. In the run-up, there was the usual issue about programmes, but because it was Tony Blair he would see Colonel Qadhafi and, frankly, anybody else he wanted to: we had some ideas. The programme evolved. I do remember the Metropolitan Police officer who came out on the recce sitting in our living room saying, "They told me it would be like this ... They told me that I wouldn't know anything about where or when. They told me the programme would just develop and that it would be all right. I'm just trying to convince myself it will be all right." And it was. We received Tony Blair and subsequently the French Ambassador received Sarkozy. This was a time when Libya was much frequented by Berlusconi and everybody you could think of coming through. Where I learned something from the French is this. Rather ambitiously - but why not as we

were optimists in the Embassy - we thought we would have a Blair/Qadhafi joint statement on the things on which we agree, not skirting over the difficulties and the differences, the profound differences in principle, but looking at the positives. So we drafted, and we cleared it with Number 10 and the FCO and anybody else who needed to know in London and we presented it to the Libyan side. The Libyans embroidered it and sent it back, many, many times, including on the day of the visit. So we got tired. The joint statement happened, but it was a very difficult negotiation. Saif, who had a hand in the difficulty, wanted to write into the joint statement that Britain would return archaeological remains to Libya. There are quite a lot of Libyan archaeological remains in the UK, including a large chunk of Leptis Magna in Windsor Great Park, apparently a gift from the Ottomans to Queen Victoria which one of my august predecessors called Hanmer Warrington shipped out in the 1830s. So the bid from the Libyans for the joint statement was adding a sentence or two, in English and Arabic, about getting stuff back. And the Libyan claim was that Number 10 were happy with this. So we rang Number 10, as you do, and asked if they had done a deal with Libya without our knowledge. They said no. We went back to the Libyans and asked them to kindly delete that sentence. This to-ing and fro-ing went on up until the day of the Prime Minister's visit. I remember a phone call at midnight from the then Africa Minister, now Foreign Minister of Libya, Mohamed Taha Siala, saying, "This is what we want, Vincent." I protested. It was midnight. I had been asleep. I remember him saying to me, "Mr Ambassador, life is a negotiation." No doubt he is right, but I didn't expect the negotiation to be so intense. Where I learned from the French is that they went through the same tortuous process of a joint statement with Sarkozy. It took time. They had the presence of mind, two days before the visit, to stop with a text that had not been agreed by both sides. What they said was, "Okay, we'll produce this text in French and Arabic. It will be the text. If you want to change anything, get Colonel Qadhafi to ask President Sarkozy. Otherwise, this is it." Nobody dared put a thing to Qadhafi.

It's worth talking about Berlusconi's Italy. Italy had a very bad history in Libya as the colonial power, from 1912 until 1943 when Montgomery expelled them with British and Commonwealth troops. Italian colonisation meant concentration camps, detention, barbed wire, starvation, hangings. Berlusconi decided to apologise. This was welcome to the Colonel, so Berlusconi was invited to Tripoli to give a speech to the General People's Congress in which he apologised early on. Qadhafi banged the table in approval and Berlusconi, seeing that this was going down very well, made the rest of his speech and then

came back and apologised again at the end. They were close, I suppose one could say, Berlusconi and Qadhafi. The economic relationship between Libya and Italy is strong: there is a gas pipeline still functioning between Western Libya and Italy. ENI and AGIP are very powerful oil and gas companies inside Libya. Libya, sadly, is still the source of irregular migrants to Italy, which is a big problem. Italy is probably the most engaged European country in Libya, on many levels. So Berlusconi's visit was important. I can remember wondering, as Ambassadors wonder, whether it would be a good idea for Qadhafi to come to London: Ambassadors tend to want their head of government to talk with the head of the government to which they're accredited, to intensify the bilateral relationship. I was a bit shy about this. Hesitant - rightly, as it turned out. Qadhafi went to Brussels and met the European Union top people. He brought his own tent, put it up in a Brussels park and, as always, was a law unto himself in terms of the programme. I think he went to France and did the same sort of thing with Sarkozy.

He also went to Rome. I had an account from the frazzled Italian Ambassador about his visit. It made me thank my lucky stars that I had actually never got very far with the idea of London. When in Rome, Qadhafi was aware of the programme, but did not see any need to follow it. There was nobody in his entourage who would gainsay him, naturally. He came down the steps of the plane at Rome airport, dressed in traditional brown Libyan garb. On his chest was a picture of somebody the Italians had hanged in the 1930s, Omar Mukhtar, a national Libyan hero of the resistance against the Italians. Walking behind Qadhafi was Omar Mukhtar's grandson. This was in memory of the apology that Berlusconi had made in Libya. I seem to remember that his entourage drove on the wrong side of the road at no notice in order to get from A to B. Qadhafi had several changes of costume in the course of the day: he quite liked uniforms as well as the national garb. So he would go back to his tent and change. That wasn't in the programme either. He wanted to see the balcony from which Mussolini had made a speech about colonising Libya. It wasn't in the programme either, but the convoy went there. Suffice it to say, the Italian Ambassador was very glad when it was all over.

We didn't receive Gordon Brown in Tripoli. He had two meetings in third countries with Qadhafi, but the relationship was much weaker than between Qadhafi and Tony Blair. The domestic downside of maintaining a relationship with Libya was real, because of the outstanding issues of WPC Fletcher, Lockerbie and then a growing issue in terms of impact - Semtex. Colonel Qadhafi gave Semtex to the IRA in the 1980s and you may remember the

ship Eksund which was caught carrying Semtex, some of which sadly reached the IRA and was used to set off explosions. So there is an ongoing issue of compensation for the victims of IRA terrorism using Libyan Semtex.

The two meetings Brown had with Qadhafi were carefully constructed. Berlusconi invited Qadhafi to a G20 Summit in Italy, which meant that Prime Minister Brown would be in the same city. There were bilateral issues to pursue, including WPC Fletcher and a consular case of the kidnap of a young British Libyan girl, who had been taken by her Libyan father to Libya against her mother's wishes. The Libyan authorities, in the end, were quite helpful on that case and the girl, Nadia Fawzi, is now back in Wigan and in school. So there were issues to discuss. There were two things about the meeting. One, it was at 08.30, before the start of the Plenary of the G20. I was back in Tripoli minding my own business. I was not party to this multilateral visit. I was in the Embassy when I got a phone call from the Head of Libyan Protocol, a man called Nouri Mismari, saying, "Hello, Ambassador. Could you kindly confirm the start time?" So I said in my best Arabic, "As you know, it is 08.30, in time to have a half hour meeting before the Plenary." There was a shriek of dismay and despair on the phone, not from the Head of Protocol but from Qadhafi himself, who had been told by his entourage that it was 08.30 but didn't believe them - didn't want to believe them and didn't want to be awake by that hour! Anyway, the 08.30 meeting happened. I was told it went tolerably well when I checked by phone with Private Office later that morning. Then they said, "Hang on a minute - the Colonel is talking to the Plenary of the G20 now, advocating the dismantling of Switzerland. The French part of Switzerland should go back to France, the German-speaking part to Germany and the Italian-speaking part to Italy." I thought to myself, "I don't suppose there will be many more meetings between Mr Brown and Colonel Qadhafi."

The background to Qadhafi's wish to dismember Switzerland was that one of Qadhafi's sons, Hannibal, who was psychotic, was accused by the Geneva police of mistreating his servants in a Geneva hotel where he had gone with his pregnant wife for the delivery of their baby at a Swiss hospital. The Geneva police knocked on the door, and found a lot of Libyan heavies with guns who had not been announced to the Swiss police. When they found Hannibal, they arrested him. A photograph of Qadhafi's son in handcuffs went round the world that night. The Swiss released him fairly fast. Colonel Qadhafi allegedly slapped the face of his son for insulting the family and proceeded to exact revenge from Switzerland for having locked up his son. Among the acts of revenge were stopping oil supplies to Switzerland - which was

about half of what they got at the time, closing down Libyan petrol stations in Switzerland, of which there were more than 100, taking all Libya's money out of Switzerland - several billion dollars, and arresting two innocent Swiss men on trumped up charges of migration crime and tax evasion, locking them up for several months. Unscrupulous. Amoral.

Still on ministerial visits. Andy Burnham came to Libya as Health Secretary. He was the MP for Leigh. He came with two aims really: one was to seek to improve health contacts with Libya (a lot of Libyan doctors trained in the UK) and the second was to argue for the safe return of Nadia Fawzi, the young girl aged five or six who had been kidnapped by her father. Andy Burnham did his best. He lobbied, we all lobbied. Gordon Brown wrote to Qadhafi. The outcome was positive. The Europe Minister, Abdul Ati al-Obeidi, my main interlocutor, decided to get involved. So he set the Libyan security forces to monitor the family of the father to see if the girl could be found. In the meantime, Nadia's mother, Sarah Taylor (who has written a book about this) sold up, came to Libya and went through the Libyan court process to secure custody.

One of the good things about Colonel Qadhafi was that he had a view about equality between men and women. In particular, in cases of family dispute, the mother should have custody of the child until s/he reached the age of eighteen, as long as they were Muslim and stayed in Libya. So Sarah promised to become a Muslim and to stay in Libya. She won the court case. That didn't help directly, because the father had stowed the girl away with his sister in a big family then denied knowledge. Colonel Qadhafi locked him up for three weeks but he didn't break. Abdul Ati al-Obeidi set the security services on to monitoring the family and found a girl of the right age at a primary school in Tripoli who, ostensibly, belonged to the family of the sister. There were a couple of false starts. Sarah and I went to see Abdul Ati al-Obeidi once or twice. He showed us a photo and asked us if it was Nadia. The first time it wasn't, but the second time it was.

SR: That must have been very emotional.

VF: Yes, it was. So, because of the court ruling, Sarah had custody. Abdul Ati al-Obeidi again instructed the Libyan security services to pick up the girl early, before school was out, and to take her to a police station, where she was handed over to her mother and me. Nadia had not seen her mother for a couple of years and spoke only Arabic. She wasn't sure where she was, what was happening to her. It was a very new world for her, with some female police officers looking after her. To my relief, she quickly cottoned on that this was her

mum, though they no longer shared a common language. But then we had a problem. What to do next? The mother had promised to stay in Libya and become a Muslim, which she was ready to do, but it wasn't really sustainable. The immediate question was: where to stay? The husband was part of a large family. That family were incensed, and wanted to get the girl back. So, I have to say without much consultation with Consular Directorate, we brought them to the Residence where there were unarmed guards and a high wall. We looked after mother and daughter for six weeks and lobbied Saif and Abdul Ati al-Obeidi and Musa Kusa and anybody else we could think of to allow them to go home. On my wife Anne's birthday, 14 February 2010, they flew home. Nadia is now a teenager in Wigan. So that was a good story about the Libyan regime.

Back to Tony Blair. He returned to Libya as the economic envoy of the Quartet, seeking money for the Palestinian Authority from Libya. He was welcomed by the Colonel. He stayed with us and worked on bilateral relations as best he could. Separately, there was one big issue that became a preoccupation towards the end of my time: the health of Megrahi, the convicted Lockerbie bomber in Scotland. Fairly late on, it was identified that he had cancer. The Libyans wanted him released on compassionate grounds. The decision was for the Scottish government, particularly for the Justice Minister, Kenny MacAskill. The British government had no locus, therefore the British Embassy had no locus, although we represented the government of Scotland overseas. The outcome was that Kenny MacAskill listened to medical advice, which was that there was a serious risk that Megrahi would die in the Scottish prison, if not released on compassionate grounds. Saif went to Scotland to fetch him and he came back to Libya. There was a lot of celebration among Qadhafi's supporters. Megrahi is now no longer with us, but was treated by Egyptian medics in Libya and Egypt and survived for a couple of years.

That was a big issue at the time, because if you follow the rather nasty precedent of Switzerland, if Megrahi had died in Scotland that could have had a very severe effect on Libyan-UK relations and on the well-being of British citizens in Libya.

SR: What is your overall view of Libya?

VF: A dignified people. I find the present plight of Libya deplorable. They haven't been lucky. They haven't had a transition to democracy in any real sense. They went from a feudal regime, starting in 1952, to a revolutionary regime in 1969 with Qadhafi. Less revolutionary as time passed, though bad enough with support for terrorist movements,

including the IRA, the Jackal, Abu Nidal and others. What they didn't get was the chance to exercise their freedom to speak. Then Qadhafi fell, with our assistance - French and British bombing, with American support. But the vacuum was left and we didn't seek to fill it. The West didn't seek to fill it in any pre-emptive way. Today, it's a mess. The people don't deserve that.

But our memory is of a friendly, dignified people, suffering under an arbitrary and often vindictive regime and deserving better. That's still true without Qadhafi.

SR: Perhaps before we leave Libya, you could say a word about the Embassy?

VF: Yes. It was bigger than Malta, more UK-based staff from the FCO with one or two from the Home Office. A group of over 50 locally engaged staff, including guards, who were mainly from Pakistan, some Libyans. The Consular staff were a mixture of Libyans and British female spouses of Libyans.

The Embassy was in two places. The Residence had been the home of the Commander of the Italian Mediterranean Fleet. On the top floor of the Residence was the Chancery, the political section with secure communications. So I walked to work by walking upstairs - a very short commute! In town, there was a tall tower with our Commercial Section and Visa Section. The tower then was called Burj al Fateh, which means the tower of the September '69 Revolution, when Qadhafi came to power. It's now changed its name and we are no longer there, but I'm glad to say that our Embassy still has a strong presence inside Tripoli.

In my time, we operated in those two places. Confidentially, in the Chancery above our home; commercially and for visas downtown, about twenty minutes' drive in the terrible traffic.

There was a good team. Hard-working. A good Deputy Head of Mission was important, particularly Mark Matthews, who offered wise advice quietly to me. There was a sense that we were making a difference, a positive difference.

2010 - 14: Consul-General, Jerusalem

SR: So now we move to your last post, Jerusalem. Tell me how that came about.

VF: As with the move from Malta to Libya, when we were coming towards the end of our posting in Libya we needed to think about what next. The Office made some suggestions for

what was likely to be my last job. We extended our stay in Libya from three years to four, partly because it was going okay and partly because the Arabic speaking jobs on offer elsewhere after year three of our stay in Tripoli were less enticing than those after year four.

We had a strong preference, jointly, for Jerusalem, which had not been available in year three but was coming up in year four. Why Jerusalem? Well, traditionally if you're an Arabist, you end up in Cairo or Riyadh. I've never had a particular affinity for Riyadh. Cairo, whilst attractive, was not something that we sought particularly. Jerusalem the Golden is a special place, special for Christians - we're Catholic - special for the big three monotheistic religions. My career had never actually led me to think very hard about the Israel-Palestine conflict, other than to be aware of it. Anne tells the story of our first posting in Baghdad and going to our first diplomatic cocktail party. I promptly disappeared in the melee, leaving her to wander around and talk to anybody who would talk to her. She met a group of young people who asked where she came from. When she said Britain, they came back with the Balfour Declaration. She was aware of it but not familiar with it. Neither was I!

Happily, thanks to the generosity of the Office, after Libya I had more refresher training in Palestinian Arabic, which is akin to the Lebanese and classical Arabic that I was first taught in Shemlan many moons before. The Arabic of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq is comparable. So, for several months, I had one to one tuition with a Gazan poet who brushed up my Arabic and we discussed politics, the future of Gaza and the future of Palestine. That was fun. Towards the end of 2010, having left Libya in April, we landed in Ben Gurion airport and were whisked off to Jerusalem and a new life.

The Consulate General was a little bit smaller than Tripoli: twelve UK based staff. A very different focus from Libya. Little trade, a lot of development assistance with a sister ministry, the Department for International Development, alongside us, but not directed by the Consulate General, other than the William Hague edict - which has to be true - that overseas, the Embassy, High Commission or Consulate General is the collective voice of the British government. Alongside DFID, there was the British Council, who were important in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza.

There were two aspects to the job. One was the peace process, seeking to facilitate a fruitful conversation between Israel and the PLO, usually in my time under the aegis of the US. And bilateral relations: talking to the Palestinians, seeking to enhance the bilateral relationship, which was tricky. In Palestinian eyes, Britain was the source of trouble as the home of

Balfour, and the implementer of the British mandate, which we abandoned in 1948 - leaving the issue to the UN, and leaving the Palestinians to lose a war.

Nevertheless, the relationship was one of respect. We were - and still are - a key player in Europe, and the United States' main ally. So we mattered and therefore we got a hearing and access. But more was expected of us by the Palestinians than politically we were able to deliver.

The job entailed travel - not very often - into Gaza. Space is very cramped in Israel-Palestine; Gaza was an hour and a half's drive from Jerusalem, involving a checkpoint. I went to Ramallah most days of the week, as that's where the PLO and the Palestinian Authority are. There was some work in East Jerusalem, mainly entertaining and receiving visiting VIPs. There were three main geographical areas to handle: I probably spent less time than I should have done in Gaza. Gaza required planning and was a place where, under government rules, British diplomats could not talk to Hamas: they are the de facto rulers in Gaza. Gaza was not the place for political negotiation: that was Ramallah and, to a lesser extent, Jerusalem. So, in retrospect, I wish I had spent more time in Gaza, although I'm not quite sure what I would have achieved by so doing, other than acknowledging the fact that two fifths of the population of what I call Palestine, the Occupied Territories, is in Gaza, so it cannot be ignored.

There was a young and enthusiastic British and Palestinian diplomatic team in Jerusalem. Two skilled Palestinian men ran the office in Gaza. There were no permanent staff in Ramallah, because we were frequent visitors. DIFID were near us in East Jerusalem. It's quite important that the Consulate General is in East Jerusalem, the Arab quarter, with the Consulate General and the Residence bought by a very farsighted British government just before the 1967 war.

SR: Can you explain the setup with Tel Aviv? How does that work exactly?

VF: Yes, that's an important point. I think that the relationship between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem is unique in the Diplomatic Service. At that stage we had two SMS2 officers, one an Ambassador - Matthew Gould, and me as Consul General, replacing Richard Makepeace. Two different jobs, but with a need to converge in terms of factual reporting and policy recommendations wherever possible. Two sides of a coin: the Israeli view of the occupation, and the Palestinian sense of oppression under the occupation. But coming together to try and

find a set of policy recommendations back to Middle East Directorate and ultimately to Ministers (in my time, mainly Alistair Burt and William Hague, plus Philip Hammond towards the end). A lot of coordination.

SR: And Matthew would often come up to Jerusalem, wouldn't he?

VF: He would come to West Jerusalem all the time: the government of Israel and the Knesset are in West Jerusalem. Occasionally, and to his great credit, he would make a determined foray with me into the Occupied Palestinian Territories to talk to Palestinians. Once or twice, I did the same down in Tel Aviv. A creative tension by definition, rather than by personality.

One aspect of the job of the Consulate General was to make sure that officials and ministers knew the facts and had an understanding of the constraints on Palestinian/PLO action. Plus seeking to persuade the PLO to act in line with UK government policy. The assets in the bilateral relationship between Israel and the UK are far greater than those in the relationship between the Palestinians and the UK, greater in variety, greater in intensity, going from trade and joint ventures to joint research, to academic links, to intelligence sharing, to common suspicion of Iran. And the Palestinians had an issue of occupation and the wish to get out from under. So I sometimes felt that the Consulate General was a one issue place and the Embassy was a multiple issue place. That said, the one issue that monopolises the attention of the Palestinians was and is the main postbag of the FCO and the subject of Parliamentary debate, monthly if not weekly. And frequent UN Security Council discussion. So not to be minimised.

When we arrived in Jerusalem, replacing Richard and Rupa Makepeace, the situation of the Palestinians was not good. When we left in 2014, it was worse. And now, in 2019, it's worse again. So, as that realisation grew on me, the wish to influence UK government policy in the direction of the Palestinians also grew. Not blindly. The Palestinians are like anybody else, a variety of people, good, bad and indifferent. But they happen to have to endure the occupation, which excuses much.

The job was fascinating, and frustrating. We were largely in the slipstream of the Americans. Israel listens to America. Israel listens to Europe but gets different messages from Europe, depending on which bit of Europe is doing the talking. The EU collective, the 28, are capable of repeating themselves on policy, but find it very difficult to innovate. In my time, there was Obama, probably the President most sympathetic to the Palestinian cause there's ever been.

Initially, Hillary Clinton, who was methodical. There was then a year for the re-election of Obama in which, because Israel-Palestine is a domestic issue in the US, things went very quiet. Nothing much happened because the Americans didn't make anything happen. Then along came Kerry. And William Hague, who had been nobly arguing for more engagement by the US, got it from Kerry and therefore backed Kerry all the way. Not unthinkingly, but he backed Kerry.

My role was to talk to the PLO, to have access when I needed it - and I got it when I needed it - to President Abbas. I escorted him twice to the UK for meetings with David Cameron. And all the time to encourage conversation, American-led conversation, between the PLO and the government of Benjamin Netanyahu. That proved to be very unsuccessful. Our policy was created in good faith on the assumption that only America could change things. But we didn't always know what was happening. John Kerry, in particular, was his own desk officer, so his own staff didn't always know what was going on. He did a lot of bilateral diplomacy between Abbas and Netanyahu which, in the end, foundered.

What I found in the Palestinian people that I met was a lot of intelligence, a lot of openness, willingness to talk, very articulate. A sense of grievance, a deep interest in the UK and the English language, the UK as a player in their political life. The openness struck me.

We did three years. We might have done four, but decided together that three years of political head-banging was enough, mixed with much fun, and travel throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israel and Jordan. Three years was enough. I think there needs to be quite a lot of detachment between the conduct of the job to the best of your ability and your personal feelings. Over the period, that got harder. Four years would have been a year too far.

Where I find that the situation has got worse is that the occupation has become systematically more entrenched, and the Palestinians are more divided - divided between Hamas and Fatah, and weaker. Our policy of two sovereign states based on 1967 lines (which I think is the right one) is questioned by many, abandoned by many young Palestinians and far harder to realise now than even in 2010.

I mentioned that Secretary Clinton was methodical. She achieved a very quick end to one of the several Gaza conflicts - the one in 2012. She intervened, with President Morsi, after about nine or ten days of fighting between Palestinians in Gaza led by Hamas and Israel, in

which there could only be one victor. But the Hamas policy is to claim victory by simply remaining, by not losing. So she and President Morsi combined to secure a ceasefire which lasted eighteen months. It was quite hard to see a way forward. It still is. The policy of seeking talks is a logical policy: it's based on the premise that the two sides will talk about the same thing. In this context, they don't. The Israelis talk about their security and the right to settle in the West Bank and the need to control the "terrorist entity", Gaza. The Palestinians talk about self-determination, freedom and 1967 borders (if you're Fatah), and Israeli military withdrawal and free access to East Jerusalem. The international community, with the current exception of President Trump, are closer to the Palestinian policy position: the PLO policy position of recognition of the state of Israel on 1967 lines, accepting 22% of the mandate territory as Palestine: Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. But that is not the current trend of policy and of the facts on the ground.

Ways forward? Much sought-after. Hard to find. The conflict has been prolonged but also discussed at least since 1967, probably since 1948, 1917, 1838. Is it intractable? One would hope not. Can one see light? It's quite hard to find. Hope springs eternal and the wit of man is capable. But something needs to change. And, in particular, to achieve the outcomes that the international community minus Trump have been seeking, something needs to change.

SR: But perhaps there are some glimmerings of that?

VF: Not electorally. We shall see. There is another election on 17 September this year. But in my time, I witnessed from a distance two Israeli elections and the Palestinian issue was roughly priority number ten. The situation is being managed - deliberately - in a direction which will make the two state outcome impossible.

What could change? It's hard to say. One issue on which, after retirement, I have sought to change UK government policy from the outside, is the issue of the recognition of the state of Palestine on 1967 borders. British Opposition parties are in favour of this but the government is not. It remains to be seen what will come of that, whether it would be purely symbolic were it to happen or whether it would have some practical impact, practical implications. And who else might do it, were we to do it: the French, the Irish, the Spanish? It would be a chunk of the European Union, but by no means all.

Just to sum up. If I go back to the beginning and that Civil Service Selection Board interview, I didn't dream of this outcome. I didn't dream of this rich menu of experiences. I

am very grateful to the Diplomatic Service for tolerating me and affording me the opportunity to enjoy a career. I tell people who are thinking about joining the FCO that the pay is bad, the pension is okay but you're never bored. There are people who are bored in the FCO, but I was not one of them. I was lucky. I don't think there are many people in life who can say that. So I am grateful.

Today, looking back, I think our politicians, our FCO Ministers, have acted respectably, not always adventurously, in trying to advance British interests.

SR: Do you think that will change if we do leave the European Union? Will we become more narrow and insular?

VF: We will be less influential. For the last three years we have been narrow and insular: we haven't really had a foreign policy. We've lived for the day and lived for negotiations with Brussels that few understand.

Diplomats want to be in any club that would let us in, so that we can try and influence the outcome of the club deliberations. To that extent, we need to stay in the UN Security Council, we need to be playing a role in the Commonwealth. I would prefer us to be playing a role inside the councils of the European Union, but I don't know whether that will happen. If it doesn't, we will still be alive and our children will need a job. Diplomacy, among many other things, will still matter. But one tool will have gone from our box of tools. Quite a big instrument.

Departure would take us to some very basic decisions about where our interests lie: close to Europe, close to America. And there is one angle on which the Israel-Palestine issue comes back to mind: the rule of law. The Russian illegal annexation of the Crimea, which led to EU sanctions, and the prolonged Israeli occupation of the OPTs are of a kind in terms of the international law framework. If we leave the European Union, that framework of international law will matter more to us, because we will have less protection. We will have friends, but they could be fair weather friends. Who was it who said, "There are no such things as friendships, there are only interests."? I would prefer our interests to be convergent with the interests of the 27.

But back to that rule of law. If we are out there, ploughing our own furrow, then having an international framework of law that is respected and applied, ultimately by the UN Security Council, is even more important than now - and currently that is not predictable.

So realpolitik or expediency or supporting your friends, be they right or wrong, can lead to outcomes that harm the fabric, the rules-based order on which we rely. But let's not end on that!

SR: No, can we end on an upbeat note, please?

VF: I have found cleverer people than me more frequently in the FCO than anywhere else. That's a reassurance. It is a home of practicality, maybe more responsive than active, if you understand me. More responsive to crises than foreseeing and preventing: that's been a long-standing criticism and it can stand. But the collection of brainpower and public service ethos and willingness to share information and not to compete individually is a good creation. It will last.

I am optimistic that the machine in which I was a cog will continue and that it will continue to attract bright people to work for the common good.

SR: A good note on which to finish. Thank you, Vincent, very much indeed!