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(Patrick) Robin FEARN (born 05.09.34)

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Sir Robin Fearn KCMG

This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Sir Robin Fearn at Gastard, Wiltshire, on Monday, 18 November 2002.

MMcB: “I see, Sir Robin, from ‘Who’s Who’ that you were educated at Ratcliffe College and then University College, Oxford, did National Service in the Intelligence Corps, 1952-1954, and then went into the Dunlop Rubber Company doing marketing. Is that right?”

Sir Robin: “Yes, that’s correct. To start at the beginning, I was born in Spain, in Barcelona, of English parents. My father was a businessman and spent ten years in Barcelona. I was born a year and a half before the Civil War, so in fact we returned to England when the Civil War made life impossible. I lived in London and then in Yorkshire where my father’s business was. I’m a Catholic and I was then sent to a Catholic school, Ratcliffe College in Leicestershire. From there, as you say, I did National Service, first of all in the artillery but, as I was going to Oxford to read languages, I applied and was accepted for the Russian language course, which was a wonderful way of passing one’s National Service. I spent a year in Cambridge and six months outside of that, finishing as a Russian interpreter. I then went to Oxford where, in an idle fashion, I changed from reading French and German to French and Russian, leaving Oxford in 1957.

I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do except that as a linguist and as a son of parents who had lived abroad, I thought it would be rather nice to work abroad, so I applied for a number of companies in the usual milk round. I was eventually taken on as a graduate trainee by the Dunlop Rubber Company and was sent out, initially for a very short period to replace someone who was ill, but in fact it turned out to be a two-year stint, to the Caribbean to oversee the sale of Dunlop products to the various agents in the Caribbean islands and in the north of South America. Two wonderful

years; a year in Jamaica and a year in Trinidad, travelling round the islands as a bachelor.

I then returned from Trinidad, where I was then stationed, for what was meant to be a six-week break before going to Central America to live in a jeep travelling up and down the peninsula. But during those six weeks I thought it would be a nice idea to get married and I resigned from Dunlop and went on the dole and started applying, vaguely, for export jobs. At that time a friend of mine said, 'Why don't you try the Foreign Office? The exams are starting more or less now.' I said, 'Okay.' The various stages took, as you know, quite a long time. Meanwhile, the Labour Exchange told me they had found me a job as a continental telephone operator and that I had to take it or lose my dole. I thought of that but then, fortuitously, ICI offered me a job and I went to work for ICI in their chemical exports division for several months until the Foreign Office eventually came up and offered me a place. It wasn't a clear-cut decision. The Foreign Office offered me £50 more than ICI were paying me and I remember sitting with my wife, Sally, saying that £50 was actually quite a lot of money. It sort of reflects the accidental nature of life: fifty pounds less and I might not have joined the Foreign Office as I did, and I've never regretted it."

MMcB: "So, having entered the Foreign Office in 1961, you went almost straight away as Third Secretary to the Embassy in Caracas."

Sir Robin: "In Caracas, yes."

MMcB: "Spanish speaking?"

Sir Robin: "Well, it was assumed I was Spanish speaking because I'd been born in Spain and I had, in a sense, as a child been made to maintain Spanish at home by artificial devices of trying to speak Spanish round the table at lunch on Sundays. But I must confess, my Spanish was pretty awful, and it was a question of learning it, or re-learning it. I don't think I've ever learnt Spanish to a real degree of fluency. I speak it fast in order to cover-up my grammatical errors. And Venezuelan Spanish is perhaps not the best form of Spanish to peddle."

An interesting two years. Those were the days, of course, when you still sailed to posts, and we sailed with a six-week old baby to Caracas to arrive, I remember, at the port of La Guaira and be told to drive up into the town to Caracas which was 2,000 ft, 3,000 ft, above the port, to the Hotel Tamanaco. It was quite an experience because Caracas then was one of the most (as an oil rich country) developed capitals in South America. It was very American in style, with very heavy traffic. I wound my way up to the Hotel Tamanaco which was really a first insight into the problems of Venezuela at that time. One arrived to find machine-gun posts up in front of the hotel with a banner wrapped round it saying, 'Welcome to the Hotel Tamanaco.' The bar had been blown up a few weeks before and was a blackened ruin. So it was an insight into the instability that Venezuela faced.

This was four years after the overthrow of the previous dictator, Perez Jimenez, and following the establishment of democratic government under Romulo Betancourt. It was a time of internal instability, accentuated by the export from the new Castroite revolution in Cuba, the export of its revolution to Venezuela which was always a prime target in terms of both urban and rural guerrilla movements. The autonomous university was the usual flashpoint. So it was a violent, unstable place which took a certain amount of getting used to.

We spent six weeks in one hotel bedroom, with twenty-three pieces of luggage and a baby. We eventually found a house, and you would lie there and you would hear the machine-guns chattering. I remember my wife saying to me, 'I can't sleep.' And I said, 'Well, you'll just have to get used to it.' Of course the machine-guns always sounded next door but they were probably a block or two away."

MMcB: "Who was being machined-gunned?"

Sir Robin: "Well, it was often very unclear. Sometimes it was the police firing at each other. In theory the battle was between the forces of law and order and the extreme-left guerrilla groups on the other side. There was the assumption that this would lead to a rightist military takeover in Venezuela. A lot of time in the Embassy was spent trying to identify who the likely coup leaders were. In practice of course it

never happened. Venezuela, what would have seemed miraculous then, has had continuous democracy since 1958.”

MMcB: “Was it prosperous, the economy?”

Sir Robin: “It was prosperous but extremely divided in that there was a very wealthy elite feeding off the huge wealth that Venezuela produced, and wasted, and two-thirds of the population who lived in degrees of relative misery. Of course, the curiosity about Caracas was that you had this great modern town with skyscrapers, flyovers, and so on. All around it were the ranchitos of the poor.

It suffered, I think like so many Latin American capitals, from acting as a magnet for people from the countryside who could not find work where they happened to be who would come to the capital and then accrete round the edges of it in very poor conditions indeed. So it was a greatly divided society. It was that sort of division between those who had and those who had not on which the radical elements were quite naturally feeding.”

MMcB: “What was the UK’s interest?”

Sir Robin: “Well, oil. Shell were prominent in Venezuela. We had various bilateral issues such as the Venezuela/Guyana border dispute which was creaking along at that time. I don’t think it’s ever been resolved, but there were various sporadic attempts, and we went to those talks. Economic, of course, because Venezuela was a fairly substantial market with its oil riches in Latin America.”

MMcB: “So there was a considerable export trade?”

Sir Robin: “Well, there was a considerable export trade, but as always in Latin America, the British share of the market was disappointingly low. One of the main objectives of the Embassy was indeed to change that round. Not very successfully, then or now.”

MMcB: “Very disappointing isn’t it. So you enjoyed your time there anyway.”

Sir Robin: “I enjoyed it up to a point. It was quite difficult for a family because of the security situation. One used to get telephone calls from people asking if you were the Second Secretary at the British Embassy, then put the phone down. There were threats to kidnap people, this sort of thing, which kept you a little bit on edge when you were newly married with a young baby. We had another baby just before we left. With a passion for symmetry, we left with another six-week old baby.

It wasn't easy to travel around the countryside. You had to be quite careful. It was wonderful country once you did get into the countryside, but because of our family situation, we weren't very happy leaving small children behind in order to travel, so we didn't do a great deal of it. That was a bit frustrating. We only did two years, and I think two years was long enough.”

MMcB: “It would give you a good feel for the place.”

Sir Robin: “Yes, but I can't pretend I have the warmest memories of Venezuela. It was not one of the most attractive countries in the area. It was a place with a mixture of cruelty and violence which was not very attractive. When you gave dinner parties, the young men would come with their pistols and leave them on the mantelpiece. That sort of thing. One always had an underlying feeling of violence and machismo.

I remember once, early on, at cocktail parties I was shocked by the fact that all the men gathered at one end of the room and all the women gathered at the other. I thought this was nonsense, in my innocent way, and I wandered down to talk to the women. I had to give it up because stories went round that I was obviously unhappy with my wife.”

MMcB: “So quite a startling introduction to the diplomatic life. You then went to Cuba.”

Sir Robin: “I went very briefly to Cuba. I really went out just to hold the fort for the Commercial Secretary who was ill. I went out for four or five months, perhaps

less. Great fun, because in Cuba then, in 1965, the apparatus of power was forming but it hadn't yet coalesced into the shape that it possessed when I went back to Cuba in the '80s. It was still a fairly fluid society, and because of that fluidity and because of the charm of the Cuban character and the beauty of Havana itself and the countryside. It was an interesting and attractive place to be. Havana is the most wonderful capital. It's always interesting to see how people tackle the question of their colonies in different ways. The Spaniards always tried to establish architecturally, as it were, a legacy of Spanish imperialism, whereas I'm not sure we ever did. When I lived in Jamaica it was mainly tin-roofed huts. But there it was grand buildings."

MMcB: "But we probably left a decent police service behind."

Sir Robin: "Absolutely. And of course there was an emphasis on youth in Cuba at that stage. Castro himself was, I suppose, in his mid-thirties, most of his colleagues were younger. I remember the first time I had to go and call on the Minister of Light Industry, or something, I put my suit on and tie. I wandered round to the ministry, you went in and there was a girl sitting in paramilitary uniform behind a desk. I said I'd like to see the Minister and she said, 'Patria o muerte – venceremos' (Fatherland or death – we will conquer)! It was fun. I said I was calling on the Minister and she said 'Oh, I'll give him a ring.' Then she said, 'He'll be down.' I said, 'He doesn't have to come.' And she said, 'Oh yes, he'll come down.'

Part of the charm of the place was illustrated when down the steps of the ministry bowled this young guy aged about 25, 26 with a Cuban shirt and a quayabera and said in his wonderful Cuban Spanish, 'Vamos tomar un café.' (Let's go and have a coffee.) We went out of the ministry, sat on bar stools in a coffee-shop and did our business there. It was that sort of atmosphere and it had its charm. Of course, in the background what was happening was the transformation of the revolution into a Soviet client."

MMcB: "It was not a Soviet client at that time?"

Sir Robin: “Well, yes. That followed the missile crisis of ’62. It was after the missile crisis. Castro’s coming out, if you like, in terms of his own Marxist-Leninism and his creation of a communist state had happened several years before. But, as I say, the apparatus had not yet, as it were, solidified into that formidable apparatus of power which existed later. So there was a certain degree of freedom. There were still people there who were politically different from Castro, who thought that perhaps things might change and were hanging on. There was a more varied society. One wasn’t constrained as one was in later years from making contact with the Cuban population. So it was a bit more fun. But I was only there for three or four months.

We were interested in Cuba of course, commercially as well as politically. It was the time just after the Leyland buses. I enjoyed it greatly. But it was only a short spell.”

MMcB: “After that you went almost straightaway to the British Embassy in Budapest.”

Sir Robin: “I went after about eight or nine months. I did hard language training in Hungarian. I must say hard language training for most people in the Office is the lightest part of their career. I was taught by two charming Hungarian émigrés, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Both taught me in their pyjamas. I spent four or five months doing full-time Hungarian language training in London before going out, which was a huge advantage in terms of using one's time in Hungary. I think I was one of the only one or two people in the Embassy who had Hungarian at that time. Now it’s very different of course.”

MMcB: “Were you able to get out and talk to Hungarians?”

Sir Robin: “Yes, oddly enough, although this was ’66 -’68, ten years after the revolution, still of course part of a Soviet empire very much in its heyday and the situation for Western diplomats in Hungary was inevitably constrained. But curiously enough, I think that one made more Hungarian friends, and kept them, than many other posts. It is fascinating to go back. My son was posted there in the early nineties and was able to get round the dinner table two dozen or so old Hungarian friends who had survived over the years. As always in those days of the communist system, you

weren't encouraged, nor were you particularly allowed to make, as it were, free contact across Hungarian society. It was mainly the cultural community who was offered as sacred cows to diplomats to graze with. But amongst those, were people with wit and intelligence. I've no doubt they had to report back. That's life. But we enjoyed it.

We lived in a most attractive house, and one of the curiosities in those days of being in a communist post, you tended to have far better housing than in the non-communist posts because these were houses that had been taken away from the bourgeois and were made available to diplomats. So we, with our two young children, then three because our third was born while we were there, lived in a lovely house on the outskirts of Budapest, on the Buda side with two acres of garden and a big house. It was a lovely place to bring up children. We greatly enjoyed our Hungarian friends and the constraints of the system were something you just got used to and took for granted."

MMcB: "This was the time of the student uprisings against Vietnam, wasn't it, 1968? Did that impinge at all on you?"

Sir Robin: "No, not at all. It had absolutely no effect on Hungary whatsoever. The Hungarians had exhausted their 'on the streets' effort in 1956 at huge cost. The Hungarian people, of course, remained strongly nationalistic, despite the apparatus of the Communist Party. There was a strong feeling of Hungarian nationalism, a general dislike of the Communist regime under the surface, but people weren't, in those days, back in the game of going out on the streets because it didn't get you very far. At the same time, the Communist government was, as so frequently in Hungarian history, why in a sense the Hungarians were so much more developed when the collapse of Communism came in 1990, trying to push at the frontiers imposed by the Soviet Union in terms of economic management. They were trying to introduce what was called the new economic mechanism, which was effectively a way of trying to free up the centralised control to have a certain measure of private enterprise. It didn't succeed. It was eventually sat on from Moscow, but it reflected always this Hungarian wish to try to establish its own terms under the Communist system.

But the job was mainly political reporting, reading between the lines, scraping away at what you could get. In a Communist post, I think in a sense, political skills are required perhaps in a way that they aren't where access is freer because you are doing a tremendous amount of 'putting pieces together' and trying to reach conclusions from fairly minimal evidence. There's a great deal of reading the press. One of my jobs, as a Hungarian language speaker, was to arrange for the press translation, pick out the articles. A lot of time was spent on that. Otherwise, it was through official contacts. At my level I wouldn't have had very high official contacts as I was only a junior first secretary. It was a matter of trying to get another slice off the joint through cultivating interesting people. From a political point of view, a fascinating job."

MMcB: "Were they particularly friendly towards Britain?"

Sir Robin: "Ideologically, not, obviously at the top. I mean we were in the other camp. In terms of your average Hungarian, yes. And of course there was a particular cultural interest in Western Europe and what was happening in Britain which interested many Hungarians. I always found, generally speaking, courtesy and interest amongst the Hungarians one met. Of course, at the top, when you were dealing with the official cadres, you were dealing with people of a different quality."

MMcB: "Did the fact that Hungarian intellectuals had come to Britain mean anything? Kaldor, Balogh and people like that."

Sir Robin: "Did it mean anything to the Hungarians?"

MMcB: "Yes."

Sir Robin: "I can't remember it ever being mentioned. I'm sure it must have been, but they would treat them as renegades. There was a certain amount of ambivalence. On the one hand, all Hungarians are extremely proud of the mark they make in the world for a small nation, but on the other, ideological side of the camp, Balogh and Kaldor were defectors."

I remember in a rather more frivolous way how this ambivalence came up when Zsa Zsa Gabor came back for the first time to Hungary. For some reason she was living in Britain at the time, so therefore we were involved in some way in this. Of course, the initial Hungarian reaction was that she had sold out her Hungarian birthright, but when she came you could see it was irresistible to them to be invited to the party to meet her.”

MMcB: “So you did have her out?”

Sir Robin: “We were involved. I don’t think we gave entertainment. I think the Americans gave entertainment. But I do remember that I had to deal with her because she had got it into her head (I think she must have had a house in Britain at the time) that she wanted to import a horse from Hungary into Britain. I was delegated to deal with her to arrange for this horse. I remember hilarious phone calls with her when I would say, ‘Ah, Miss Gabor.’ ‘Call me Zsa Zsa, darling.’ And I would say, ‘Yes, Miss Gabor.’

We enjoyed our time in Hungary very much. It had its downside, I suppose, especially in the dark winters, and with the pollution. But Budapest is a most attractive capital.”

MMcB: “Did they have interesting links with Austria?”

Sir Robin: “Well, they had a very heavily defended frontier with Austria. This was the Iron Curtain running between Hungary and Austria, and crossing the frontier was always like something out of a bad movie, particularly in the winter when it was snowy and men in the machine-gun posts, observation posts, and the wires on the no-mans-land with the minefield. The way one was treated at the frontier, you were very often kept waiting for three-quarters of an hour because you had a British passport. There was a slightly spooky quality to it.

Hungary had trading relations with Austria, but I don’t remember feeling a particular relationship between the two based on history, if that’s what you’re getting at. For us, Vienna was the escape. That’s where we went to relax, where you went to get your

car serviced, where you went to talk freely and have a bit of fun, do your R and R, if you like, over a weekend before coming back into the rather tighter atmosphere of Hungary itself.”

MMcB: “As for the Hungarians themselves, they would not be able to go there?”

Sir Robin: “No. They could apply for a visa to go abroad. Sometimes they got it and sometimes they didn’t. It depended on the assessment of that person’s fidelity to the regime, whether they were likely to cause trouble or whether they were likely to come back or whatever. As I recollect, very often people, if they got a visa, weren’t able to take their family, or all their family. It’s a highly unpleasant system, having lived in it in Cuba and in Hungary. If you happen to be a foreign diplomat, there are many mitigating circumstances. If you happened to be Hungarian or Cuban, and you were not in the right cadres, as it were, then life could be very difficult. Or if you wanted to have any independence of thought or action, life could be very difficult. If you conformed, OK, but Hungarians weren’t awfully good at conforming. That’s part of their charm.”

MMcB: “Was your house bugged?”

Sir Robin: “I would say yes, almost certainly. One certainly always worked on the assumption that one’s house was bugged, and therefore if you wanted to talk you went down the garden. But I never found that a huge handicap. I mean people don’t really lie in bed with their wife and say, ‘Darling, I saw an amazing secret telegram.’ You just don’t. I think what you most had to be careful about was not that but gossiping about other members of the staff, little unhappinesses or giving indications of weaknesses which could be exploited. That’s what one really worried about in one’s conversations in the house.

Were we bugged? Almost certainly so. We had regular visits by telephone technicians who came to check that our telephone was all right when we hadn’t asked for it, this sort of thing. We had a splendid episode in the Embassy itself, which was in an old bank building, at the back of which was part of another block. There was

great excitement one night when the security guard suddenly saw a poster on the wall pushing out and a lot of drilling noises, then everything being retrieved, pulled back. It does seem pretty stupid in retrospect, but it was a game at the time.

I was never consciously 'honey-potted', beautiful blondes trailed across your path. Disappointing in fact. I felt very insulted!"

MMcB: "After Budapest, you came back to the FCO for three years, 1969-72."

Sir Robin: "Yes. I was on the Cyprus desk for most of that period. It was a very interesting desk. It is interesting to see that the people one was dealing with on the inter-communal talks between Clerides and Denktash, now President Clerides and President Denktash in the Turkish Cypriot area, are still there, still trying to resolve the problem. This was before the Turkish invasion of Cyprus so there was a greater degree of hope that one could resolve the issue through inter-communal talks, and as guarantors of the Cypriot constitution, we were involved in this. The major thing was to prevent things going wrong in Cyprus and at the same time try to facilitate progress towards an agreement."

MMcB: "When had they become independent?"

Sir Robin: "Early sixties. I can't remember exactly. At that time Archbishop Makarios was President Makarios.

It was a very interesting desk and one I enjoyed very much. I shared the third room with the Greek desk officer, and of course we had the colonels in Greece at that time. I also had as part of my brief, Turkey because of the link with Cyprus. So I enjoyed that very much. I'm glad to say I was able to leave the desk without anything awful having happened, but certainly no progress having been made either.

When one looks back on it, one marks the difference in working life-style between then and now, which no doubt you will remember too. I recall we were living in Bayswater at the time and I used to walk my children to the local primary school, get there at 9.15 am then catch the Circle line train and get into the office about 9.50 am,

find myself first in the third room, and get the fire lit. About 10.00, the Greek desk officer would turn up and life would begin. And by 7.00 pm, I was usually home. It was a very different working style from what one has now.”

MMcB: “Were you still lighting fires in 1969?”

Sir Robin: “Yes. There were those five particular sequences of buzzing on your bell for the porter in your corridor to bring a box or bring coal. I think five dots was coal. If you passed them in the corridor and they’d hear one, two, three, four, five, they’d say, ‘Oh, bloody hell. Coal again.’ And then you had tubes in those days. You shoved things in tubes and they went through that pneumatic system.”

MMcB: “Almost prehistoric.”

Sir Robin: “Yes, but it was fun. Of course the level of staffing seemed to be higher. You made very good friends with your colleagues. My third room was the tea point, known as typhoid corner. You could do things then . . . I remember people from the Australian, New Zealand and other High Commissions coming in to talk to me and we’d have cricket games in the office with a ruler and a ball of paper. They’d come to call to discuss Cyprus and when they’d finish we’d have a little cricket game. I just can’t conceive of that happening now.”

MMcB: “Beyond imagination. But you say you had visitors from Australia and New Zealand.”

Sir Robin: “I mean the people who were shadowing our Cyprus policy in London would come and call on me for briefings, and you would use these occasions for a bit of fun. You’d brief them and have a game, or you’d sit down in your armchair opposite the fire, have a cup of tea and a chat. One wasn’t looking at one’s watch like the way I seem to remember in the eighties and nineties in the Office when life was already accelerating in terms of pressures.”

MMcB: “So they were interested in the bases.”

Sir Robin: “Who?”

MMcB: “The Australians and New Zealanders.”

Sir Robin: “I can’t remember them being particularly interested in that. I think they were mainly interested as Commonwealth countries and what was happening in another Commonwealth country. They were simply marking it in a way that all embassies would have their people marking various areas of the world.”

MMcB: “How about our application to join the EU? That had gone forward first in 1962 and here we are in 1969, and almost there.”

Sir Robin: “It made very little impact on me. As I’ve mentioned, my memory is pretty awful. Maybe it was a larger question than I remember.”

MMcB: “It is equally possible that it was confined to the European departments.”

Sir Robin: “In Southern European Department, as it was then, I don’t think we had any engagement in that issue at all. Obviously, in national terms it was a big issue, but it certainly didn’t affect my work in any way.”

MMcB: “I suppose that’s not surprising really. Anyway, you left the Cyprus desk and went to be Head of Chancery in Vientiane, from ’72-’75.”

Sir Robin: “In Vientiane, yes. I remember that very clearly because in those days you were just rung up and told where you were going. There were no bidding lists and all the rest of it. It wasn’t very democratic, but it did solve a lot of problems if you were just told where you had to go. I remember being rung up by Personnel, who said, ‘You’re going as Head of Chancery to Vientiane.’ I thought they’d said Vietnam, so I went home and sat with Sally, gave her a gin and said, ‘We’re going to Saigon.’ This was 1972, three years before the end of the Vietnam War. We girded our loins for this. When I was back in the Office a few days later, a friend of mine came bowling in and said, ‘I’ve just got a posting.’ And I said, ‘Oh, where are you

going?’ He said, ‘I’m going as Head of Chancery in Saigon.’ I said, ‘No you’re not, I am.’ He said, ‘Well, they’ve just rung me up and told me.’ Anyway, I clarified it. I don’t think I’d really heard of Laos or knew where it was. I went out there as Deputy Head of Mission and Head of Chancery.’

MMcB: “Who was the Ambassador?”

Sir Robin: “Initially a man called John Lloyd and then a man called Alan Davidson who has since made a considerable name for himself as an author on food, and fish dishes. He managed to produce a book called ‘Fish and Fish Dishes of Laos’ as a result of his stay there and spent a lot of time trying to secure the head of a famous pa beuk river fish which is the largest river fish in the world, and eventually secured one. I recall it was an afternoon when he was giving a charity do in the garden of the residence and half-way through it this lorry appeared with a bleeding head of a pa beuk in the back. He rushed off enchanted by this. I’ve probably got it wrong, but I think he sent it back to the British Museum, but I’m not sure whether it arrived with all the flesh on it or just the bones. I don’t know what’s happened to it since but it was a monstrous beast.

Laos was a quite primitive post. I flew up from Bangkok for the first time, and when we were coming in to land, I said to the American next to me, ‘Where’s Vientiane?’ and he said, ‘You’ve just flown over it.’ I thought I’d been looking carefully. It wasn’t really much more than a village with about 8-10 kilometres of tarmac road around it, the rest was hills.

It certainly had its difficulties in terms of hygiene and health. We were regularly ill, particularly from the food. The sewers ran through the streets, in the market you had to beat the flies off the things you were buying. It was a very primitive society but it had great charm. The Lao were, I must say, people of tremendous attractiveness. You were still then, in 1972, under the Royalist government in Laos which maintained control over its strip down the Mekong while the Communists were in the north and east. There was all the glamour of the extraordinary fairytale ritual in the capital up in Luang Prabang. The embassy had its own Beaver aircraft which is how you got round Laos, flew everywhere, because there were no roads. You got to Luang

Prabang for these wonderful royal occasions with boat races with the black and white spirits going up the Mekong. It had a tremendous colourfulness and charm and they were a very gentle people.

The foreign presence was obviously dominated by the American Embassy which was acting effectively as the sort of second government in Laos at the time. The Americans were always complaining about the Lao: 'These goddam Lao won't fight.' It's not an unattractive quality really."

MMcB: "What about the Russians? They had a big embassy there."

Sir Robin: "They had an embassy there but obviously they were not the protagonists of the Royalist government as the Americans were. If you went up to Hanoi, then of course there you found the Russian presence as almost a sort of replica of the American presence in Vientiane.

It was an interesting time. The war never impinged directly on Vientiane. The war was up north, the Plain of Jars, or down the Ho Chi Minh trail areas in the east. A lot of it was bombing, the B52s coming over from Thailand and bombing. You didn't really come into contact with any of that at all until 1974 when (which is often forgotten) there was a peace agreement in Laos, a year before Saigon fell. So we had the Pathet Lao in Vientiane, their delegation in town for the negotiations. We were, with the Russians, co-chairmen of the Geneva Agreements on Laos so we had a housekeeping and protective role with regard to the Pathet Lao. I spent quite a lot of time with them, with Phoumi Vongvichit, their Foreign Minister. The Pathet Lao in those days, the ones that were down in Vientiane, were generally from the same families as the Royalist Lao; they came from the Mekong Valley families. They were French educated. It was only after the fall of Saigon and the Communist takeover of Laos that you got the harder men coming down.

That was fun, interesting, successful, in the sense that a peace agreement was reached which led to a coalition government in 1974, which worked up to a point. It probably worked by really not taking decisions, but there was the balance where you had a

Royalist minister and a Pathet Lao deputy minister, then vice-versa spread round the ministries. So it was quite an interesting political time.

It also had the advantage for us, as co-chairmen of the Geneva Agreements, that we were engaged in a way which we otherwise might not have been. I remember one particularly fascinating journey shortly after the peace agreement when the Pathet Lao invited the embassy up to their headquarters in Northern Laos which had originally been in Sam Neua, but that had been virtually bombed out of existence. The headquarters were in a narrow limestone valley with caves on either side. We flew up there, the Ambassador and myself, the Military Attaché and the Assistant Military Attaché who was the pilot. You flew off with the co-ordinates and the pilot would say, 'Can you see a river coming in from the right?' There was just trackless mountains. You'd say, 'Yes.' And he'd say, 'I think we're there.' Anyway, eventually we landed on this very narrow hard-earth airstrip with huge craters on either side created by the B52 bombers. Obviously, the airstrip had been constantly repaired, or had been up to the time of the peace agreement. We then drove to this valley. We were put in a hotel in a cave, you walked up a little muddy path to an entrance to a cave with a concrete bomb baffle outside. Inside, you had your bedrooms and your sitting room and lots of Chinese cigarettes all over the table.

We had Phoumi Vongvichit, the Foreign Minister. It always stays in my mind, this wonderful vignette of him coming to have talks with us up in our hotel, and there was Phoumi, a very nice, gentle, grey-haired man, dressed impeccably in a dark suit and dark overcoat with his minions similarly dressed carrying briefcases, staggering up this muddy path, with all the formalities of diplomatic behaviour being conducted in this strange way. We called on Prince Souphannavong in his cave, the Red prince."

MMcB: "You can remember which is which can you?"

Sir Robin: "Oh yes. Of course Prince Souvanna Phouma was the Prime Minister in Vientiane. There was another prince, Prince Boun Oum, who had his power centre down in South-Eastern Laos.

We went dancing in a cave, doing the Lamvong, feeling enormously clumsy. But it was a fascinating experience. Part of that colourfulness of Laos.

I remember my first day when I arrived on this plane that I was talking to you about, and I was met by someone who said, 'It's the That Luang festival (a religious festival). The King is entertaining tonight in his palace in Vientiane and you are invited.' So I got myself togged up and went out to this palace on the edge of the Mekong. It was absolutely beautiful. The river was about half a mile wide. The moon was slanting across it and the very pretty gardens by the river. We all sat round a little stage with the King who was a tall figure in a pantaloon like costume, a brocaded jacket, and watched the most beautiful girls doing Lao classical dancing, very slow, intricate hand movements. And I thought, 'Well, this is the life, this is the life.' Then it went on, an hour, a second hour, and the diplomatic community started to get restive, but we were happy to see on a grass bank behind us that people were coming out and putting food on the tables. Eventually, the King said let's go and eat. But what illustrated the hazards of Laos was when you got to the table, you thought, 'Hallo, it looks black.' Then, as you got there, the flies took off, and you tackled what was on the table. I was then in bed for a week in a sort of delirium. I don't remember much about it. It was that sort of hazard that you faced in Laos.

I remember Sally got dengue fever and spent two or three days kneeling beside the bed because she couldn't stretch her joints out and trembling uncontrollably. Then we had . . . Do you like these little stories? I'm not really talking seriously.

MMcB: "Yes."

Sir Robin: "We had great fun once when the ambassadors changed. Alan Davidson announced that instead of flying into Vientiane, he was coming up from Bangkok by train with his wife and two daughters who were aged 18 or so. The train got into the railway station, Nong Khai, on the Thai side of the Mekong at some ungodly hour in the morning, 4.30 or 5.00am or something. You then crossed the river by a sort of canoe then drove into Vientiane along the northern bank. Anyway, Sally and I got up in the middle of the night and went to the railway station. They all got out and we went into Nong Khai. I had managed to arrange with an Australian

development project to have what they call a jet-boat to take us over to the other side. Alan then asked rather vaguely, 'Do you think we could get coffee on the ferry?' I said, 'Well, I don't think it's quite like that.' We had a glass of murky coffee at a little Thai stall and then went to present our passports, whereupon the big, fat man in Immigration started falling about and said, 'Do you want to go to Laos? There's a coup d'état over there.' Since we'd left a coup d'état had broken out! We thought we'd better go over anyway, so we got this boat and went across. It was slightly hazardous as the engine failed half-way through and we started drifting down towards Cambodia. Luckily we got it started and got off at this muddy little jetty at the other side. There was waiting the Head of Protocol, Sananikone, of one of the great families of the Royalist house, who clearly hated being there because he wasn't quite sure whether he was meant to be supporting the coup or opposing it or who was running it."

MMcB: "He probably wanted guidance from you."

Sir Robin: "Well, we didn't know, we'd been on the other side. We drove into Vientiane, passed the army base where anti-aircraft guns were blazing away at planes in the sky. What had happened was that a group had come over from Thailand to seize the airfield, seize the planes and try to bomb the army base. We lived a few hundred yards from the army base. Then I was immediately rung up by the Pathet Lao saying, 'Help, help, help, we're going to be exterminated.' I had to go down and hold their hands and try to act as protection for them. Meanwhile, my children were having terrific fun on the balcony of our house as the little planes circled overhead trying to bomb the palace which was just down the road. They eventually hid under the ping-pong table, which I don't think would have been much protection.

Anyway, it was all over at the end of the day in typically Lao fashion. But it was that sort of place. When you were there you had constant practical problems. But in retrospect, you see it as a place of great charm and interest, one which I certainly would not have missed.

We left a few weeks before Saigon fell, and of course immediately after that the Communists took over in Laos. The King was taken away to be re-educated and died,

or was killed, nobody knows. Laos then became a Communist country in the way that it wasn't when we were there."

MMcB: "Did we close the embassy?"

Sir Robin: "We closed the embassy sometime after that, I can't quite remember when, '76 something like that. Why did we have an embassy there? Well, partly because we were co-chairman, partly because Vientiane was used as the staging point to help our consulate in Hanoi. If you remember, all through the war we maintained this consulate-general in Hanoi, accredited to the Mayor of Hanoi rather than to the government, a diplomatic sleight of hand.

That was the other advantage, you occasionally travelled up to Hanoi, taking the bag, so you were able to see something of that, which was quite interesting. And the huge advantage that we had in having had a diplomatic presence in Hanoi was that at least we had a house to live in. It was a rather odd house, octagonal sort of house, whereas most of the Diplomatic Corps as such, lived in hotel bedrooms. I remember one telling me that it was also his office although he had his wife there, and whenever he had callers he had a screen and his wife would lie on the bed, behind the screen, and he would receive his guest. His wife was told to keep very quiet."

MMcB: "Listen but not speak."

Sir Robin: "Yes. Take notes perhaps, who knows.

That was it, mainly political although there was a certain amount of aid, not much, certainly no trade."

MMcB: "A weird place."

Sir Robin: "You know it do you?"

MMcB: "Well, I visited Vientiane. I actually succeeded once in crossing the river, the Mekong, at Ban Houey Sai, and getting down to Vientiane, calling on Alan

Davidson and being put up there, then coming back into Thailand. Fortunately, I had taken my passport with me because they demanded to see it at Nong Khai and then they discovered that I had no exit visa from Thailand, so I was in trouble. The officials very kindly made remarks about it in my passport all in Thai and so I was later able to regularise my trip to Laos without anyone knowing about it back in Bangkok.”

Sir Robin: “There was no immigration in Ban Houey Sai when you were up there?”

MMcB: “No, you just weren’t supposed to enter Laos there. I went across for fun to see what it was like on the other side.”

Sir Robin: “Fascinating area, I remember going up there and being taken by USAID in a helicopter over the Golden Triangle.”

MMcB: “The area of Thailand surrounded by Ban Houey Sai was supposed to be infested with Communists and the Americans wouldn’t go there. I did because I was demonstrably not an American, driving a Range Rover with a flag on it, so I got around without any trouble. There were people objecting to the extension of Thai government administration to areas that had previously been independent (i.e. outside the remit of the Thai government), and Thai administration meant taxation, so they didn’t like that. And they would certainly shoot up Thai government vehicles, but that wasn’t Communist subversion.”

Sir Robin: “Maybe Shan or something. It’s close to Burma.”

MMcB: “The people in that area of Thailand were Red Meo who recognised no national boundary, and the Thai army was quite keen to shoot at them from a safe distance. It was good practice for the gunners. It didn’t do any harm. It convinced the Americans that the Thais were fighting Communists. I don’t suppose they hit anyone or killed many people and if they did they didn’t care because they were only hilltribe Meo or other hilltribes, Lahu or Yao.”

Sir Robin: “The Meo formed part of the mercenary army fighting for the Royalists.”

MMcB: “The Americans were hiring Meo to go and fight in Vietnam.”

Sir Robin: “Yes, because they were the ones who did like fighting.”

MMcB: “Especially if they were being paid for it.

Anyhow, you went out of Vientiane, back to civilisation in the FCO as Assistant Head of Science and Technology Department.”

Sir Robin: “Yes. I spent eighteen months as Deputy Head of Science and Technology Department. I suppose a large part of one’s career one’s felt lacking in confidence that one knew what one was doing, but certainly as Deputy Head of Science and Technology Department I was convinced I had no idea what I was doing. It was a disparate department which dealt with international environment issues, both in Europe and the United Nations Environment programme. We dealt with Concorde overflying rights. At the time we were trying to negotiate the route out to Australia across India.”

MMcB: “With Concorde?”

Sir Robin: “Yes. It didn't work, we didn't succeed. But that was the object, to open up the route to Australia, but it required supersonic overflight of India and the Indians would say, 'Well, you don't allow supersonic overflight in Europe, why should we put up with it?' So the negotiations weren't very successful.

We also dealt with pure science issues, particularly again in the European Community. None of which I really understood, so I was quite relieved actually when my time came to an end there and I was sent to Pakistan, in 1976, as Counsellor and Deputy Head of Mission.

I spent about three years there. I don't think Pakistan was our favourite post for various reasons. Islamabad was then, still is to some extent, a fairly undeveloped dormitory town, there wasn't a great deal to do except that one could get out into the hills around it or travel elsewhere in Pakistan. We had a very large embassy with a substantial immigration section. Most of the staff lived in a sort of ghetto. I had endless personnel problems which kept one busy day and night when the telephone rang in the middle of the night with someone having some trauma or other."

MMcB: "Really."

Sir Robin: "Well, I felt pretty sympathetic towards the immigration officers who spent their day in these small rabbit hutch offices dealing with difficult human cases, often with a huge degree of deceit attached to them. Then when they came out there was nothing else to do except go to the club and have a drink. There was a very incestuous sort of society.

The charm of Pakistan was getting out of Islamabad and travelling, either in the northern hills or going to places like Lahore or Karachi. I don't think Karachi was very attractive but at least it was a proper city."

MMcB: "Peshawar?"

Sir Robin: "Peshawar, certainly. We had a bungalow in Peshawar which was a very nice facility to use.

It was a very interesting political time. We arrived there in December 1976 just after the re-election of Bhutto and in his last months before he was overthrown in a coup d'état by General Zia. We then had a long period of the establishment of military rule and the trial and eventual execution of Bhutto with the international interest in that with appeals for clemency and all the rest of it. Then, with General Zia, the introduction of Sharia law and the beginning of the islamisation of Pakistan."

MMcB: "Oh really? That was down to the military was it?"

Sir Robin: "Well, there was General Zia himself who was a very convinced, very religious man and felt strongly that Pakistan should, observe Sharia law and be a proper Islamic state with, I think, very negative long-term consequences. I quite liked him. I saw quite a lot of him because I was Chargé d'Affaires for quite a long period at that time, and I thought at the time he was a genuinely honest man who felt obliged to take the action he did because of the behaviour of the politicians in Pakistan, the corruption of the Bhutto regime. He used to say to me, 'People keep telling me that I must hand back democracy, but to whom? Where is the governing class going to come from that can introduce stability to Pakistan?' And I think that was his genuine position. As time went by, he became conditioned to running . . ."

MMcB: "It would reinforce itself wouldn't it?"

Sir Robin: "Yes. In a sense you could understand it. You had the ex-Bhutto party active in the name of Bhutto, you had the mullahs, you had really no alternative the government could hand it back to. I think it is one of the tragedies of Pakistan, in the years since independence it has never been able to establish a governing class carrying responsibility, so you always have this alternation between corrupt politicians and military interventions with all the internal consequences of that in terms of the economy which was never able to develop itself. Then, of course, the loss of Bangladesh, the defeat in two wars. Those are why, psychologically as it were, Pakistan is a failed country."

MMcB: "It failed to make any progress on Kashmir. I think Kashmir must have been a really substantial cause of rage among the Pakistanis."

Sir Robin: "Absolutely, because it was a travesty of the reality of Kashmir. Of course now you look more critically at Pakistani behaviour over Kashmir. You could understand the reasons for it. But support for terrorist intervention in Kashmir is not exactly a helpful solution."

MMcB: "No, I suppose not, but on the other hand what was left to them?"

Sir Robin: "Indeed. It became a national cause, one of those national causes which rally most people around the leadership, so to that extent it was not only, I suppose, a national issue but a 'rationale' to beat that particular drum. But Kashmir was not particularly active when I was there. We went to Kashmir on holiday. We went from Islamabad to Srinagar, which is about eighty miles away. But to do that, you travelled down to Lahore, spent the night in Lahore, then took the train to the frontier, then walked across no-man's-land. You took the train to Amritsar, then flew up from Amritsar to Srinagar, it took you two days. But you could do it. Srinagar was peaceful and Dal lake and the houseboats and Pahalgam and trout fishing up the valley. It was not the sort of place it is now or has become.

The other attraction if you were there was that, rather oddly it seems now, we used Kabul as a holiday place. We had that wonderful Raj-type embassy with its huge house and its squash court and wonderful grounds with tennis courts. The houses were scattered around with staff. We would drive up through the Khyber Pass and Kabul Gorge, rent one of these houses, then go over the Salang Pass down into Northern Afghanistan to go trout fishing, picnicking. This was all just before the Soviet invasion. We went up there twice and had a most enjoyable time.

MMcB: "We gave the embassy away, didn't we?"

Sir Robin: "Yes. We're now back in what was the old hospital."

MMcB: "We gave it to Pakistan."

Sir Robin: "Pakistan was always asking for it."

MMcB: "I think we did."

Sir Robin: "Did we? I can't remember what happened to it. I think the building has gone. I seem to remember quite recently some comment that the building got quite damaged in the fighting in Kabul. But it was a lovely piece of real estate. And very dramatic scenery in Afghanistan. The drive up the Khyber Pass and Kabul Gorge was pretty testing. We drove up there in a Mini. We took two cars because we

had four children and a nanny which was quite daunting for driving, spending the night in Jalalabad. It was great fun.

Another little vignette, if you like, perfectly unserious, but at the time of Bhutto's trial and execution, I was Chargé d'Affaires. Jim Callaghan had been out to Pakistan and decided to enter a plea for clemency for Bhutto, and I received instructions to deliver it to Zia personally and immediately. So I applied to call on him and later that evening at about 10 o'clock I was told he would receive me at the Commander-in-Chief's house in Rawalpindi. It was a quite modest house, but it was Zia's style at that time. So I drove down there and went and sat in his sitting room. He had a son or a daughter, a son I think, who had Downs Syndrome, very sad, which he was very upset about. The child came in and I played with the child for a bit and eventually Zia came in, all doubled up, all bent over, and I said, 'What's the matter with you?' He said, 'Oh, it's my back, my back, I've done something to my back, I can't fix it.' He started talking about his back, and I said that I suffered from disk trouble too and took muscle-relaxing pills. He said, 'Oh, send me some.' So I said I would. When I went home, Sally was asleep, she woke up and said, 'How did it go?' I said, 'Fine. Remind me I have to send these pills down to Zia.' She said, 'You fool, they're two years old, you'll kill him. You'd better take two yourself now, and if you're alive in the morning . . .' Sure enough, in the morning I was alive, then the 'phone call came 'Where are the pills?' Anyway, he always claimed they helped him."

MMcB: "This speaks of a fairly confident relationship, doesn't it?"

Sir Robin: "Well I saw quite a lot of him. Gradually, of course, it became clear that there was no exit from having to execute Bhutto, first of all having arrested Bhutto there was no alternative to executing him, at least in their minds, because Bhutto alive would always remain a threat. Then afterwards there was this feeling you couldn't hand back democratic power to a nation which was so divided and so unstable, then the habit of autocratic power developed and Zia became a much tougher and much less attractive man as time went by."

MMcB: "How is it that Pakistan without a middle-class were nevertheless able to produce a pretty good cricket team?"

Sir Robin: "It's a national passion."

MMcB: "So are these cricketers drawn from every segment of society?"

Sir Robin: "Yes, I think they are. Probably, the higher you are in society the more likely you are to have been brought up at a school, or university, where cricket was part of the system and you could develop your skills. I think if you were a poor villager you would have great trouble finding somewhere to bowl on or bat on or a team to take part in. I don't think I'm really an expert on the social composition of the Pakistan cricket team."

MMcB: "There must be 100 million people in Pakistan, certainly now. There are over a billion Indians, Indians alone never mind the Pakistan and Sri Lankan components of the sub-continent, and Bangladesh."

Sir Robin: "Cricket is one of those sports, rather like squash, a game at which both Indians and Pakistanis excel. There's a wristiness about them, and their eyesight is very sharp. But it was a great passion. We had the English team out there on tour in Lahore and the atmosphere was terrific.

Otherwise, Pakistan was mainly political from my point of view. I also spent a great deal of time on what one would call pastoral care, trying to maintain morale in the embassy."

MMcB: "Was it a purpose-built embassy?"

Sir Robin: "Yes. Very strange actually. I remember when I arrived, I was driven into Islamabad from the airport and then we appeared to be going out of Islamabad into a sort of wild terrain, and there at the top was something that looked like a multi-storey car park. It was the embassy (not a high commission as Pakistan was out of the Commonwealth at that time). You were on a knoll and you looked down to the Diplomatic Quarter, and down there was another large building which was the American embassy. Then (and it is curious how national traditions seem to keep

themselves) right at the far end, in the real outback, were the Australians, right on the perimeter. The rest of it was undeveloped, although now of course it is. But in those days there weren't all that many missions."

MMcB: "Were there other European?"

Sir Robin: "Yes. There were the usual missions, but many of them had not built in what was meant to be this area demarcated for embassies."

MMcB: "How far is Rawalpindi from Islamabad?"

Sir Robin: "Ten miles. It's very near. We went to Rawalpindi quite often. It didn't have a huge amount to offer, but it was a town, and if you had friends you put them up there if you couldn't put them up in your house. It had a good market. But it was a garrison town, it wasn't a town like Lahore, full of history, full of old Mogul history and a fort. Lahore was a wonderful city, but increasingly rundown.

I don't know that we enjoyed our time in Pakistan tremendously. I don't think we found the politics in Pakistan very attractive. Certainly from the point of view of the wives, the position of women was a difficult one."

MMcB: "Were we able to make any impression on the Pakistan government? Were our representations listened to?"

Sir Robin: "Oh yes. We were, in terms of those who could influence the Pakistan government, one of the main players, for historical reasons, but there was not much we could do to re-engineer the internal situation. And that was the real problem. Of course, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which happened after I left Pakistan, then there was much more to play for as it were in the British embassy in Pakistan. But I wasn't there at that time.

MMcB: "I'd completely forgotten about the embassy period in our relations with Pakistan.

Well, that probably copes with that. You came back to be head of South American Department, in 1979 wasn't it?"

Sir Robin: "In 1979, yes. As usual in those days, you were never quite sure what you were coming back to. First of all I was told I was going as Head of Chancery in New York, then I was told I wasn't, then I was told I was going somewhere else, and eventually I was told I was going to be head of South American Department. I took over I suppose in October from John Ure.

Obviously the key issue throughout that period, and increasingly so as one got to 1982, was the question of the Falklands and the negotiations with the Argentines and perhaps the equally difficult negotiations within Whitehall in determining policy towards the Falkland Islands.

When I arrived, the Conservative government had been in power since May, with Lord Carrington as Foreign Secretary. I remember when I took over from John Ure that he was agitated that we had, on the one hand, renewed Argentine pressure to get back into negotiations, but on the other we had a distraction of government in London with the Rhodesia issue, which meant that the Prime Minister wasn't prepared to deal with the Falklands until the Rhodesia issue was out of the way. So there was a sort of limbo period with the Argentines pressing for a return to the negotiating table and the inability of the Office to get a paper through Cabinet determining the policy in terms of reference for future action. We eventually got that paper through, I think in early 1980."

MMcB: "And this was a paper setting out the Foreign Office's desire to have a policy."

Sir Robin: "Yes. I think if you look back on the history of the Falkland Islands issue since 1965 when it became a live issue, you have a cycle where a new government comes in in Britain, it calls for the papers, it looks at the issue, is presented with effectively the same options: either you defend the Islands (don't negotiate but you defend the islands and make sure resources are there to protect them, which was deeply unattractive in terms of a diversion of military resources and

expense) or you negotiated seriously on sovereignty, which effectively means you have to negotiate some form of sovereignty transfer. Then you have to get that through parliament and through the islanders, which was also deeply unattractive. So usually these options were put to each new government and they decided that they would have a go at solving it, then as the difficulties developed, the policy became one of keeping negotiations going until the government changed. So it was always a very frustrating period for officials, and of course in a sense difficult too to create an acceptance of the need for urgency given that, over the years, the heat of the dispute had gone up and gone down and nothing had actually happened. So that the argument that unless one negotiated seriously and with some urgency on sovereignty, you were going to be faced with the risk of military action against the Falklands was always a difficult one to get across because there didn't seem to be the evidence to support that.

In 1980, again one put, as I recollect, those options. In fact there were three options; one to defend the islands, two, to negotiate seriously on sovereignty, three, the option put in there to be kicked into touch, was try to negotiate without bringing sovereignty into the equation and just keep negotiations going in order to, as it were, prevent something worse happening, i.e. negotiations without actual substance, which, again, if you look at the history of the Falkland Islands, we were remarkably successful in doing over seventeen years of keeping negotiations going, even though one never seriously got down to negotiating on sovereignty which was the big issue for the Argentines.

At home you had those three options, and in terms of negotiation with the Argentines, again you tended to follow a fairly traditional path with the Argentines pressing for sovereignty change and we arguing that first of all you need to win the hearts and minds of the islanders, offer co-operation, confidence-building measures etc, then we would think about sovereignty down the line. Those were the sort of traditional approaches which we took.

I don't think in 1980 we engineered anything terrifically new in this. We obviously argued in the paper that if we were to avoid ultimate risk of invasion, then we should negotiate seriously on sovereignty because defence resources certainly weren't available. This was at the time of defence reviews and the budget cuts and the

economic recession, and indeed, not only defence budget cuts but a refocusing of the defence effort on NATO rather than on Britain's worldwide role.

We advocated that one should negotiate seriously and that was accepted by Cabinet at the time. And then we advocated that the basis for this should be the lease-back solution, which you're probably familiar with."

MMcB: "No, I'm not familiar with that all."

Sir Robin: "Well, the lease-back solution, in short, was the idea that you transferred sovereignty to Argentina but they immediately then leased it back to the British government and to British administration for a period of years. From our point of view, the sort of period of years we might have been talking about was about three generations. Had we ever got down to negotiations with the Argentines they would have been looking for about five years. It always seemed to me, and I think it seemed to many who'd dealt with the Falklands over the years that the leaseback formula which was considered if not implemented by the previous Labour government, that if you had to find some means of resolving the dilemma between the Argentine demand for sovereignty and the islanders' demand to continue to live under British administration, that this was the only way of finessing both points. But of course the problem was that you needed to convince the islanders that this should be a negotiating position before you actually sat down to negotiate it with the Argentines. And if you were going to try to persuade the islanders, you had to do so on the public stage, you had to do so with everyone looking at you, as it were, from Buenos Aires or domestically.

That has really brought up another facet of the Falklands issue which is certainly a factor in the difficulty of resolving it, the factor which applies equally to Gibraltar which is that although technically this is a bilateral negotiation between Britain and Argentine, or Britain and Spain, and certainly both Spain and Argentina argue that it is the UK that is responsible for its colonies, that the colonies are not a third party, in practice you had three parties. This is an enormous complication, from which you get a very clear and emotional divergence of view, in this case between the islanders and the policy of the British government in terms of its own best interests in the region.

Well, in 1980 the policy of lease-back was eventually agreed that we should explore the possibilities for this."

MMcB: "Agreed by the Cabinet."

Sir Robin: "By the Cabinet, yes, with, if I may say so as I recollect, a certain amount of reluctance, partly because of the clear parliamentary difficulties while the whole process of persuasion of the islanders went on. But it was decided it should be tried and I went out to the Islands in July 1980 with Nicholas Ridley who was then the Minister of State responsible for the Falkland Islands. In those days, of course, you travelled out to Buenos Aires, went to call on the Argentine Foreign Ministry, then you travelled down to Patagonia and took an Argentine Lade air force plane which ran, as it were, a civil air service to the Islands. You travelled across to the Islands in an Argentine plane which seems ironic. It seems a long way away now. We spent several days in the Islands talking to the Island councillors, talking to the islanders trying to persuade them that, whether one liked it or not, the dispute was reality, that it imposed not only a dead hand on the economy of the Islands which at that time was stagnating, with wool prices not doing particular well. You also needed to raise the dead hand of the threat of invasion or action against the Falklands, and the only way to do this was to try to tackle the sovereignty issue and to consider lease back as the best means of ensuring continued British administration and British way of life, etc.

We didn't do badly. They are charming people, the Falkland Islanders with nice courtesy. However, they looked on us with deep suspicion. Nicholas Ridley whom I had a considerable admiration for in many ways, he had political courage, was not exactly the right man to, as it were, create empathy with the Islanders, who were being asked to do something which of course went dead against their instincts and preferences. We were treated with great courtesy as I say, and I think that we found that we had at least given food for thought to, particularly the younger Falkland Islanders who were concerned for their future and their children's future.

There was, as it were, a start made on the question of lease-back. What went wrong then was that there was uproar in London when it was learnt that we were out there doing this, and again there was no real preparation made in terms of conditioning

public and parliamentary opinion to what we were going to do. So the headlines in the press back in England "Sell Out of the Falklands" etc, etc. The Falkland Islanders themselves, who had this very effective lobby in London, organised the lobbying to raise their protest against the whole proposition of sovereignty change, so that on our way back, we were told that there was great political furore over this and that Nicholas Ridley would be required to go and report to the House of Commons almost immediately on return and give an account of what had happened. I remember sitting in the aeroplane in Paris airport drafting this statement to be made to the House of Commons. In a sense it should have been cast iron, because everything we were saying was dependent on the wishes of the Falkland Islanders accepting that unless a clear majority of the Falkland Islanders should agree then nothing would be done, but when we got back and went to (almost straight that day, or it may have been the next) the House of Commons and made the statement, it went disastrously wrong. Again, it's a matter of style by Nick, who managed to appear to be condescending and made some rather unfortunate remarks like 'The Foreign Office knows best,' and things like that. I can't quite remember the language but that was certainly the impression. There was a great hooaha in the government and opposition benches, savage attacks. I remember sitting next to the officials' box, and the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, Ken Stowe, saying, 'That's the worst reception I've ever seen a minister get and I'm going back to tell the Prime Minister.' Naturally, by the next day, lease-back was effectively dead in the sense that the decision was taken from No.10 that no further pressure should be put on the islanders. They should be left to consider what they'd been told, and if they did come back and wanted it followed up then we could do so, but meanwhile, no pressure, which effectively meant that the thing was dead and buried.

It left us with no hand to play at all with the Argentines, and we became increasingly concerned as the year ended and the clear frustration in Argentina of this very unpleasant military regime, which had been in power since 1976, which began to make very much stronger and more aggressive noises about the lack of progress. I think I'm right in saying that a couple of rounds of negotiations were held without any progress being made, that once again we were pressing for economic co-operation, hearts and minds, and they were pressing for sovereignty.

By early 1981, certainly in the Foreign Office, we were getting increasingly concerned that time was running out. This is all contained in the Franks Report. We had a meeting in London with the Ambassador to Buenos Aires and the Governor of the Falkland Islands, and all those concerned in the Foreign Office, to consider ways forward. The conclusion at that meeting was that time was running out and that if we weren't able to make progress on lease-back, then there was no substance to future negotiations and that we would, sooner or later, see the Argentine regime turning to a policy of pressure with the prospect, eventually, of force. What we foresaw, and I'm not sure that this was wrong because I think the invasion happened when it did for particular reasons, was that when the Argentines were convinced that we had no intention of negotiating seriously on sovereignty, that they would turn to a series of pressures like cutting off the flights to the Islands, cutting off fuel supplies and isolating the Islands and try to bring home the cost of failing to negotiate, with, at the end of that, the possibility or the risk of invasion, probably timed to the 1983 anniversary of 150 years of British occupation of the Islands. I think in retrospect, and seeing what has come out since the invasion, that that was probably an accurate understanding.

We were concerned to put up a further paper to Cabinet bringing home the fact that time was running out, once again producing the options and really asking the Cabinet to bite the bullet on one or the other. This policy was endorsed by Nicholas Ridley. We put up a draft paper to Lord Carrington before the summer, which was then left in abeyance over the summer. There was a critical meeting with Lord Carrington in September to discuss this paper and to agree it and to then put it forward to Cabinet. What happened then, and it is what I think Franks was particularly hard on Lord Carrington for, although I don't think particularly fairly, was that we sat down I remember sitting down with Lord Carrington and Nicholas Ridley, and Lord Carrington looked at Nick and he said, 'Won't do, will it Nick?' And Nick said, 'No.' I was horrified because it was Nick Ridley's paper. But the thesis that Peter Carrington was putting forward was that without clear practical evidence of an Argentine intention to use force, the dilemmas faced by the policy options remained too difficult for the Cabinet actually to grasp the nettle, and that therefore, until things got worse, putting it to Cabinet would only produce the same result, that it would be bounced back to the Foreign Office and we would just be told to go on negotiating. I

suspect he was right on that, but of course, it was, in retrospect, I think a mistake, at least from the Foreign Office's point of view in not having been able to put it to Cabinet, with whatever result, that Autumn. I think Carrington was probably right in that neither option was acceptable, certainly the option of defending and fortifying the Islands, which meant in practice keeping a nuclear submarine permanently there, increasing the military force from the thirty-one marines to something more meaningful, almost certainly having to construct an airfield there so that you could actually react quickly to events. All this against the background of the defence cuts, the withdrawal of HMS Endurance, which kept coming up, which we kept putting back in its bottle. The principle of the withdrawal of HMS Endurance remained agreed up to the invasion, but in practice it was never implemented because the HMS Endurance was, as it were, seeing out a seasonal run. On the one hand that was not possible and on the other the idea of going over the heads of the islanders' wishes and trying to push through a policy of sovereignty transfer would create severe parliamentary difficulties for the Conservative Party particularly and criticism from the opposition which for the government was highly unpalatable.

I think the mistake one made then was the lack of attempts to prepare opinion in the UK to really get the options across, get them argued, not in a situation of crisis but in terms of educating opinion on the reality of the options. The situation then drifted, it drifted to late autumn, we did then put a paper to Cabinet, it came back with a decision that we should continue to negotiate. The Ministry of Defence certainly took the view that if the Islands were invaded there was nothing they could really do about it, it was too far, it would require a total task force which was probably beyond our capabilities to manage in the conditions of the Falklands and at that distance.

We had a further round of negotiations with the Argentines in February in New York which I attended which were extremely tough where they said, effectively, 'Look, you've got a year and we're going to have a rhythm of negotiations where sovereignty must be the key thing, that rhythm must be monthly I think in its frequency.' I can't remember the details but it was a perfectly ludicrous scenario if you like. We came back from New York convinced that now we were on the final stages unless we could actually produce a policy which could forestall the incremental steps of pressure which we foresaw coming.

What of course changed all this and accelerated the timing of military action by Argentina was a number of factors, one the change in the Junta in December 1981 which brought to power Galtieri and, in the naval part of the Junta, Anaya, very much a firebrand, a man with the naval tradition of advocacy of aggressive policies towards the Falklands. It coincided internally in Argentina with the collapse of the economy, and the collapse of the economy masterminded by a regime which had conducted repressive policies over a number of years and therefore had very little popular support so that the attractions of a foreign adventure became more and more strong in order to divert attention from the internal problems.

Then you had this ludicrous event, which was the trigger for the invasion of the arrival in South Georgia of the scrap metal merchants run by this man called Davidoff. He had a perfectly legal contract to remove scrap, but I don't need to go into the history that he arrived there on an Argentine Antarctic naval vessel, which was again understandable because it was the only way he could get there, but clearly as part of a naval ploy to, as it were, raise the stakes. The Argentine flag was raised and there were naval or military personnel ashore, and I remember very much that this was at a weekend. These things always happened at the weekend. I was sitting in this cottage in the country, and it was one of those wonderful British occasions which I loved with the family which was one of the five-nations rugby matches about to start at 2.30, with all my boys lined up in front of the television, and at 2.25 the phone rang and a languid voice from the Foreign Office said, 'Looks as though the Argies have landed in South Georgia, you'd better come up to town.' Well, we had to decide over that weekend (Richard Luce was then the minister) what to do. Certainly the ministerial feeling was that one had to react strongly because otherwise the government would be exposed to Parliamentary criticism that this was an infringement of British sovereignty and that one therefore had to respond with muscle. Of course we didn't have any muscle. All we had was HMS Endurance, which happened to be in the area. It was still there because it had been reprieved until the end of its seasonal duty. I think the trigger for the invasion was the message, which we then sent to Buenos Aires which was, 'If you don't take your men off, we will send HMS Endurance and take them off for you.' That, I think, was the trigger, it engaged Argentine face because all of this was of course covered in the press in both

countries in a way which made it extraordinarily difficult for them to accept the option of having their men taken off. But it also presented them with a rationale for raising the stakes and over the next week there were rather frantic and very misleading negotiations with the Argentines, where first of all they tried to play it down and then they got tougher. By the end of that week, by about 25 March, it was clear, at least in retrospect, that the decision had been taken for military action and invasion happened on 2 April.

I remember in the Office, I think the invasion was on a Friday morning and on the Wednesday it was agreed that we should go up and open the Emergency Unit in the Foreign Office which was a good illustration of how ill-prepared the Foreign Office was for dealing with this sort of crisis. We went up to this set of rooms looking over the Park where there were virtually no facilities whatsoever except for a few tables and chairs. We went up there with, I think, myself, Colin Bright who was the Argentine desk officer, John Weston, who was then Head of Defence Department who didn't stay more than a few days because he had to go back to do his own thing, and two or three other people. At the end of the crisis I think we had had something like 600 people pass through the Emergency Unit, but there we were at the start grossly undermanned. There were no facilities there, there were no beds, no bathrooms unless you wandered down the corridor to find one. We never had a proper filing system throughout the crisis because it never caught up. We had no effective registry. We simply devised our own filing system on the tables with piles of paper, and I think it was one of the lessons of the Falklands campaign that what was needed when setting up an emergency unit was one that actually worked. I remember Sally brought me in a toothbrush and things. One stayed there with telegrams coming in like confetti and one tried to deal with them. Then we went through that quite extraordinary Friday where we knew the invasion had taken place, but the only news that it had taken place and that the garrison and the Governor had been taken prisoner came from the Argentine media. There was a long delay during the day in announcing this because Margaret Thatcher wouldn't accept that we had firm evidence that the Islands had been occupied because we hadn't heard from the Islands. We said well of course you wouldn't. So there was this sort of farcical delay until the evening when Carrington and Nott gave a joint press conference. Meanwhile the decision had been taken to send a Task Force."

MMcB: "Already?"

Sir Robin: "Yes, the decision had been taken on, I think, the Thursday night meeting in the House of Commons, I can't remember. And it was again, I think, historically fascinating that the initial Ministry of Defence position was that there was really nothing they could do about it, that it was too difficult, until the intervention of Admiral Henry Leach who said, 'Yes, we can do it,' much to the shock of his Defence colleagues but much, of course, to the relief of the Prime Minister, for whom this was not only a case of British territory being taken by a foreigner by direct aggression, but also of course a political crisis of major proportions for the government.

Again, I remember sitting up in the emergency unit late on a Friday night when it was agreed that there was to be this emergency debate in the House of Commons the next day. I got a call from Private Office saying, 'Oh, by the way, we want two speeches, one for the Prime Minister and one for the Foreign Secretary . . .' because of course Carrington was doing it in the Lords '. . . by eight o'clock tonight please.' I remember looking at Colin Bright and saying, 'How are we going to do this?' So I said, 'Well, come on, let's divide up the labour, you do the factual stuff and I'll do the comment stuff.' We produced two speeches, which Carrington actually used in the Lords, more or less, but clearly the Prime Minister wasn't very happy with hers, and I don't blame her because there she was fighting for survival. So most of that Friday night was spent over in No.10 sitting there with Margaret Thatcher. She was admirable, absolutely admirable, tough, determined, really in fighting form. We were all exhausted. I was absolutely knackered as I hadn't slept since God knows when. I remember getting back to the Foreign Office sometime late at night. Someone had put a bed up in our corridor and I tried to sleep in it but couldn't. I got up at about five in the morning then went back over to No.10 all morning to work on the speech, then went to the debate, which, for the FCO was a pretty grisly experience because of the wave of vituperation, the shock and humiliation, the need for a scapegoat with the Foreign Office as the scapegoat, quite unfairly when one knows the history of it. It was a very harrowing day and of course it led to the dispatch of the Task Force on the following Monday, the first vessels of the Task Force. It gave the government a

platform on which to build either for the recovery of the Islands or using the Task Force as a means of pressure to produce a negotiated outcome which was acceptable.

It led of course to the resignation of Peter Carrington, which was of deep sadness to us. I remember being in a meeting the following Monday or Tuesday with Richard Luce and suddenly Peter Carrington wandered in. He said, 'Don't pay any attention to me, I'm just looking around,' and then wandered out. Then a couple of hours later there was the news that he had resigned. We went and had sad drinks with him that night. I think Peter Carrington still feels very bitter about the fact that the Foreign Office, and he in particular, was seen as to blame. I think, at the same time, he felt that somebody's blood had to be shed, as it were, in order to lance the wound and to allow the government to regain the initiative. I think that many thought that John Nott should be the person to resign, but then again, if one looks at it cold-bloodedly, it would probably be wrong for the Defence Minister to resign at a time when the whole effort of the Task Force was being engineered. Sad, but I think probably politically necessary for it to have happened."

MMcB: "So why did he have to resign?"

Sir Robin: "Well I think he got fed up with the constant barrage of criticism which he felt was so unjustified, and I think he was an honourable man. This was almost the last occasion you can think of. You know, 'Somebody's got to take the blame, and I'll do it.' Of course it was a tragedy because he was a great Foreign Secretary."

MMcB: "Did Endurance stay on station at the time of the invasion?"

Sir Robin: "Yes. Endurance happened to be in Port Stanley or somewhere in the vicinity of Port Stanley at the time of the Davidoff landing, then it went chasing off down to South Georgia and remained on station there. Then it tried haring back to the Falkland Islands but it was too late. It wasn't there at the time of the invasion. Interesting if it had been. I remember Margaret Thatcher saying, 'Well what good is Endurance anyway, it's only got a pop gun on board?' which was about right. It was an Antarctic vessel not a naval vessel in the terms of carrying real fire-power. But I

suppose had it been able to interpose itself and at least provoke the need for the Argentines to create casualties, whereas they were very determined to make this as bloodless as possible, I think it might have been more interesting in terms of world public opinion.

I've missed out all sorts of things on those few days; the debate in the Security Council, the resolution on the Falklands that Tony Parsons engineered so brilliantly in the United Nations. The object was, first of all, to get a condemnation of the Argentine invasion and to get a resolution calling on them to withdraw immediately, and there was a final part which was, having withdrawn, the two sides would then discuss solutions. But the key thing was one, the condemnation, and two, the demand for withdrawal, and it was on that basis throughout the rest of the campaign which we were able to premise the, Article 51, self-defence action of the Task Force.

It was a very interesting period, certainly the time in the emergency unit, a fairly tough time, psychologically tough at the start because of this feeling of humiliation and the blame heaped on the Foreign Office for which I felt particularly vulnerable being Head of the Department. At the same time, the pressure of the workload was huge. I averaged, I think, about three and a half-hours' sleep a night over the main months of the campaign. One used to get home some time after midnight and be back at one's desk by five to put together the report, first of all for the Foreign Office and then the War Cabinet. One of the lessons of the Falklands is that if you are going to have a crisis, have it in the West because the time differences then work in your favour. It meant that you had your debates in New York, your action in Washington, your action in Buenos Aires, what was happening on the ground with the Task Force, late in the evening. You then had the telegrams reporting the results and outcomes reaching you by the middle of the night. You then had that time to deal with those and to put them into briefs for the War Cabinet and the decisions required and you could then send the decisions back in time for when they woke up in New York or Washington or wherever it was. If you imagine now, with a war in Iraq, you would have the reverse problem, so it was, in a sense, helpful, if you could put it that way, that it was in the West."

MMcB: "I have a recollection that someone or other in London issued a statement saying that it would take two weeks for a nuclear submarine to get back on station, thus telling the Argentines that they had two weeks clear to get their troops onto the Islands before there was any risk of attack by a nuclear submarine."

Sir Robin: "Yes, there were any number of those sort of episodes which, in the round-up at the post-mortem, could be seen as factors. In fact, I think I'm right in saying that the decision to send a nuclear submarine wasn't taken until something like the 28th or 29th March, but the press ran a story that they had been despatched a few days earlier. I think this was the time when the decision was clearly, in retrospect, taken in Buenos Aires to mount an invasion, and so you could say that that was an additional factor that they had to attack or it would be too late if they'd left it. There were a number of those sort of factors. I mean if you're sitting in Buenos Aires and you're told the British press are saying that a nuclear submarine is on the way, you have to decide whether you're going to do it or not because what you can't afford to do is run into a nuclear submarine on the way there."

MMcB: "What about reports from the embassy?"

Sir Robin: "Before the invasion?"

MMcB: "Yes."

Sir Robin: "Well, I think Anthony Williams felt very bitter about some of the accusations made against him. I thought Anthony Williams did a good job. I thought he was consistently trying to hammer home the message that time was running out and we needed a policy. The problem was more in the Islands, and the Governor, Rex Hunt, felt very much at odds with Government policy. I don't think Rex really understood the politics of Latin America. Rex, I think, faced the dilemma that governors of the Falkland Islands regularly faced, that you went out there wearing, effectively, two hats, one you're the agent of HMG and you're meant to be the executor of HMG's policy, and on the other hand you are father of your people, and in a small population as in the Falklands, most governors I think, partly through emotional reasons, decided to be the father of the people and, in that sense, the

opponent of British Government policy. If you live in the Islands or if you've ever been to the Islands, you can understand it all too easily. If you're sitting in London and you're looking at a map and you look at those islands four hundred miles off the Argentine coast, it looks one way. If you go to the Islands, it looks different. Where is Latin America? There is absolutely no indication that you are anywhere there, either in the geography or in the atmosphere of the Islands. You are much more of a Scottish off-shore island. All the Falkland Islanders wanted to do was to be left in peace rather than be pushed around by politics. But it wasn't helpful. Rex was, as always, 'Bang the Argentines' nose and no negotiations.' Anthony Williams in Buenos Aires was 'Time's running out, you've got to do something, somebody's got to convince those Islanders.' So there was this sort of three party element in the Falklands which made it much more difficult to deal with."

MMcB: "There was quite a substantial British population in Argentina, wasn't there?"

Sir Robin: "Argentina. Yes, it's difficult to know precisely how big it was. I mean there's a large population going way back to the mid-nineteenth century, early part of this century when we were responsible for investment in the utilities and the railways and God knows what in Argentina. Several hundred thousand of those at the time of the invasion had the right to a British passport. Some of them may only have had a British passport, although I think most of them were dual nationals effectively. They had very little sympathy for the Islanders and they got up Margaret Thatcher's nose as a result of that. The logic of their position was well we opted to live in Argentina, don't tell us we made a mistake, that was our decision. So inevitably you had that difference of view.

Anyway, it was an interesting experience. At the end of the campaign when the Islands were re-taken, the emergency unit was closed down and I was sent back to be once again head of a department, South American Department. By then it had expanded to a colossal proportion with the huge amount of work that had to be done on the Falkland Islands on the post recapture stage."

MMcB: "Rebuilding."

Sir Robin: "Rebuilding, providing a new administration, providing aid and all the policy decisions that had to be made round the Falkland Islands internationally. We went down there. We were meant to be in new premises but for some reason of administration, they hadn't managed to get all the desks in. I remember sitting on the floor talking on telephones and trying to write things. It was total chaos for a bit. But it soon became apparent that one just couldn't survive, one was putting up something like thirty or forty submissions a day, nearly all on the Falkland Islands, and the rest of Latin America just wasn't getting looked at. The decision was then taken, which I pushed for, to set up a separate Falkland Islands Department, and I then became Head of the Falkland Islands Department till the end of the year when, in theory, I was due to go to the Royal College of Defence Studies which the powers that be in the Foreign Office very kindly had seen was some way of getting a bit of repose after the year that had passed.

Unfortunately, it didn't quite work out that way. We had, during that autumn, the Franks Committee of Inquiry and their report was due early in the New Year. I remember my first day at the Royal College of Defence Studies in Belgrave Square, I got halfway across the hall when the Hall Porter said, 'Message from the Foreign Office. Could you ring the Permanent Under-Secretary (who was then Anthony Acland).' I was called back to deal with the Franks Report and the debate in the House of Commons in February on the Franks Report which occupied me entirely up to more or less the end of February. I was then asked to write a diplomatic history of the crisis using all the material available, including intelligence material. That took me really until the end of April. The results are somewhere in the Office. So I didn't really get to the RCDS in body until April, but then had a very engaging, relaxing, idle, eight months until the end of the year when I went off to Havana."

MMcB "Before we leave the subject, were you involved in any way with the negotiations between ourselves and the Americans and the Argentinians?"

Sir Robin: "The Haig mediation and all the rest of it? No, I wasn't directly involved. I mean, I didn't sit round the table with Haig and his team, but I was certainly involved, of course, in producing the papers and the briefs. There was a

division of labour in the Foreign Office then. The Emergency Unit was the sort of boiler-house but then you had separate teams dealing with defence issues, separate teams dealing with the political issues which you fed but you were not, as it were, as in a department, the sort of starting point. One did quite a lot of drafting of various bits of policy but things like the Haig mediation effort were usually done elsewhere in the Foreign Office with our input as necessary.

It was quite a fascinating period. I don't know whether you saw that film that appeared on the television recently called 'The Falklands Story'. It was a film made in, I think, 1986 by the BBC. It used actors to relate in summary the lead up to the invasion, and the political aspects of the mediation efforts during the crisis. I can't remember who played Haig but it was a wonderful representation using his Haig-speak. I was rather surprised because earlier this year I was rung up by my brother who said, 'I've just switched channels, missed something on the Falklands story, but I see you were appearing in it.' I said, 'What!' He said, 'Robin Fearn was played by so-and-so.' I eventually managed to get a copy of this film and much to my relief I found I wasn't caricatured too awfully. It rather surprised me that you could not be told that you were appearing as a character. It wasn't shown in the eighties, as I understand it, because it was very much a glorification of Margaret Thatcher. I think it was found to be politically lacking in impartiality. So it was not shown until the twentieth anniversary."

MMcB: "You ended up, after the Royal College of Defence Studies as Ambassador in Cuba."

Sir Robin: "A quiet two years. There was nothing particularly exciting happening in Cuba or with Castro at the time. It was the time of Castro's campaign against the developing countries' debt. And it was the time of Nicaragua and all that. So there was a lot of regular political interest in the job in Cuba, but I think it must be almost the quietest time I've spent in an embassy in the sense that we didn't really work after 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I think we worked from 8.00am till 3.00pm.

By that time the apparatus of power was absolutely solidly established in Cuba, and it was an apparatus of power which, despite the palm trees and the engaging Cuban

characters, was more of a reality than ever I'd experienced in Hungary. It was very complete. So we had very little, limited access to the Cuban population, except again a few cultural people were let out as it were to keep us happy. You spent your time mainly on the political task of trying to assess what was happening and report accordingly in political analysis. It required, I suppose, the usual efforts to develop relationships with key officials, but they were terribly well-organised, wonderfully well-organised. You would make two calls in the Foreign Office, and when you got to the second one, the second one knew what you'd talked about to the first one, and they all held the party line.

Again, it was a question of getting to know people, getting, as it were, to establish a personal relationship which allowed you to at least get behind the cover. It was enjoyable, but not very taxing. There was a certain amount of commercial work. Cuba oddly enough was our largest Latin-American market at the time."

MMcB: "Had we given up sending them Leyland buses?"

Sir Robin: "We'd given up sending them Leyland buses, but we sold them various other things. When they had foreign exchange they used it. They paid.

It was a very quiet time, but very enjoyable. There were no great features of it that I can remember to excite you with. I finished that in 1986. I was called back early because my predecessor in Havana, David Thomas, who had then become the Assistant Under-Secretary or as we now call, Director, had heart trouble and so had to go off and get better. And so I was called back early after two years in Cuba to take over from David Thomas."

MMcB: "Was that a promotion?"

Sir Robin: "Well, I suppose it was a senior grade job, so yes. I did that for three years."

MMcB: " specialising in the Americas, North and South?"

Sir Robin: "It was technically North and South in the sense that North America Department was part of the group of departments, but policy towards the United States is really dealt with through specialist departments. North America Department was a co-ordinating point, so one's engagement was less with the United States than with Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Falklands. On the Falklands, post conflict, it was mainly the early stages of negotiations, on fishing on which the present prosperity of the Falkland Islands depends. But otherwise, just general Latin American affairs, a lot of time spent on Caribbean issues, Dependent Territories in the Caribbean, trying to sort them out, the usual problems.

Then in 1989 I went to Madrid, which I considered myself very fortunate to have got. Prior to that I wasn't an EU specialist and there was very much the ethos at the time that major European posts went to people who had EU experience, so I was lucky to get Madrid."

MMcB: "It must have been a very delightful posting."

Sir Robin: "It was a wonderful posting. It was a superb five years, four and a half, my final period in the Foreign Office. An exciting post dealing with a Spain, which more than a decade after the death of Franco, was undergoing a rapid and very successful period of economic, political and social development. Their frenetic bubble of vitality that it had in the eighties when the Spanish work style was to work all day and play all night had largely passed. It had rather settled down from that when I was there, during the final years of the socialist government of Felipe Gonzalez. But it was a country which by then had become a big player in the European Union and, of course, a member of NATO and was showing itself prepared to pull its weight inside NATO in terms of using Spanish troops in humanitarian peace-keeping efforts. It was also a huge market.

There was constant work on EU issues in terms of lobbying and negotiating, trying to engineer either alliances or influences over the range of issues dealt with in Brussels. That took up a great deal of time. And then of course there was Gibraltar. It is an oddity for a European post to have, as it were, a big bilateral issue, one which puts you technically in such direct conflict with a country which is your friend and ally. It

was of course a very welcome difference from dealing with the Falkland Islands and Argentina that you were dealing with a democracy and a democracy which was with you on most of the main issues. But Gibraltar was an awkward one, it was what the Spaniards used to call 'The pebble in the shoe'.

It had similarities, in a sense, with the Falklands. One mustn't exaggerate these similarities, but both from the Spanish point of view and the Argentinian point of view, if you accepted that Britain could not change the constitutional status of either country against the wishes of the inhabitants, then the long-term logic had to be that Argentina or Spain would have to follow a policy of benevolence and persuasion, making it apparent to the inhabitants that their lives, the quality of their lives, their economic futures, would be better off as part of Spain or Argentina. Although that is what we always tried to persuade them to do, in practice it was a policy they found impossible to do, partly because I think the whole system of democratic government and elections every four years militated against the adoption of long-term policy which would be unpopular with many people. It was much easier to say, 'Hey, we're going to turn the screw' than to say, 'No, we'll turn the other cheek' and show how much we love you. So it was one of these perversities of the situation that the right policies really couldn't be followed.

A wonderful time in Spain. A country which, having been born there perhaps I have a prejudice towards, although I was born in Catalonia rather than Madrid, but a country which I think has shown a remarkable development since the days of Franco and is now a very serious player indeed."

MMcB: "You mentioned the EU and Brussels and negotiations in that framework. Did Brussels play any kind of a part in trying to produce a solution to the Gibraltar problem?"

Sir Robin: "Rather the reverse. When Spain joined the European Union there was a belief on both sides, both in London and Spain, that somehow the joint venture of the European Union would allow us to resolve, or even dissolve the problem of Gibraltar within the EU framework. And of course Gibraltar was also linked into the European Union as a territory for which Britain is responsible, not in all aspects of it

but in many aspects of it. In practice it worked out to be quite the reverse in that the application of a number of directives to Gibraltar gave Spain scope for obstruction, for blocking those directives unless Gibraltar were excluded. So it opened up a whole new range of argument over Gibraltar rather than the reverse, which, rather naively, we thought might be the case when Spain joined the European Union. Things like the extension to Gibraltar of the air liberalisation package, to allow Gibraltar airport to open up, etc, etc, but which the Spaniards were determined not to allow to happen in order to isolate Gibraltar; or some of the financial directives, a whole range of issues which if applied to Gibraltar would seem to the Spaniards as either enhancing Gibraltar's ability to develop economically or enhancing their legitimacy and status. So they would use these again as arguments for blocking directives. We spent a great deal of time rather barrenly talking about these wretched directives. So no, it did the reverse."

MMcB: "Do you think there is any kind of solution in sight?"

Sir Robin: "I'm not an optimist. I've obviously followed the events this year, the initiative for a joint sovereignty solution. My personal view is that unless you have a solution, such as joint sovereignty, that there is very little prospect of the economy of Gibraltar ever developing its true potential. The prospects for the finance centre as the European Union, works its way towards restricting the role of finance centres inside the European Union are going to diminish. In terms of tourism, until you can get Gibraltar airport linked in as part of the network of airports in the Iberian peninsula so that you can fly from Madrid to Gibraltar, you're not going to get the business presence in Gibraltar, you're not going to get the tourists that you could get. So I think that while the impasse remains, you are going to have a restraining hand on the economy of Gibraltar, which is not in the interests of future generations of Gibraltarians. One would like to see the Gibraltarians recognising this and looking more realistically at the merit of a sovereignty solution, and if so, how can we in Gibraltar play our part in shaping it to ensure that it produces the right long-term result for us?' But that, of course, as you can see is not happening."

MMcB: "A battle for hearts and minds again?"

Sir Robin: "Battle for hearts and minds again, yes, but again I say the Spaniards don't help themselves with that, they really don't. It's really perverse, because when you look back at pre-Franco times relations with Gibraltar and Spain, although the sovereignty dispute was there, were open and friendly and Gibraltar was simply a part of the society of southern Spain, different obviously in its administration but with none of the animosities and barriers and constraints that now exist."

MMcB: "Before, we finally close, can I ask you about your experience as Director of the Foreign Service Programme at Oxford University? What does that do?"

Sir Robin: "Well, the Foreign Service Programme is a post-graduate programme for foreign diplomats which has been running in Oxford since the seventies. It's attached to Queen Elizabeth House. When I was there, I think I was the third Director, I took over from Sir John Johnson in 1995. We had each year a maximum of thirty-four diplomats. We tried to ensure that they came from thirty-four different countries, actually it's not quite true as we also had two Japanese, so that you had the widest spread of people. They were mainly funded by Chevening scholarships. That remains the case now, all except a small minority from the wealthier countries."

MMcB: "Japan?"

Sir Robin: "Japan would fund their own. And there was a Kuwaiti for example. In the nineties, you had, of course, a rather different pattern in that you had a lot of people from the new democracies following the break-up of the Soviet Union, and a year at the Foreign Service Programme was seen as a valuable contribution to try to build up the expertise of their own foreign services."

It had quite small, modest premises in Parks Road. We were never a grand organisation, but I think we produced a very good teaching programme covering, what are the classic four disciplines for foreign diplomats, international politics, international economics and finance, international law and diplomatic practice. My job as Director was to organise and ensure the right quality of the teaching input for the politics, finance and law, and myself to teach the diplomatic practice element. We

placed quite a lot of importance on the hands on practical side as well as the more academic or theoretical aspects of diplomacy. People came in October and they did an academic year."

MMcB: "Were these diplomats coming from their embassies in London?"

Sir Robin: "No, these were always diplomats direct from capitals. We never had anyone seconded from embassies in London. These were diplomats sent by their capitals. Of course, for a Foreign Service, wherever it may be, there is the usual pressure on resources, it takes quite a big breath, as it were, to let someone go off for a year. In the Japanese or Korean case, they used to send them off for two years to study abroad. You were always being told that the days when Foreign Ministers would allow this to happen were numbered, but Foreign Service Programme is, I am glad to say, still in excellent form and succeeding as it ever did.

It was very enjoyable. From my point of view, the difficulty was that I didn't live in Oxford so I had to attack it either from here in Wiltshire or we had a flat in London. I think I spent most of my salary on rail fares and dismal nights at 11.30 after a dinner party on Didcot Railway Station waiting for a late train. But it was huge fun. I'd never taught before in my life. I found that I loved teaching and found it deeply rewarding. And I found the creation each year of this family of at least thirty-four young kids (they weren't young kids, they were probably average age early thirties, but to me they were young kids) tremendous fun, and one has remained in close contact with a number of them.

Part of the benefit for them was the actual education they got. Another aspect was the network that they developed of contacts either through their colleagues or through former members of the Foreign Service Programme. There are something like eleven or twelve hundred foreign diplomats who have now been through the year in the Foreign Service Programme since its inception which is quite a formidable network.

It was very enjoyable, but of course I could only go on until I was sixty-five. Life is a process of decapitation; decapitated by the Foreign Office at 60, by Oxford at 65. I'm now in my third career."

MMcB: "What's that?"

Sir Robin: "I'm primarily doing teaching and training in diplomacy with an organisation called the Centre for Political and Diplomatic Studies which is run by my colleague and collaborator, Dr John Hemery, an academic, and we provide now two quarterly courses for the Foreign Office, one on political work and one on political negotiation. We train overseas where the demand may be. That takes about a third of my time, I suppose, then otherwise other things, Imperial War Museum, Bath University."

MMcB: "Are there British participants?"

Sir Robin: "On that course in Oxford? No, there was one person from the Foreign Office before my time. There was some special reason which I can't remember, why he was on it."

MMcB: "The FCO has always been reluctant to spare staff for training."

Sir Robin: "Well, I think they do now. I think there's been a very welcome transformation in the Foreign Office and the whole approach to the priority given to training. In fact, if you look now, the menu of training courses provided by the Foreign Office is very comprehensive and I think, though I shouldn't say this myself as I participated in it, the quality of it is high. But we have a rather different approach. We do module training or specific short-term training rather than long-term periods of more academic training which the Foreign Service Programme provided. I suspect that that's probably the best way of getting value for money.

Certainly in your day and my day, 'training' was not a word that you ever heard. Whether it did us harm or not, I know not. When I look at some of the training that is done I feel that I would have found it extremely useful to have at least experienced it to see what it did, what added value it did provide. I think things are very different now, and, I think from the point of view of the importance given to training, that is very welcome. I still think it's a bit haphazard. There's probably more scope for a

structured approach to training, but then of course when you're always trying to train people who are actually on desks, there is the usual conflict of interest; 'We think it a good idea that you go on the course, but I'm afraid we're not going to find the time for you to do it.' But there is a big difference, and I've been impressed by training. But then I would say that as I'm a contributor to it.

As I say, we do this, four times a year, political work course, which is for people going abroad to do political work for the first time. It's a three-day course and then a political negotiation course of two days. Again, I find it fun because I like teaching, I like the contact with younger people. I hope it does some good, and it's a way of keeping oneself out of the armchair I suppose."

MMcB: "Well, thank you very much indeed."

Sir Robin: "Not at all. It was a pleasure to talk to you."