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Sir Simon James Fraser, GCMG, 2016 (KCMG 2013; CMG 2009)

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR SIMON FRASER GCMG

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AW: This is 11 July 2018 and Sir Simon Fraser is giving his recollections of his diplomatic career. Our first question Simon, why did you join the FCO?

SF: I joined the FCO in September 1979 having just left university. I had taken the exams rather speculatively, like so many people, not expecting to get through and being quite surprised when I did succeed in them. Why I joined? I don't think there was one overriding reason. I was always interested in history, in international affairs, and in languages and in particular in the Near East, European history, and so it seemed in a sense a natural thing. I'd studied Classics at University. The Master of my college at Cambridge was Sir Duncan Wilson, who was a former Ambassador in Moscow, and I had talked to him about it and he had encouraged me to apply, so he was one of the reasons. My uncle was Sir Michael Franklin who was the Permanent Secretary at DTI and the Ministry of Agriculture, so he was in the Civil Service and another role model. So they were influences on me. So for a combination of reasons I applied.

It was 1979 and it was very shortly after Margaret Thatcher had been elected. I was very lucky because a freeze on Civil Service recruitment was imposed that year and I was one of the last people to squeeze through, literally the last in before the freeze came into effect! I went in without a background of deep knowledge of politics or economics or policy but with a broad general interest. So I guess those were the days of the selection of the generalist.

I remember doing my selection panel; I had a terrible streaming cold which made it very difficult. Our main written test was about how to deal with the risks from unexploded WW2 bombs discovered during the construction of a new road tunnel under, I think, the Bristol Channel. In my Final Selection Board I was asked a question about the future of Northern Ireland which I answered absolutely appallingly and thought I didn't have a chance of getting through, but obviously someone took pity on me!

AW: Can you remember who was on your Board?

SF: No, I can't remember who was on the Board but I remember how terrifying it was. I can remember walking out of the room!

That's a bit of the story of how and why I joined. We turned up on 3rd September 1979, there were about twenty something of us. In my group there were others I recall – Geoffrey Adams, Jonathan Powell, Ian Cliff, who's still serving in the Office. We went in for, I think, two weeks of training in the Map Room supervised by Paddy de Courcy Ireland who was at that point the Head of Training Department. We sat round and were educated in various things connected with the Office. A lot of it was connected with how to stick pins into bits of paper so that people didn't prick their fingers at briefings and which colour paper you should use for which type of submission. It did strike me that there were quite a lot of rules and regulations about it all: "this is how we do it", the power of precedent. We also had Paddy, at one point, reading us extracts from Harold Nicolson's diaries. I remember one part of that very clearly which was when he quoted Harold Nicolson saying "you should always remember that you are an elite and you have been selected to be an elite and you should be proud of that". That was a bit of the atmosphere of the day. But how relevant as a training for modern diplomacy?

We had various training briefings from different heads of department, and other parts of the Foreign Office but it was only two weeks and nothing like the sort of sustained induction you have nowadays. At some point in the second week they came round with envelopes which said "this is your job". I was assigned to United Nations Department to work on the UN, which I thought was interesting. However, they then took me aside and said "You've been assigned to work in UN Department in London, but would you mind going to New York in two weeks' time please for three months to attend the General Assembly because we have a system of sending junior people to support the Committees". So that was something of a shock for me just out of university and with very little understanding of the whole machinery, but I of course said yes and two weeks later I went off to New York and spent three months supporting UKMIS New York in the 1979 UN General Assembly.

1979/80: UKMIS, New York, United Nations

AW: You must have really had to scurry to go?

SF: I remember packing a case and interestingly enough - and this dates me - it was the first time I'd ever been on an aeroplane! My family didn't travel a lot, we weren't particularly affluent. I remember getting on the plane to New York and it was all very exciting.

AW: Did they look after you well when you arrived, in terms of pastoral care? Did they find you somewhere to live?

SF: We stayed in the Beverley Hotel on Lexington Avenue. There were half a dozen of us. We were looked after pretty well. Actually, I tell you it was a blessing, in those days we still used to have subs – subsistence allowance. We were paid a daily amount regardless of our expenditure, it doesn't happen now of course. I remember quite clearly that we were paid \$70 per day and the hotel was something like \$30. The long and the short of it was that I was able to pay off all my university debts after three months and still have something in my pocket. Times have changed.

We turned up at the UK Mission. The Permanent Representative in those days was Tony Parsons who had just been Ambassador in Iran and of course had lived through the fall of the Shah. He had had a very difficult time then because the Embassy was judged not to have foreseen it as well as it could have done which led to the writing of the “Browne Report” by Nick Browne trying to learn lessons, which has become quite celebrated in the FCO, and which we referred to back to when I was PUS during the Libya campaign in 2011. So Tony Parsons had come back to London and then was appointed to New York and I think was a man who, in a sense, had something to prove at that point. I found him a very impressive individual. His Head of Chancery was Mig Goulding, also a distinguished diplomat who later served as Under Secretary General in the UN Secretariat. I was assigned as a very junior person to support the British representative on the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly which is the committee that deals with financial and administrative questions, so the running of the UN. It sounds very dry but it was interesting because it has a finger in every aspect of UN activity. Our representative was a man from the Treasury called Michael Stewart who was quite an ebullient and at times an abrasive personality who'd been there a long time. I suspect that the Treasury may have parked him there. But I got on well with him and I enjoyed working with him and I learned an awful lot. It was a very good example of how the Foreign Office's policy of immersing you in the “sink or swim, get on with it” actually can work. It was quite tough because everything was new; all the processes were new, understanding how the system worked was new. It was a rapid learning curve and

I very much appreciated it. It was fascinating to be in the General Assembly. Not only did I work on the Fifth Committee but one of my jobs was to fill the seat in the General Assembly when important people weren't there, listening to the speeches of different foreign ministers and summarising them. So, two weeks into the Foreign Office I found myself sitting behind the United Kingdom sign in the General Assembly of the UN! I thought it was quite exciting and my Mum certainly did!

AW: And what were the big issues for that General Assembly?

SF: It was an interesting time because it was just after the fall of the Shah. At the time the Shah was actually in hospital in New York, dying of cancer and Khomeini was very much the big issue. It was just before the start of the Iran/Iraq War which came to be an important part of my career later on, we'll come onto it, and it was just before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which happened right at the end of that period, at Christmas that year. It was a period of some interest internationally and politically and of course it was still in the days of the Cold War so it was still the Soviet Union and the Security Council being very much divided along those lines. It's a long time ago now.

The team in UKMIS apart from the Ambassador and Head of Chancery, I remember was an impressive group of people. I think the Mission, like all others, is much smaller now but there was a very good group of First Secretaries who all went on to have quite stellar careers, Kieran Prendergast, Maeve Fort, Graham Burton, Simon Fuller, Gwynne Evans amongst others were all there at the time. They used to work very hard and, if I may say so, they used to play hard as well! It was fun to be around.

AW: In your notes you mentioned Bobby Sands ...

SF: Yes, Bobby Sands was actually later. What happened was that after the first three months I went back and worked in UN Department in London. I carried on working on these issues relating to the administration of the UN and issues to do with economics in the UN in UN Department. My Head of Department was somebody who gloried in the name of Michael Keith Orlebar Simpson-Orlebar. He was rather a remote figure. I was thinking about this when I was reflecting on this conversation, I probably saw my Head of Department once every two months, if I was lucky, and my Under Secretary, Lord Nicky Gordon-Lennox, probably once every six months. So the hierarchies of the Foreign Office were very different (and the names tell their own social story!) The Department had a great big central registry

and all the files in those days were paper files, so the working methods were very different. We had one photocopier in the corridor and you had to record in a register every single document you copied. I worked in London on the UN for that year and then I went back to New York for another three months at the end of it to do another General Assembly, so I did two General Assemblies. The second time I was on a different committee, the Economic Policy Committee, and that was at the time of Bobby Sands and Long Kesh and the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland. The reason I mention that was because this was obviously a big issue in New York because of the Irish community, so it stuck in my mind as being a very tricky political issue for Britain to handle, both in the UN and in the bilateral relationship with the United States. By this time the Iran/Iraq War had begun, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had happened and the other thing that struck me thinking back to it, which is different from now, was that the UK had a big agenda in the UN in those days on the decolonisation issues committee – the Fourth Committee of the UNGA. We had what was still called Rhodesia, and many other decolonisation issues where we were under a lot of pressure from the developing group – the “G77”. So the atmosphere of working in the UN for the British diplomats was quite different in those days.

That was my first year, multilateral issues, UN Department, learning about the Office in a very general and junior role.

AW: In the Office, some of our people have talked about an informal “mentoring” process that seemed to exist in the past, did you find that, was there anybody who helped?

SF: To be honest with you, no. I found the whole approach to training a bit of a sink or swim mentality. It was learning by doing and following other people’s example. There was nothing like the sort of focus on individual development, skills development, that I’m pleased to say there is now in the Office. It was a much more old fashioned work place environment, with none of the focus on diversity that we have now. It was quite a traditional atmosphere. One thing I do clearly remember is everybody smoking in the Third Room, that’s a lifetime ago, isn’t it! And the tea trolley would come round, rattling away. I also remember that people used to come to work between 9.30 and 10am in the morning, which is very different now. The culture has definitely moved on a lot.

AW: So the decision to learn Arabic ... Was that the Office’s idea? Your idea?

SF: We had to do the hard languages aptitude test in those days. It was quite normal to do a hard language, one didn't have to, but quite a lot of people did. I scored fairly well in the language aptitude test. I remember I was keen to learn Greek but they didn't want anybody to learn Greek that year and I also dabbled with the idea of Chinese, but decided against it. Arabic fitted for me into my background and interests in that region, the Mediterranean and the Near East. I was also interested in the culture and religion of the Middle East and also in the Arab-Israel issue. I'd developed a strong interest in the history of Israel when I was at university, so it sort of fitted.

1981: Language Training, Arabic

So we agreed on me doing that but it was an eighteen month course. Because I was asked to go back and do a second General Assembly I missed the start of it in September 1980 and I could only join in January, so I had to catch up and instead of having eighteen months had just over a year and had to squeeze it in to get to the higher level. There were two levels: the operational and then the higher.

I was very pleased to do it. The people on my course were Geoffrey Adams, Ian Cliff and John Sawers, studying Arabic with me as well. The difficulty for us was that MECAS had been closed down because of the Lebanon situation very shortly before so the joys of going to MECAS were no longer available and there was no alternative. So we studied Arabic very unglamorously in what was called Palace Chambers, which is now Portcullis House, but was then part of the Foreign Office. So decrepit was Palace Chambers that you weren't even allowed to walk in the middle of the floor because it was unsafe, and no more than three people were allowed to be in a room at one time and you had to walk around the walls. It wasn't exactly salubrious.

The guy who ran the course was Doug Galloway, who had been one of the teachers at Shemlan, a Scottish guy. He had brought back some of the teachers, a Mr and Mrs Moumneh and another chap, called Fadhil Sharaa I believe, who was a Palestinian and an excellent teacher. The Moumnehs were Lebanese. They were MECAS teachers and they taught us in Palace Chambers. We used to go in in the morning and we would do three or four hours of lessons and then go home and do three or four hours of homework. It was pretty intensive, five days a week. It was hard work but we made a lot of progress so I succeeded in the exams.

AW: Did they send you out into any countries?

SF: Yes, they did, and that's a very good point. We only did Palace Chambers for the first part, for the higher part we were actually sent off to St Andrews. St Andrews has a very good Arabic faculty, but they teach classical Arabic which isn't much use to a diplomat, so they set up a special unit there for us and the four of us went to St Andrews for almost six months. The Moumnehs, poor things, went with us, and shivered in Scotland.

AW: It's a long way from the hills above Beirut!

SF: Exactly! I can't say that they were over the moon about it. During that time we were sent to Syria on a couple of occasions, given two or three weeks to travel. I went off around Syria on my own for several days on buses, making my way. This was in 1981 and I saw the whole of Syria. It was shortly after the massacres of Hama when the regime had killed a lot of people in 1980 trying to wipe out the Muslim Brotherhood. The Ambassador at the time was Patrick Wright and I remember that Vincent Fean, who was the Third Secretary, was very supportive and helped us all. I went up to the Euphrates. One of the things I did was that I went to a little known place at the time called Raqqa because there was an interesting Roman period ruin just next door called Risafe. I actually stayed the night in a hotel in Raqqa, which one of the least pleasant places I've stayed. Of course all those years later Raqqa became the centre of ISIS. There's a point I'd like to make here – interestingly enough for me, we're going to talk about my time in Syria and Iraq, but little did I know that those places I went to, and I was extraordinarily lucky in a way, that they were very current in foreign policy throughout nearly the whole of my career. It all worked in a wholly unpredictable way to have continuing relevance.

In the circumstances I thought the Office made us a very good offer of teaching us the language and investing in us. Of course we all complained about going off to odd places in the Middle East as you do, but it was impressive. When I said to my friends at the time that my employer was actually paying me for a year to learn Arabic, they thought that was great and I think we ought to acknowledge that.

AW: It would have been all too easy for them to have collapsed a bit after MECAS closed ...

SF: Yes, I think it would and of course there were more resources in those days, now it's tougher. I think the standard of language training now is less uniformly good. They really did invest in us and took us to a pretty good level.

AW: So now you are pretty clearly going to be appointed to ...?

SF: Yes. When we were in St Andrews the time came when we were to be posted. As you know in those days you weren't offered a list and invited to apply for posts, you received a letter saying "You have been posted to X". At the time there were four of us learning and there were four jobs available. One was in Khartoum, one was in Riyadh, one was in Damascus, and one was in Baghdad. I drew what I thought was the short straw in those days, Baghdad, which of course was at war with Iran and a pretty difficult regime in a difficult country, a tough place. I think probably the plum option was Damascus but I wasn't that keen to go to Riyadh, so that was fine and I was assigned to go to Baghdad.

1982-84: Baghdad

I must say I didn't know very much about Iraq or Mesopotamian history at the time but I studied it and got ready to go. This was in June 1982 and I was twenty four years old. The big issue at the time was the Falklands – so that was dominating British foreign policy. Carrington had just resigned as Foreign Secretary and Francis Pym had been appointed, so the Foreign Office was going through a bit of a spasm over that. The other big thing that was happening in the Middle East at that time apart from Iran/Iraq was the attack on the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, when the Israelis attacked Sabra and Shatila, so it was a point of high tension.

I flew to Iraq. My vivid memory is of being driven from the airport to a hotel in blackout, because Baghdad was in blackout, and waking up in the morning in this hotel, having spent a year and a half studying Arabic, being taught by Lebanese and Palestinians, and not understanding a single word that anybody said!

AW: Different dialect?

SF: Yes, totally different dialect, and they actually used different words for common daily things. So I felt very lost, I have to say, waking up in this city at war and not understanding much and not knowing where I was. It was very difficult for the Embassy to operate and we'll talk more about that.

It was quite a tough introduction but at least in those days you were able to fly in. Very shortly after that the airspace was closed and there was no air access to Baghdad and everybody had to go over land from Jordan which was a ten hour drive. At the time I think

Baghdad was considered to be one of the two most hardship postings in the Foreign Office because of the war, the climate, the nature of the regime and because life in that country was not easy at the best of times.

I arrived at one of the most acute moments of the Iran/Iraq War, which had been launched by the Iraqis in 1980. Saddam had become President in 1979 and he'd launched his attack against Khomeini in 1980. It had all gone largely in Iraq's favour until about 1982 and then it was reversed. So the time I got there was just as the Iranians were seizing the initiative, and you may recall there were the infamous human wave attacks where they sent in hundreds and thousands of people in the desert just the other side of Basra, and there was this First World War type of pitched trench warfare with the use of gas: horrible, horrific battles and the pressure was very much on the regime. When I got there my Head of Chancery said to me "When is your heavy baggage going to arrive?" I said I thought it would come in six weeks and he said "I'm not sure I would bother unpacking it, I'm not sure you will be here much longer than that". I also remember the Ambassador, who was Stephen Egerton and who we can talk about, wrote a despatch very shortly after I arrived predicting that Saddam Hussein would not be in power in six months' time. How wrong he was. It was a lesson to me actually, very early in my diplomatic career – don't make predictions. It was very, very tense and to be honest I found it quite unnerving arriving in all this tension, and it was difficult to get a feeling for what was going on.

The Embassy was a beautiful old building on the banks of the Tigris which we'd had for a long time and indeed had been the centre of the British presence there during the time of the monarchy, ever since the First World War. It had been sacked and burnt down a few times, including in the 1958 revolution. One of the trophies was a bullet that sat on the Ambassador's mantelpiece that had come through the window and passed through the lapel of the Ambassador Alexander Stirling a few years before. It was a historic place with palm trees and overlooking the Tigris. I was given a room which I was assured was the room that Gertrude Bell had occupied when she was there. Stephen Egerton insisted on calling me The Oriental Secretary because that's what Gertrude Bell had been called, so it was continuity. But essentially I was the Chancery gofer, an Arabist and my job was to do the political reporting, supervise the translations, deal with the Foreign Ministry and be the general junior political officer.

My very first day of being a diplomat in a post abroad is etched in my mind. I was asked to go to Abu Ghraib prison, which later became very notorious, to attend the trial of a British man whose name was Donald Hagger who was accused of being a spy by the regime. He was a slightly odd individual and I'm not sure he had all his marbles, who liked to collect military paraphernalia. The regime had decided they were going to exploit this. He was sentenced to death and I had to attend his trial at which he was sentenced by what was obviously a kangaroo court. That was another shock to the system as I was a slightly wet behind the ears young diplomat. He was imprisoned. He was later released in a swap. This is of course one of the techniques of these regimes. They would take pawns so they would have political bargaining chips. It's something the Iranians do as well.

This was quite a rude introduction to life. I moved into my house and the other thing I discovered very rapidly is that it was very difficult to buy food in Baghdad because of the war and effectively a blockade. I remember paying the equivalent of ten pounds for a cauliflower. There was very little food in the town and the Embassy had to import most of its food by truck or by plane, ordered from a company in Denmark or you had to drive to Kuwait with your cool boxes in the back of the car – which is a seven hour drive each way - stock up and drive back as fast as you could with the air conditioning blasting. So all by way of saying it was quite challenging and tough.

For some reason the Foreign Office had decided because it was all so precarious they weren't going to invest in a budget for air conditioning in Embassy houses despite the fact it was the hottest country in the world. We had these rather odd machines in which water was pumped through a rush mat and a fan would pump damp air into your house. A lot of people got respiratory problems with that.

In many ways life was difficult but having said that it was absolutely fascinating, first of all because of the war, secondly because it's a fascinating place, the history, Mesopotamia, the great rivers, places like Ur and Nimrod and Babylon. Although it was difficult to travel because you had to apply for permission from the Foreign Ministry two weeks in advance. And then you were tailed by people when you travelled. But when you did get out, for people like me with my interest in history, it was absolutely deeply fascinating. And it was a country that you couldn't visit as a tourist, so it was a unique experience and opportunity. So for all the hardship one has to bear in mind the upside. Visiting places like Mosul and Basra was quite extraordinary and a privilege.

From time to time there would be air raids. The Iranians would fly over. All the anti-aircraft guns in Baghdad would suddenly go off, the whole city would shake. The most dangerous thing was not the bombs that were being dropped but the returning anti-aircraft fire that came down. People used to make the mistake of going on their roof to watch the show, it was a very dangerous thing to do. So you did have to learn how to look after yourself.

As is very often the case with hardship posts there was a tremendous sense of esprit de corps and an active social life. We used to play a lot of tennis, there was a nice compound, there were lots of parties, people went out of their way to look after each other. We weren't actually allowed to mingle much with Iraqis because the regime was so tight that it was not safe for Iraqis, so therefore the foreign diplomatic community got pushed together and that inhibited your ability to actually contact society or understand what was going on. But people used to make the most of it as best they could.

AW: And the bilateral relationship wasn't great?

SF: The bilateral relationship started quite well because we were actually supporting Saddam at the start and there was a big economic relationship because Iraq had a lot of money. Of course what happened during the war was that they ran out of money and so the relationship tapered off and as time went by became more difficult. In the end we settled into a position of tacitly supporting a stalemate in the war. But in any case the regime was really a brutal regime and it was very dangerous for Iraqis. It was arbitrary violence of a most unpleasant kind. It was a nasty, nasty regime. Even for diplomats you weren't really safe. I know that people used to come into my house and deliberately move things around.

AW: So that you knew they'd been in?

SF: Yes, so that you knew you were being looked at. People occasionally were harassed on the streets, you had to be careful. But if you were careful, you were generally alright but it was a very intense experience for a young person.

AW: At some point your Ambassador must have changed?

SF: Yes. I was there for two years. It was supposed to be a three year posting but actually it was quite tough and after two years an opportunity came up. Stephen Egerton was there for my first nine months or so and then John Moberly came. He had been the Assistant Under Secretary for the Middle East in London and he came out as Ambassador. A different

personality. Stephen was very outgoing, quite a striking personality, he was one of the school of Ambassadors who expected you to stand up when he came into the room and to call him Sir. He had a way with him. When you went to see him you'd know if you were in trouble. If he said "Simon my dear would you do this?" it was OK. If he said "Simon my darling" then you knew something was up. In some ways he was a caricature of a certain type of Ambassador. John was different, much quieter. They were both great Middle East experts and I think it was John's last posting and I'm not sure it was his dream swansong. I have fond memories of both of them.

I did have some extraordinary experiences, the first of which was meeting Saddam Hussein. I met Saddam twice at a presentation of credentials and also at his mother's funeral. That is something about working in the Foreign Office – having met Saddam Hussein and having spoken to him, that is definitely something one doesn't forget. He wasn't an endearing character of course but you did get a sense of power and the way that naked power was used. Quite chilling.

There were also some other very interesting things that happened. I was sent down to Basra to help evacuate a group of girls who were performing at the Basra Hilton Hotel and who got caught up in Iranian shelling. I remember that having got there I spent quite a while holed up in this hotel with this group of English dancing girls and singers – all consular duty! And then having to get them out to Kuwait. All sorts of things happened in places like that, that's one of the great joys of the Foreign Office, you never knew quite what was going to happen next. I also spent some memorable days visiting the marshes in Southern Iraq where the "Marsh Arabs" lived in reed huts, with water buffalos, travelling in long canoes. Saddam later drained the marshes to root out alleged Iranian sympathisers.

AW: But you weren't sorry to leave Baghdad?

SF: I found the first year very tough and I caught hepatitis in the first year quite badly and actually had to be evacuated home and that took some time to recover from. But interestingly enough, and what happens in these places, is that in the second year and by the time I left, I was actually getting well into it and enjoying it, having made good friends.

AW: And you'd got the dialect by then ...

SF: Yes, I'd got the dialect and understood the language and felt on top of it. But the opportunity came up to move over to Damascus because John Sawers, who'd been there, was moving on. I decided to do that simply for a change, and so in 1984 I did move to Damascus.

1984-1986 Damascus

It was also a Ba'ath Party regime, with a very tough dictator, Hafez al-Assad, but in a different country with a different culture and actually quite a different regime. I went to Syria in 1984 and I really loved Damascus and I loved Syria. It was a privilege to work there, a beautiful country with a fascinating history and a more sophisticated culture than Iraq. There is a divide between river cultures and coastal cultures and Iraq was an introspective river culture, quite a tough society. Syria had the Mediterranean influence and the Levantine influence and was quite different. The regime in Syria, although tough on its own people, was respectful of diplomats. We had a lot of freedom there, you felt secure because they were smart enough to know it was in their best interests to look after diplomats. It was politically fascinating because of the Lebanon issue and because of the relationship with Israel. We had a small Embassy. The Ambassador when I arrived was Ivor Lucas and shortly afterwards he was replaced by Roger Tomkys, who came on from Bahrain. I spent two and half years there doing a similar sort of junior political Chancery job but with much more scope to engage with Syrians because it wasn't risky for Syrians to deal with diplomats, although I think they got asked about what they were doing, and one or two were obviously working for Syrian security services.

A lot of interesting things happened while I was in Damascus and much of the focus was on Lebanon. It was the time when British hostages were being taken in Lebanon, some were killed, there were two gentlemen called Douglas and Padfield, who I think were killed and another man called Collett. And then of course there was John McCarthy and later on Terry Waite, although that was after my time. That was a big focus of our activity. Traditionally the Embassy had been able to travel freely to Lebanon through the Bekaa Valley, and was one of the great joys of being there, but actually we weren't able to do so because of the security risk and I think it was Hezbollah who were occupying the Bekaa Valley.

It was an interesting and quite tricky time and during that time our own Ambassador in Beirut, who was David Miers, was caught up in a bombing of the American Embassy and was actually in the bombing. We worked very closely with them.

The other big issue at the time was the illness of Hafez al-Assad who was coming to the end of his time. We didn't quite know what was wrong with him but we knew he was ill and there were various rumours. His half-brother Rifaat al-Assad was manoeuvring – so it was all about the succession – was it going to be Rifaat or the favoured son who was Bassel al-Assad who was quite a macho figure. But he was killed in a car crash so he was taken out of the equation which meant that Bashar al-Assad, who now of course is the President, came into the picture. He had been living in London. So there was a lot of thinking about the future of Syria, Lebanon, and stability in the Levant. It was a very interesting assignment and again there were bizarre things that happened. I will never forget the Defence Minister who was a man called Mustafa Tlass, who was a great fan of Princess Diana. We got a phone call at the Embassy one day saying that the Defence Minister would like to give a present to Princess Diana – and it was a horse! I don't think the horse ever reached Princess Diana.

AW: Did you travel in Syria?

SF: Yes, one could travel and I did a lot. And looking back on it for the last six or seven years I've been sort of living through the war in Syria. I know all the places where terrible destruction has happened. All the places I used to go – Aleppo – I used to visit the souk in Aleppo at weekends. The richness of the history and the fabric of that very sophisticated society have just been completely shattered and it's absolutely, totally tragic. But again it's been a privilege for me to know all those places and to understand and experience the feel of them. I count it as a great privilege to have been there. My favourite place was the ancient ruined monastery of Simon Stylites north of Aleppo.

AW: And the end of your time there? There was a break?

SF: Yes, at the end of my time there diplomatic relations were broken. What happened was that there was an El Al plane which was due to take off at Heathrow and there was a bomb found on it. This was traced back, via the man who was arrested who was called Hindawi, to the Syrians. I was junior and probably didn't see all the evidence but there was a question about whether this could really be pinned on the Syrians. In the end we decided it was the Syrians and to break relations. As it happened, my own posting was due to end two weeks before that. So I knew that relations were going to be broken but I actually left very shortly before. I wasn't actually PNG'd and was able to leave in reasonably good order. That was a mixed blessing in a way. It had been such an intense experience going through all of this,

and we were a very close Embassy, therefore leaving everybody behind (and we'd already been burning the documents and clearing out the Embassy, just like it is in the movies) was a very emotional thing. When they were all finally expelled there was a party organised by the Foreign Secretary back in London which everyone was invited to come to. I went along to it and it was a really moving occasion.

Another example, as in Baghdad, of how a very close-knit community is forged and relationships are very strong because of what you are living through together. Rob Young was the Head of Chancery in Damascus, who had a very distinguished career after, was a strong and binding figure with the staff.

AW: And the leaders – did you meet the al-Assads?

SF: Yes, having met Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, I also had the privilege (if that's the right word) of meeting Hafez al-Assad when I was in Damascus. So I met these two historic Baathist Middle East dictators. It is interesting to compare the two and of the two, the more impressive was Assad. He was one of those people who really filled a room with his presence. He was physically a bit odd because he had a very large head and you couldn't help noticing that and he was incredibly still, dominated by that presence and slightly odd physiognomy.

There's one other comment I'd like to make about communications on these two postings. Nowadays one of the great changes that has happened in diplomacy is that everybody is communicating by text, email and by telephone. In those days, particularly when I was in Iraq, we were in this acute war situation and the only way we could communicate was by official telegram. The telegram had to be typed up, encoded, and sent. It was very difficult to communicate if something urgent happened, so you really were on the front line but also quite separated. There was one period where, for over six months, because the regime were cross with us, they actually cut the Embassy's telephones so we had no telephone communication with London so literally the only way to communicate with London was by diplomatic telegram. You may ask what value can an Embassy offer in those circumstances – but it's an example of how in those days an Embassy could be a more remote outpost in a place like that than it is today.

So those are my early experiences in those two very interesting countries. I was pleased that I was posted to two real Arab countries with a real history and society behind them. It's not

how everybody would choose to spend their twenties and there were some downsides which we don't need to go into, but overall when you look back at a lifetime's experience, it was rich and rare.

I'd like to say a word about coming home, because this is relevant to the Foreign Office. I think the Foreign Office looks after you when you go on a posting, much better now than it did then actually, but when you come home you don't get the support. I had lived over five years basically immersed in the Middle East and I'd rather lost touch with society in Britain. Much had happened in Britain in those times – there was the Thatcher revolution, the Big Bang, the whole change in society, the City, the phenomenon of the Yuppie. I remember seeing this rather strange thing sitting on somebody's desk - which was a desk top word processor – and of course we didn't have those in the Embassy because we were still using manual typewriters. We weren't even allowed to type sensitive reports on electric typewriters. All this change had happened and I was sort of dislocated and immersed in a different society and culture. My experience of that was that people would say “Where have you been?” and “Gosh that's interesting” but after ten minutes or so, they couldn't relate to your experience. It took me quite a lot of time to readjust and other people have told me that they'd had that experience which is an interesting side-light on diplomatic life.

AW: Not so pastoral at home ...

SF: And when you go abroad you expect something unusual, when you come home you think you are coming back to something you know but actually life has moved on, your friends have moved on, got married ... So – in 1986 I came back to London and was reintegrated into the Foreign Office itself.

1986, First Secretary, FCO London: South Africa Sanctions Desk

AW: And so why South Africa?

SF: When I came back they asked me if I would like to carry on with the Middle East and I said no, that I'd rather do something different. As it happened this was absolutely at the height of the South Africa sanctions crisis with Margaret Thatcher where she had got very isolated in the Commonwealth because she was opposing sanctions on South Africa and of course the anti-Apartheid Movement was very strong. It was the absolutely hot issue of the day and the Foreign Office was struggling, frankly, to keep up with the demand because in every meeting, every international meeting with a foreign minister or a prime minister, South

Africa was on the agenda. They created a new desk in the Foreign Office in South Africa Department which was South Africa Sanctions Desk, so it wasn't like a country desk, it was an issue desk. I had control of managing sanctions policy. It was hugely fascinating because we were so isolated, because the Prime Minister was so personally engaged on it, because there was so much criticism of Britain, notably in the Commonwealth but also in public opinion. I was thrown into that. Kieran Prendergast was the Head of Department, a very able man. Tony Reeve was the Under Secretary; Ewen Fergusson was the Deputy Under Secretary. I had to learn about South Africa. I was trying to devise arguments in support of our policy, a policy which frankly I didn't have a lot of personal sympathy for. I understood the argument that engagement with the South African Apartheid regime was something that Britain could do in ways that other countries couldn't, and therefore we should preserve that capacity, but I thought that engagement should be accompanied by pressure and it was about getting the right balance. It was an interesting challenge for a young diplomat.

The Commonwealth set up an Eminent Persons Group which reported on this and the British Government didn't accept that report. It was all very heated. In the end what happened was that sanctions were imposed, notably financial sanctions, and they did have an impact on the Apartheid Government and of course in the end President de Klerk came in replacing President P W Botha and the policy changed. I lived through that. I don't think I was there when the change actually happened but it was very interesting to see that process beginning to unfold. I visited South Africa a couple of times and talked to the opposition movements, the Black Sash Movement, visiting the townships, and our Embassy (I don't recall whether it was called an Embassy or a High Commission then because they'd been expelled from the Commonwealth). Patrick Moberly was the Ambassador, a cousin I think of John. He was replaced by Robin Renwick, I think because the Prime Minister felt Patrick Moberly was a bit too sympathetic to the opposition and not tough enough in supporting her policies. Robin Renwick was a very able man, was close to Margaret Thatcher and was close in particular to Charles Powell who was Margaret Thatcher's very influential Private Secretary. Robin Renwick was put in really to be her person. He was a highly effective representative there, got close to the government, was a very strong channel and actually a good example, even if I didn't always feel comfortable with the way he was doing it, of a successful Ambassador carrying out that particular role. And after that she appointed him in Washington as a reflection of that.

Middle East Department, Iran/Iraq War Desk

I did that for a year and a half or two and then I moved back to Middle East affairs and was put onto another issue desk which was the Iran/Iraq War, which was still going on and was attractive for me because I knew a lot about it. It had moved on. Actually I was involved in the negotiations around the ending of the war which was an interesting thing to do. Both countries had become exhausted, they were looking for a way out and Alan Munro, who was the Deputy Under Secretary on the Middle East, and I worked together and were quite influential in putting together the Security Council Resolution, which was called Security Council Resolution 598, I think it was in 1988 and it was the Resolution that ended the war. I remember giving instructions to UKMIS New York quite intensively on this and actually sitting down with Alan one evening and finding the final formula of one paragraph of the resolution which finally clinched the agreement. I couldn't tell you now what it was but there was a sense of actually contributing to a diplomatic process that ended the war – it was a moment in history and working on something that really mattered.

AW: And was anything else going on in the region?

SF: Yes, a big issue at that time other than that was that we were in one of our periodic difficulties with Iran. This was about the 'fatwa' against Salman Rushdie over his book 'The Satanic Verses'. Diplomatic relations were broken and the relationship was in turmoil for some years. One of the things I carried forward from that in my later career was I developed a strong scepticism about how much effort one should try to put into trying to build relations with Iran because I thought it was so unpredictable. There was always something that would happen to knock it back and indeed when I was Permanent Under Secretary many years later in 2011 when the Embassy was stormed again and we had to evacuate it, this all came back to me. Another example of how you learn from experience. So that was my early time in London.

AW: And you'd settled back in and learned to cope?

SF: Yes, I'd settled back in and found my feet in the Foreign Office and learned about operating in the Foreign Office which I hadn't really done before because my time in UN Department had been quite interrupted by being in New York twice.

1989-90 Private Secretary to William Waldegrave.

AW: It is 1st August and Sir Simon Fraser is returning to his recollections of his diplomatic career. When we left off last time, Simon, you were about to move to become Private Secretary to William Waldegrave. How did that come about?

SF: This was 1989 and William Waldegrave's Private Secretary at the time was Kim Darroch who was completing his period and they were recruiting a Private Secretary. William Waldegrave was the Minister of State in the Foreign Office responsible for the Middle East and Central and Eastern Europe and, later, also for Africa, working under Douglas Hurd who was the Foreign Secretary. They were looking, I think, for somebody with Middle East experience, that was the heart of the job, and I interviewed for the job and was given it. In fact it was absolutely fascinating to work for him because he is a highly intelligent man, very interested in the issues and was one of the rising stars in the Conservative Party at the time and a very engaged Minister who got on well with officials and so he was quite lively to work with. He wasn't always easy though, he could be quite demanding and was impatient to get into the Cabinet, but then that is not unusual among Ministers. This was a really important moment for me. It was a pivotal moment in my career. I started in the job because of my Middle East experience and there were some very interesting things going on in Middle East policy, notably the opening of Ministerial level contacts with the PLO which William Waldegrave did with a man called Basam Abu Sharif who was the PLO's designated representative. As it happened I had met Basam Abu Sharif in Damascus years before when he was a rather less reputable member of the, I think it was, DFLP, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine - it could have been the PFLP which was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine! Both were splinter groups of the PLO based in Damascus.

AW: Sounds like something out of Monty Python!

SF: Yes, a bit like "The Life of Brian"! I remember my first ever meeting with Basam in Damascus when I was the Second Secretary there. I went off to this block of flats and was met by two heavies in jeans and ushered into a room, the walls of which were lined with Kalashnikovs and I got on very well with him. He was an interesting, intelligent man, he'd been blown up and badly injured by a letter bomb sent by the Israelis when he was in Beirut.

Since the Damascus days he had become senior in the PLO and was designated as their representative in the first Ministerial meeting with us which William Waldegrave conducted. It was part of the opening of the relationship with Arafat's PLO which led towards progress in the peace negotiations at the 1991 Madrid Conference.

That was part of the job but the most interesting thing that happened during this period was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War and it was my good fortune that William Waldegrave was also responsible for Central and Eastern Europe. I suddenly found myself right at the heart of this most fascinating historical moment, the most important moment of my career which was the end of the Cold War. I was receiving all the telegrams from Moscow and across Central and Eastern Europe as the Warsaw Pact collapsed. It was intense and exciting. I have some very vivid memories of visiting the region at that time. For example flying along the Berlin Wall in the helicopter with William Waldegrave, just weeks before it fell; and then following the whole process through the opening of the borders between Hungary and Austria and the movement of people into Western Europe; and then a bit later on when Ceausescu fell in Romania, visiting Bucharest literally a week after he had been executed. Literally there were fires still smouldering in the streets of Bucharest. This was a very vivid and colourful experience, a direct personal experience of this absolutely riveting period which I will never forget. That was a great privilege. There was an awful lot going on and there was so much to do.

William Waldegrave was active and instrumental in forging British policy towards those countries during this period and the great challenge for us was how we would save Central and Eastern Europe for democracy and stop it dissolving into economic and political chaos as it came out of the Warsaw Pact. For example we designed the British Know How Fund which was a very carefully targeted aid project for giving political support to democratic institutions in those countries. Other innovations included the establishment of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to support the development of political parties in the region.

There were also the talks on the reunification of Germany happening. There were the four powers who were responsible for Berlin plus the representatives of the German Government engaged in talks for the reunification, and of course there was a lot of controversy around this including Margaret Thatcher's reticence about German reunification. This was a historic moment. I saw William Waldegrave recently and we were talking about it. He said that it

was a Wordsworthian moment – “Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive”. It was a very invigorating, exciting time. At the time perhaps I failed to appreciate just how lucky I was. That in a nutshell was that experience which lasted nearly two years.

1990-1992: Policy Planning Staff

The next thing I did, which was equally interesting and in one sense even more formative for me, was that I went to work in the Policy Planning Staff which was led at that time by Robert Cooper, who I think was one of the great leaders of the Policy Planning Staff because he is a remarkably creative and powerful and slightly eccentric intellect and he was just the right person to have in that job at a time when so much was changing in the world. We had a very good team, Jonathan Powell was in the Policy Planners and later Simon McDonald joined us as a speechwriter. This was a strong but small team of people sitting at the heart of the Foreign Office and there was everything to think about and write about and policy to be made on all fronts, because essentially we were helping to establish the post-Cold War order in the world. I’ve talked already about securing Central and Eastern Europe. There were great debates going on too about the future of NATO after the Cold War, the enlargement of the European Union which of course was a core part of our policy for stabilising Central and Eastern Europe, which was a great British initiative in the EU and which we drove forward. There was the emergence of Russia out of the Soviet Union, the end of the Gorbachev era and the rise of Yeltsin. So much happening and so much policy toward Russia was being made to try to ensure peaceful transition there.

AW: Did you continue to travel into the region?

SF: I travelled less at that time but certainly went on some visits. But mainly our job was to write think pieces for the Board of the Foreign Office and for Ministers about these big issues. How can we, and what should we be doing to try to, create a new order in Europe after the Cold War? It was the source of my fascination with European policy.

The other big thing that happened at this time and which I was deeply involved in was the Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister when Saddam invaded Kuwait and pressed George Bush the elder to take a very firm line in response. The decision was made that an alliance would be put together to push him out of Kuwait, led by the Americans but with our strong support. I was closely involved in the whole process of planning that, setting the policy goals and was also involved in the

Emergency Unit which was established to manage that war, because we had a lot of troops involved. We were directly engaged by land, sea and air in this operation. Because I'd been in Baghdad I had some real expertise to offer. We, in the Policy Planning Staff, formed the view that if we actually pushed Saddam out of Kuwait we should take this further and go all the way to Baghdad. But that was not the decision that was taken, for very understandable reasons, because the whole legitimacy of pushing him out of Kuwait was very different from the case for actually going on and occupying Baghdad. But with hindsight we might say that we could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble later on if we had done that. Those were the sorts of very exciting policy debates that we were having at the time. This was also linked to the whole debate about international intervention, so called liberal intervention, in the post-Cold War period and George Bush senior's announcement that we were creating a "new world order". This was all the tremendous excitement of the early post-Cold War period.

AW: And many other things were happening ...

SF: Yes, Margaret Thatcher fell and John Major came into office having been Foreign Secretary and then Chancellor. There was also an awful lot going on, although I was less directly involved, but it was hugely important at the time, around Maastricht and the EU, and the Maastricht Treaty which was the great issue of the Major Government. But in the Planning Staff that was not an area I was personally focussed on.

The other thing that we were very closely engaged in was the outbreak of conflict in the Balkans. The Bosnia War was in 1992-95. In the Policy Planning Staff I remember we wrote a paper in 1991 saying the next big crisis will be Yugoslavia because Yugoslavia was very much a construct of the Post War period in Europe and unlikely to survive the end of the Soviet Union. It was a very difficult challenging thing that happened, terrible conflict in the Balkans, involving all those countries but particularly focussed on Bosnia.

The reason that I was so excited by this period was that I was right at the heart of the machine with basically a blank piece of paper to work on and it was intellectually hugely challenging. It was really the moment in my career when I began to think deeply about foreign policy and step back a bit from just being part of the machine, doing the briefing, taking forward the policy of the day. You really had the sense that you were living in an important moment in history and it was a great privilege. The decisive time in my career.

This was the moment at which I realised that having invested so much time in the Middle East I was a bit exhausted by it. The Middle East is fascinating but it's like a drug, once it gets into your bloodstream it's very hard to get it out. But actually you can spend your whole life on it and not very much is going to change: you spend your life grappling with other people's intractable problems. I was very motivated at this point by the excitement of Europe and what was going to happen there so I decided to shift the focus of my career in that direction.

AW: An opportunity to be involved in real change?

SF: Yes, and to be involved in something that really affected my own country, my own continent where there was much to be done. I read a huge amount around the history of Europe, reading back to the First World War and before, trying to understand the unfolding of everything that was taking place and I decided that I wanted to be involved in that and more involved in European Union work. I had previously been one of those who thought that working on the European Union was rather dry and technical and I hadn't understood the historical excitement of it, but this was the moment and I shifted direction. I also realised at this point that I needed to understand more about economics as a driving force in international foreign affairs and of course the European Union was essentially an economically driven political project. And so this combination of things was going on in me which led me, after the Policy Planning Staff, to apply to go and work in Paris in the Embassy in a slightly unglamorous job as First Secretary, Financial and Economic Affairs.

1993-96: Paris, First Secretary, Financial and Economic

This job was essentially looking at banking issues, and Treasury issues, working for the Bank of England in the financial sector but also on those aspects of European Union policy, in particular relating to monetary union.

I got that job in 1993 but before I went to Paris I spent a summer at the LSE studying economics at an LSE Summer Course. I think I was the first person from the Foreign Office to be sent on that course; typically I agitated to get sent on it! It was absolutely excellent and I think for several years afterward the Foreign Office carried on using it. It was six weeks of basically very rapid undergraduate economics without the hard maths, which was really excellent. My lecturer was Morris Perlman, a holocaust survivor and great teacher.

I went to Paris, Mitterrand was still President in his last years. This was the Cohabitation Government when Balladur from the right was Prime Minister. It was a very interesting period. I did a lot of work around the preparation for monetary union and the French policy of shadowing the Deutschmark and the so-called “Franc fort” policy as they prepared for monetary union. It was interesting for the UK, for having had Black Wednesday and fallen out of the ERM, we were watching carefully what was going on there. It was a first-hand experience of how different the political commitment in France and Germany is to the European Union compared with the UK where it was always seen as an optional issue, as we’ve seen so vividly since. So it was important to learn and understand that.

In 1995 Mitterrand’s term of office came to an end and Chirac was elected President from the right. Balladur had in fact been the favourite to win the Presidential Election but lost it to Chirac because he didn’t have the popular appeal. It’s a great example of how in the end people vote for someone they feel they like. The French vote with their “tripes” they say. Chirac became President and appointed Juppé as Prime Minister. Juppé tried to introduce some fairly radical domestic economic reforms in France to reform the French economy, which everybody agreed was necessary. He was very cerebral and different from Chirac and he completely fell foul of the French people and he ended up with a massive general strike, and basically he failed as Prime Minister at that time. It was a vivid insight into the culture of France and how the shock of Thatcherism could never have happened in France because it just isn’t in the political DNA.

AW: And did you have a good team in the Embassy?

SF: In those days the Embassy was led by Christopher Mallaby who was the Ambassador and, yes, we had a very strong team because of course in those days those Embassies had more people. Rob Young was the number two, followed by Michael Pakenham later on. There were a significant number of people covering these issues. The Financial and Economic Counsellor was Christopher Crabbie. Michael Arthur was there as Head of Chancery. It was a very strong Embassy, in fact people in London used to say there was far too much talent deployed in Paris.

The other important moment I want to mention, because I think it was a historic moment, was the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994. The fact that you could go to and from Paris on the train, which we now take for granted, was a very significant change and a very important moment in terms of accessibility. So we then got an extraordinary flow of Ministers visiting

and doing day trips, which they liked to do especially on Fridays, to Paris. It was a good time.

AW: Was there a referendum while you were there?

SF: Well the French referendum on Maastricht was held just before I arrived and was very narrowly won.

AW: And it was quite “shocking” because it was so narrow?

SF: Yes, we were surprised it was so close but there was the Gaullist Philippe Séguin who ran a very strong anti-Maastricht campaign. What we don't always recognise was that there is a very strong Gaullist, nationalist, streak in French right wing politics, very sceptical about European integration, although the technocratic centre was in favour of it. The politics around Europe was much more complex than people in the UK realised, and there was a lot of controversy around this policy of shadowing the Deutschmark and going towards a single currency and surrendering elements of the sovereignty of the Franc. These are issues which have been salient in our politics but which were also in French politics at the time.

In 1996 the Under Secretary in London who was responsible for Europe at the time, Stephen Wright, rang me to say that there was a job available in Brussels working in the Commission as what we used to call a Detached National Expert for Hans van den Broek who was the European Commissioner for foreign policy issues – in particular the Balkans, and would I be interested in doing this? It was slightly odd because it was a move outside the Foreign Office mainstream but with a promotion, it got me promoted to Counsellor which was something I was keen on. It was a slightly unorthodox move but I decided to do it because I'd become so interested in Europe that I wanted to go and work there, and I thought “I need to go and work in the European Commission, I need to understand this beast and I need to understand the system from the inside”. So I took that opportunity.

1996-99 Brussels European Commission

I moved to Brussels in June 1996 and it was the time of the European football championships in England; that was “football's coming home”. I remember I watched that in my temporary accommodation, feeling a bit lost in a new city.

My job was to help the Commission, which under the Maastricht Treaty had some new powers in the foreign policy area, to build a stronger diplomatic understanding of foreign

affairs and to link the economic policy competences of the Commission more to a foreign policy understanding and a more strategic approach to foreign affairs. So it was to bring some diplomatic DNA to the Commission. Part of the job involved selectively sharing Foreign Office telegrams and information with people so that they had an understanding of the political analysis from the FCO. This was done on a quiet basis. I had authorisation to share material up to a certain classification. Hans van den Broek was the Dutch Commissioner and the primary focus was in the Balkans, where the Commission was running significant support and aid programmes because the war had ended but there was a big reconstruction process. The Commission had big programmes there which were not always being effectively administered or aligned to the wider foreign policy objective. I travelled to Sarajevo with him and this was the time when Carl Bildt was in Bosnia as the High Representative and we were part of the so-called Contact Group which was the group of countries which were collaborating on the reconstruction of Bosnia. I remember my visit to Sarajevo. It was startling to see the destruction that was still there, buildings with holes shot in them and staying in a hotel where there was no wall at the end of a corridor. It was quite tricky but very interesting.

The most vivid memory of all was having dinner with Milosevic in Belgrade in Serbia when we went there afterwards. I always say that having had the ‘privilege’ of meeting all three of Saddam Hussein, Hafez al-Assad and Milosevic during my career was something special! Milosevic was interesting, he was obviously an evil character but very smart. At this dinner he gave Hans van den Broek a good run for his money, in fact I would say he “won on points” quite clearly. It was a riveting experience.

I did that job for six months and although it was interesting it was quite frustrating because I wasn’t really part of the machine. I was external to it, although I was working directly to the Director General as well as the Commissioner. The Commission officials kept me on the outside.

But then I got a phone call from Leon Brittan who was the Trade Commissioner saying that there was a job in his Cabinet as Deputy Head of Cabinet because Catherine Day who had been fulfilling this role, was moving on and would I be interested in doing that? He’d been given my name by Christopher Mallaby, my former Ambassador in Paris, who was a friend of his. This happened six months after I’d started so I was a bit sceptical about making another move, but I decided to do it and went to work in the Cabinet. It was definitely the

right decision. I suddenly found myself at the heart of European trade policy, working for the Trade Commissioner shortly after the Uruguay Round had been completed, the year after the World Trade Organisation had been established and with an extraordinary opportunity to be involved in the creation of the international structure of globalisation after the end of the Cold War. The 1990s were the high point of globalisation. Working on trade in the European Commission, you were really in the box seat. The whole system was being run by the US and the EU who were by far the biggest economic powers in those days. China was emerging and the international system was being forged and, as so often in my life, I fell on my feet very fortunately ending up in this fascinating role.

AW: Right place at the right time

SF: Well you have to take your opportunities but you do also have to have some luck – and to some extent you do make your own luck. I started working for Leon Brittan who I found a fascinating, highly intelligent, character. Obviously towards the end he had some terrible things happen to him, but he was a very impressive man, with a forensic brain, a very acute intelligence, who had become one of the very senior figures in Brussels, a powerful voice there and also in international trade on a global level.

We did some big things. We tried to launch a new initiative on EU/US trade while I was there. I worked on that with him. We had difficulties because the French were not keen on it. I worked a lot on trade liberalisation with Japan which was important and with Korea. We were negotiating the early stages of China's accession to the WTO which happened later on, I think in 2001, but I'd left by then. And we worked to prepare and launch the next global trade round, which eventually became the ill-fated Doha Round.

The biggest negotiation I personally was involved in was with the United States. It was to do with trying to unpick the extra-territorial sanctions that the US was imposing on European companies who were dealing with Iran and with Cuba, the so called Helms Burton and D'Amato Acts. This was very sensitive politically because it was essentially the US acting illegally to place impediments on trade to European companies. It was a big obstacle in EU/US relations. It was a very intensive negotiation led on the US side by Stu Eizenstat who had been the Ambassador to the EU and a former adviser to President Carter. I was proud of it because we actually managed to resolve it during the British Presidency in 1998, and it was a complex example of a diplomatic negotiation with multiple stakeholders and an interesting insight into how the European Commission operates to bring together the European side and

deliver a deal where different Member States have different interests but come together to reach an agreement. I learnt a lot from that. That was a great sense of achievement.

Towards the end of my time there things began to unravel for the Commission. This was the Commission that was led by President Jacques Santer and in the end he was forced to resign because there was a huge scandal centred around Edith Cresson, the French Commissioner, who had appointed her dentist to some sort of paid job in the Commission without having gone through the appropriate recruitment procedures! But this was in a sense the final straw for a Commission whose reputation for competence had been badly undermined. It was very dramatic the night the Commission fell. I remember very clearly there was a vote in the European Parliament on whether the Commission should survive and there was also a procedure in the Council. We were up all night until about two o'clock in the morning, eating pizza in a nearby restaurant, when finally we heard that the Commission was going. It was a shocking moment and very bad for the EU. Suddenly it meant that I found myself out of a job, so what to do next was the question.

AW: Meanwhile back at home the Blair Government had come in ...

SF: Yes, that is true, so what had been happening? These were the days of course when we had two Commissioners; we had a Conservative Commissioner, Leon Brittan, and a Labour Commissioner who was Neil Kinnock. Halfway through my time there the Conservative Government fell and the Labour Government came in 1997, so we were no longer the privileged channel. This was a great moment of change in the UK and I remember election night in Brussels; we weren't surprised but it was a remarkable event, the arrival of the Blair Government with such a landslide. So we then got into New Labour and the end of many years of Conservative rule. It didn't affect me directly but when the Commission fell Robin Cook was the Foreign Secretary. And, by the way, I thought he was an excellent Foreign Secretary from what I saw of him from Brussels, a very strong operator. He was looking for a new Private Secretary so I applied for that job but I didn't get it. It went to Sherard Cowper-Coles at the time. Sherard, however, had been the Political Counsellor in Paris, so suddenly that job in Paris became vacant and I found myself back on the train from Brussels to Paris, whence I had come in 1996.

1999-2002: Paris, Political Counsellor

I went back to Paris, this time as Political Counsellor, what used to be called Head of Chancery, where Michael Jay was now the Ambassador. I have to say I left Brussels with regret because I had so much enjoyed working in the Commission - the experience of being on the front line of these fascinating, multiple, ongoing negotiations, all the time. I think being in Brussels is like living in Washington, it's a political environment in which everything is a constant negotiation. I found that very invigorating. I had some hesitation about going back to the Embassy in Paris and the more sedate bilateral relationship. But it was a really interesting job and it suited my personal circumstances very much. I was doing politics rather than economics and finance. I was in charge of all the foreign policy aspects, the Middle East, the Balkans – the Kosovo War was going on at that time – plus the bilateral relationship plus French domestic politics. There was a big agenda to cover.

The Balkans were, I suppose, the principal foreign policy issue - Kosovo and the Rambouillet Conference which ended the Kosovo conflict. But in a way some of the most interesting things were the domestic politics in France at the time. We again had a domestic Cohabitation where Chirac was still the President and Jospin was the Socialist Prime Minister. We were approaching the end of Chirac's first seven year period in office in 2002 and he was standing for re-election. He was quite a popular President but had failed to carry through reforms and people were fed up because the French economy wasn't going well. There was a surge in popularity at this point for the Front National under Jean-Marie Le Pen. The great surprise in the 2002 election was that Jospin, the Socialist Leader who many people actually thought would become President, failed to get into the second round of the Presidential Election and Le Pen beat him to it. This was a huge shock in the political system. Le Pen ran against Chirac in the second round. Chirac of course won. I think he got 82 percent of the vote, but it was a very interesting moment in French politics and a harbinger of things to come.

AW: Very unpredictable?

SF: Yes, exactly.

Meanwhile in the rest of the world the major event that happened then was 9/11 in 2001, George Bush having come into office in the US. There was a shift in American policy in any case with Bush, but 9/11 was a seismic moment and led to the US intervention in

Afghanistan, British and French involvement in that, which was a big set of issues, and of course the hardening of the counter terrorism agenda in the world. Later, of course, that led to the 2003 Iraq War which I'll come on to.

In Paris, I had the privilege of living in the Gatehouse of the Residence which is quite a Foreign Office institution, an iconic place. It is a nine bedroom house at the gate of the Residence (the former Palace of Napoleon's sister Pauline) and for many years was the home of the Head of Chancery, although now I think that has changed and it's the Deputy Head of Mission who lives there since the Embassy's been downsized. This was a wonderful place to live, and certainly made it possible to hold glamorous parties and events which in France is an important part of diplomacy. The French are quite traditional in their approach to diplomacy and they still respect diplomats in a way that actually we don't. You were treated with respect and got good access to Ministers and senior people, even not as the Ambassador but as the Political Counsellor. France is a good place to be a diplomat because of this and I found that I built very rewarding relations with people across the Government, not only in the Foreign Ministry but also in the other Ministries and the Prime Minister's Office and the President's Office. We had good access, we had good relations. It was also a time when we were building with the French the whole St Malo initiative on European Defence. Our relationship with France was close at the time on a whole range of foreign policy issues, so there was a lot of substance in it. I did that role for three years.

AW: You mention in your notes the Eurostar border controls?

SF: Yes, that was one of the things that I vividly remember. It was an example of how in a bilateral Embassy you deal with not only foreign policy issues but quite technical nitty gritty stuff. This was the debate about facilitating the Eurostar by establishing so-called juxtaposed controls at either side of the Channel so we could make sure we had tighter controls on people using Eurostar but also facilitate speedy travel. The reason I mention it is because it was a ground-breaking international treaty whereby British border guards were put on French soil and French border guards were put on British soil. It was an example of how within the European Union innovative approaches are taken to sharing responsibility, collaboration and in a sense pooling sovereignty in a practical way which I thought was significant and important. But of course it has also come with complications because it was partly responsible for the development of the camps in Calais because there were so many people seeking to come to the UK illegally who were being held back at the border in France

rather than coming to the UK. This has always been a complicated thing for the French who say “Why do we have to deal with this rather than you?” But we actually managed to handle that bilateral issue sensitively, in a way that worked.

There were many other issues of a similar type that we had to deal with. For example the long lasting consequences of Mad Cow Disease and the very prolonged negotiations over lifting the French ban on all UK beef exports. The reason I mention this is because it’s about the role of bilateral embassies. As things have moved on in diplomacy and contact between capitals has become more intensive and direct, the traditional role of the embassy as the source of information for Government has been eroded. There are many different sources and people in capitals pick up the phone to each other. Particularly if you’re in London or Paris, it’s very close. But in the very complicated relationship of that sort (like the beef export ban) the Embassy becomes more the centre of knowledge about the whole of the relationship and the different aspects of that relationship and what’s happening in different parts of it, and also becomes directly involved in some less traditional diplomatic activity which is very important in maintaining a modern bilateral relationship. I think that is the case in the major embassies in Europe. There was a debate going on about “What is the point of bilateral embassies?”, and the question was frequently asked, particularly as members of the EU. I think the answer to that is in a sense there had been almost a reversal of roles, where previously the embassy had been the source of information reporting to the capital and conducting international negotiation, and the capital had coordinated the relationship, now what happens is that there are many direct strands of relationships between the capitals and the embassy coordinates and mediates that relationship overall. So there was a different sort of stewardship of the relationship, but still an important role.

By 2002 I had done six years in all in Paris with three years in Brussels in the middle and it was time to come back to London. I think people in London were saying “this guy Fraser is having far too easy a ride swanning between Paris and Brussels, he needs to come home and get stuck in” which was a fair enough point.

2002-2004: FCO London, Director of Strategy

Michael Jay had left the Embassy in Paris and become Permanent Under Secretary at the FCO and John Holmes had become Ambassador for the last year of my time in Paris.

Michael Jay was then looking to create a new job in the Foreign Office which was called Director of Strategy which essentially was a fusion of the old policy planning function with a

new sort of operational strategy unit to try to link the allocation of resources directly to prioritisation of policy activities. It was, I suppose you could say, a Blairite initiative in the Office and it reflected the spirit of the times: better management, better linkage and strategic allocation of resources, better financial management, better prioritisation. All good things! I was asked to go back and do that job which I was very happy to do. I'd always been interested in the policy planning side but this had its additional new challenge. Michael Jay wanted to produce a strategy document for the Foreign Office which said "This is our role, this is what this Foreign Ministry is here to do, these are our priorities, this is how we're going to allocate resource to it, this is how we're going to use our network around the world, this is how we're going to work in Whitehall". I think that the Foreign Office had never previously tried to do that in a systematic way, and was very much divided into separate fiefdoms. I thought this was an important initiative. Addressing the underlying question of what a foreign ministry is for in the modern era of communications, just as I've talked about in relation to the modern bilateral embassy.

I went back to do that but ironically discovered, in true traditional Foreign Office manner, that this initiative hadn't really been resourced and actually there wasn't a team! I had to build a team and I had to create a role. There was a certain resistance in the system. "What is this new role? What powers is it going to have? Is this a centralisation of power under the PUS?" I was very much supported by Michael Jay and had an office in the corridor right next to him. We brought together these roles of policy planning, resource planning, internal communication in the organisation and strategy leadership. We wrote the strategy document about the future of policy and we also provided the secretariat to the Foreign Office Board so we were at the heart of senior decision making. I think we were moderately successful in it, though I think in the end we ended up with too many foreign policy priorities. Where it went wrong is that after we'd written the document and established a view across the Foreign Office about what the priorities were, it then got lost in a hugely over-complicated reorganisation project which I personally felt went too far. Luckily I wasn't actually directly responsible for that but fiddling with the plumbing of the FCO took the steam out of the intellectual energy of focussing on priorities and doing things. But overall it was a positive initiative.

The big issue during my time as Strategy Director was Iraq. We had Afghanistan ongoing, with the operation against Bin Laden and so forth, but it became clear to me, quite early in my time, that things were afoot on Iraq and this led in 2003 to the invasion of Iraq. I didn't

realise at the start quite how far things had gone between Tony Blair and President Bush, or what No 10 were doing. It seemed to me that the Foreign Office was not fully in the picture, or it maybe a few people were, but certainly the institution as a whole was not very much engaged in the early stages. I was instinctively very cautious about this because having been in Iraq I felt that the case for war was thin and the solutions that were being put forward were simplistic and that people didn't really understand the potential consequences. Some of the NeoCon rhetoric coming out of America, where clearly there was an agenda to get rid of Saddam Hussein, was just totally unrealistic and was doomed to fail, I felt. I was one of the voices in the Foreign Office, and I think my colleagues would vouch for this, who internally was questioning the whole thing. I have to say that I felt that the Foreign Office, as an institution, didn't perform strongly on the Iraq War. I know that Jack Straw who was the Foreign Secretary had reservations about it which he expressed to the Prime Minister. I don't know what position the most senior officials were taking so I can't really comment on that, but as an institution I don't think that the Foreign Office really made the case as strongly as it should about the downsides. I was also particularly concerned about it because I thought the case that was being made for it was flawed. It was like an *ex post* justification of a decision. The argument that Iraq was involved in terrorism which threatened us seemed to me to be unsubstantiated. As for the argument about the development of weapons of mass destruction, in so far as I saw evidence, and I'm sure that I didn't see all the evidence, I certainly didn't feel the case was comprehensively made. Events demonstrated that either he was incredibly successful in getting rid of them or they didn't exist. I thought it was an ideologically driven decision on the American side and a very politically driven decision on our side.

I participated in some planning talks with the Americans on this. I remember one visit to Washington when I was in talks with people in the Pentagon about post war planning where I just was quite frankly horrified by what I heard in terms of their expectations of what could be done and how simple it would be. They had this individual called Ahmed Chalabi who was a Shiite Iraqi, a businessman in America, who was going to be their candidate to go back and become President, but who had absolutely no constituency or support in Iraq. I felt it was just all far too simplistic and naive and of course history demonstrates this was right.

I thought this was an inglorious episode in the FCO's history. I wrote some papers when I was Strategy Director, which I've not been able to find since, and in which I questioned some of the assumptions that were being made. I wish I'd kept them. I don't think they are in the

archives any more. I certainly haven't been able to find them. I tried to explain why I thought that in the long term this would lead to a dismembering of the country and the very fragile balance between the Kurds and the Shia and the Sunni would be put in question. It was a very complex set of issues. This also divided Europe because the French and the Germans didn't agree with us and it did a lot of damage to the personal credibility of Tony Blair and I think to our foreign policy credibility in the region, which we've been living with the consequences of ever since. It was, in my view, an unnecessary war of choice. I think that there are defensible wars of choice, as for example in the Balkans, as in Kosovo, and actually I also think in Libya, which we will come to later. On balance I thought that was a justifiable decision to intervene in Libya. I never felt that in Iraq, I've always been uncomfortable with it. I worked on it and of course tried as a loyal civil servant to do my best but it was one of the more uncomfortable episodes of my career.

AW: At the end of the Director of Strategy role you were asked to be Director for the Middle East?

2004: FCO London, Director Middle East

SF: Yes that's right, in 2004 I'd done two years as Director of Strategy and there was a bit of a shuffle round on the Board and I bid for two jobs and was invited to become Middle East Director. This, of course, was a big challenge at that point because of the Iraq situation and there was a lot else going on including a complicated negotiation and relationship with Iran. I took that up again with some hesitation because it was taking me back from my shift towards Europe, back towards the earlier part of my career when I had focussed on the Middle East. I think that's what the Foreign Office wanted me to do, quite reasonably, to make use of my Arabic and Middle Eastern experience but to be honest with you it is clear to me now that it was not where my heart lay in terms of my personal interest. I took it on. One of the problems at that time was that there were so many people working on the Middle East, so you had tremendous input from No 10 because of everything around Iran and Iraq. I think by this time Nigel Sheinwald was the Foreign Policy Head in No 10, David Manning having moved on to Washington. You had the Foreign Secretary, you had Liz Symons who was the Minister of State, you had Michael Levy who was the Prime Minister's personal envoy in the Middle East who was also in the Foreign Office, John Sawers was Political Director, so there were plenty of cooks sharing the broth. Actually as I discovered as Middle East Director you were trying to serve all these people and there were quite a lot of big

personalities involved, so that was a bit of a challenge and had its frustrations. Nevertheless you had your hand on the tiller and I was happy to take this on. There were real problems about resource allocation in the region given the magnitude of the challenge.

Then an unexpected thing happened. This was the time when the European Commission was changing guard. Peter Mandelson was nominated by Tony Blair as the British Commissioner after he had to resign for the second time from the Cabinet. I didn't know Peter Mandelson very well but I had met him when I was Director for Strategy because he was giving a speech on China. He asked me to comment on his speech. I had working for me Peter Wilson who was a China expert, who is still in the Foreign Office, he's Ambassador to the Netherlands at the moment, and he and I jointly commented on Peter Mandelson's speech and so I got to know him a bit. He came to me and said "I've been appointed British Commissioner, what should I do about it? You've been in Brussels, what do you think?" I advised him on which portfolio he should be seeking to have in the Commission. I said he should get a portfolio where the Commission has legal powers and where you have institutional power in Europe, so that means Competition or Trade would be good things to get. He was in fact then appointed Trade Commissioner by President Barroso, who was the new President of the Commission. This was all happening in late spring, early summer 2004. Peter Mandelson then said to me "Well you know about trade because you did it with Leon Brittan, so what should I do about building a team around me?" One thing led to another and he invited me to be his Head of Cabinet, Chief of Staff, in the Commission. This posed me a dilemma because I'd only just been appointed Middle East Director and now had to think about this.

AW: Was it a difficult decision?

SF: It was a big dilemma because I felt if I stepped outside the Foreign Office again, and I'd already been outside once in the Commission, at a very important moment in my career it would be difficult to get back, whereas if I stayed I could make my way through a conventional Ambassadorial career. It was a very big choice and took me several weeks to make it. In the end I decided to take the risk and to go back to Brussels because I had enjoyed it so much and felt that there was so much opportunity to make a difference there, and Peter Mandelson was a fascinating and interesting person to work with on these issues. It was difficult because I had to tell Michael Jay that this is what I wanted to do, which caused some turbulence in the Foreign Office. I think it was "Oh Fraser, he's off again, why can't he ever sit still?" and, let's face it, I did have that reputation throughout the early part

of my career, as being, not volatile, but never quite satisfied, and here I was doing it again. I certainly have not regretted it, it was the right decision to make as the rest of our narrative I hope will reveal.

2004-2008: European Commission, Head of Cabinet for Trade Commissioner

AW: It is 15 August 2018 and Sir Simon Fraser is resuming the recollections of his diplomatic career. We've reached 2004 and you are about to join Peter Mandelson in Brussels to head his Cabinet. Did that feel like another posting or did it feel different?

SF: It is different because it is not working in the Foreign Office. On the other hand it is working overseas although it's not actually working for the Government. You are detached as a temporary member of the civil service of the Commission, it's called a Temporary Agent of the Commission, so it's a bit of a hybrid. Of course diplomatic skills are very relevant to work in this context.

I went to Brussels in September of 2004, but having spent some time in Brussels over the summer trying to put together the personal team for the Commissioner. Each Commissioner is served by what is called the Services of the Commission, in our case the Directorate General for Trade, and also has his or her personal team called the Cabinet, which is a more personal, political team around the Commissioner. There were seven people in the Cabinet, I was Head of Cabinet and it was my job to put the team together. The team has to consist of people from different countries in the EU, so it's not a purely British cabinet, it's a multinational team. We put that together in September and the Commission began work - it was slightly delayed because of a problem with the appointment of the Italian - in November 2004. This was at the time of the Blair Government in the UK, it was after the Iraq War but that was obviously still very much a political priority. The new Commission President was the former Portuguese Prime Minister. Interestingly enough he had been a British candidate for this job and he went in on the understanding that he was going to run a liberal economic policy in the Commission which was very much supported by the British Government. We went in with quite high hopes about promoting economic reform and competitiveness in the EU both in domestic policies and in international trade policy. However, the big context of this of course was that there had been the Convention on the Future Constitution of the EU which led to the Lisbon Treaty and there were referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 which voted against that treaty, and that was a huge setback for the Commission. At the same time Angela Merkel came to power in Germany in 2005 and Sarkozy came to power

in France in 2007. The political balance shifted, basically the Commission became very influenced by what became known as the “Merkozy Duo” and British influence in the Commission became a bit less important because Barroso was concentrating on getting acceptance of the Lisbon Treaty in the core constituencies of Germany and France. That is important context for what happened later.

Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair in 2007. That was important because Peter Mandelson had been very close to Tony Blair, he very much had his authority, and at that time was not as close to Gordon Brown. A little anecdote which is of interest – More often than not there was an early morning phone call between Peter Mandelson and Tony Blair in London, the coordination was very tight and both the personal and political relationship was very important.

Peter Mandelson was new to the trade agenda and there was a steep learning curve and he was very keen to promote a British type of trade agenda in Europe. That sometimes put him in contention with the Services who had a more conventional European view, what you might call a slightly more protectionist or cautious, trade agenda. This played out in a number of contexts. The big issues I want to talk about are four, I think. First of all China. In 2005 there was a very tense negotiation with the Chinese about textile imports into Europe, it became known as “The Bra Wars”, because the so-called Multi Fibre Agreement had expired and with it the controls on Chinese textile imports into Europe. We were faced with a flood of low cost Chinese t-shirts and other textile goods into the EU. It’s amusing now but it was really really serious politics and we had to respond very rapidly against it. The Commission Services wanted to impose new quotas but we said “No, we can’t go back to quotas” and we tried to initiate voluntary constraints with China without reverting to old fashioned quotas. We succeeded in doing that, but it was very complicated. Interestingly enough, the person we were negotiating with on the Chinese side was somebody called Bo Xilai, the Chinese Trade Minister, who later became more famous when his wife was accused and convicted of being involved in a murder case. He is now in prison for his role in that, but tellingly he was also one of the leading rivals of President Xi.

The negotiation was a very interesting lesson for me because it demonstrated the extraordinary growth in Chinese economic and political power as compared with the last time I had been in the Commission, when China had been relatively small – not even in the top ten

of EU trade relationships. It was very emblematic of the rapid growth of the Chinese economy in relation to Europe and the United States.

The second issue that I want to highlight is the relationship with America. The US Trade Representative was called Bob Zoellick, a very distinguished man. It has to be said that his relationship with Peter Mandelson was tense. I'm not sure whether as individuals they saw eye to eye but there was a lot of mutual respect and they were both powerful personalities. Quite soon after we arrived in Brussels we launched a WTO case against the United States, against the subsidies that they were paying to Boeing, while they argued that the EU was paying subsidies to Airbus. This was a major issue which actually has never been fully resolved ever since. It was the occasion of a blazing row between Zoellick and Mandelson. Again our Commission Services, which were led by the Director General who was called Peter Carl, he was Danish, were very reluctant for us to do this and with hindsight I'm not sure if it was the right thing to do or not.

On major trade policy, the third thing we did which was very important in 2006 was to launch a new Trade Strategy for the European Union which we called Global Europe, it has some pre-echoes, if you like, of Global Britain! We stood back and said that multilateral trade negotiations were not doing very well and we needed to engage in particular with Asia. We set out a programme for bilateral or regional trade agreements with major markets in Asia including Korea, Singapore, Vietnam and others, and actually that is the trade agenda which the EU has been pursuing in the decade ever since. So I think we had a major impact in charting the way forward for EU trade liberalisation at the regional and bilateral level and I was very pleased with that. It was a significant contribution.

But the central and fourth issue was the Doha Round which was the major multilateral trade negotiation which actually Leon Brittan had been instrumental in kicking off when I was there previously. The Doha Round got very bogged down and never succeeded. It was led by a group of four parties, the US, the EU, India and Brazil representing different constituencies in the World Trade Organisation as a whole. There were some very important set piece meetings, notably the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong in 2005, chaired by Pascal Lamy, but it became clear that there was not a lot of energy in the international system in favour of further globalisation, further trade liberalisation. Also the ability of the United States and the European Union to drive an agenda through, which is what had been done previously in the Uruguay Round, no longer existed precisely because countries like China

and India had become so much more important in the system. The whole balance of power in the international economy had shifted and what we saw as a result was a very clear example of paralysis of multilateral economic negotiation. It started perhaps with the backlash against this at Seattle at the turn of the century and ever since we have seen multilateral negotiations producing fewer and fewer results. It was sad but it was very interesting to observe and it was a significant moment of change. At the end of my period in Brussels we had the financial crisis which was another very significant moment, further turning public opinion against globalisation. I was in Brussels as we saw, if you like, the fading of the light of globalisation and multilateral trade.

AW: But you enjoyed it?

SF: Yes, I really enjoyed my time there. Working in Brussels is fascinating because it's one on-going multi-complex negotiation about lots of different things. It was a great privilege to be there as a Head of Cabinet because in that role you are involved in nearly all the major decision making processes of the Commission. The Commission works by consensus so all the Commissioners get involved in all the range of issues and it's tremendous fun. There are some really bright clever people working there and of course there are also big bureaucratic hurdles and problems to overcome. But I would place on record that it is a very interesting, challenging, demanding environment and it was stimulating to work in it.

AW: Did you keep in close touch with London and Whitehall during this time?

SF: Yes, all the time you are working with the UK Representation. Although you are not formally representing British positions it is understood that the Commissioner and his or her Cabinet are indirectly reflecting or channelling their capital's position, so you are constantly in touch with the Representation and in touch with London. We didn't agree with London on everything by any manner of means and there were issues on which we took a different view from London. It's important that you don't just become the mouthpiece of your home capital. Constantly playing this role of mediating negotiations in the Commission and then with all the Member States and with your home capital is like a game of chess.

AW: Was there an added complication with the Blair to Brown change?

SF: The Blair to Brown change was very interesting. I noticed suddenly during 2007 that instead of there being one phone call in the morning with Tony Blair there were now two phone calls on some mornings as relations between Peter Mandelson and Gordon Brown

reopened. That's very important because it's part of my future story. But it was true that Peter reopened discussions with Gordon, and Gordon Brown reached out to Peter Mandelson as he was dealing with the financial crisis and its aftermath and indeed the shortcomings of his own leadership of the party and his Prime Ministership.

I left Brussels in February 2008 because it was almost four years ...

AW: Almost as long as you'd been anywhere?

SF: Yes! Indeed, in fact I think it was the longest I'd been anywhere and I felt that I should try and come back and make my way in London. At that point the role of Director General for Europe in the Foreign Office, which Martin Donnelly had been holding, was becoming available and Peter Ricketts had taken over as Permanent Under Secretary, so I pitched for that job and got it through a selection process and a board. I was very pleased to get that because the big risk of going outside the Foreign Office that people often feel is that you can get lost. I was lucky to be in a high profile role in Brussels and actually acquiring genuine expertise, so that was a good thing, but it's always a risk about – “can you get back” – and I'd done it twice, so I was very relieved to get that job.

2008-2009: FCO London, Director General, Europe and Globalisation

My role was Director General for Europe and Global Economic Issues. David Miliband was Foreign Secretary at this point. A very able man. Personally I think he came to the job too young and that was a bit of a challenge for him, but he had a very impressive intellect. The other issue for him was the perception that he was the potential opposition to Gordon Brown as a former Blairite. Therefore in Government he had to manage that relationship quite carefully. What I liked about him was that he was pushing a liberal international multilateralist agenda, saw Britain as part of the world international community and wanted to be very active on that agenda, on the reform of international institutions and Britain playing a role in the European Union, and through the European Union, in the UN and other bodies. So it was a positive agenda, if at times a little over theoretical.

The defining event of this period, and I was in this job only a short period, was the 2008 financial crisis. I started in May but by September it all blew up. Suddenly we were facing what, without doubt in my mind, was the most important global event since 1989, the most defining event - which was the financial crisis and everything that has flowed out of it. The Treasury were dealing with the crisis in the banking system, and the wider liquidity crisis,

and Government was in crisis mode dealing with the consequences of that. It was Gordon Brown's great moment actually. Whatever the failings of his Prime Ministership, he is rightly recognised to have taken a very strong leadership role on this both nationally and internationally. The individual event that crystallised that on the international scene was the convening of the G20 Summit in London in April 2009 at the Excel Centre. This was very much Gordon Brown and Britain bringing together and giving leadership to the international community and playing an important role in creating this new forum, the G20. It had met previously as Finance Ministers but had not met at the Head of Government level. That was the single most challenging event and we made a success of it.

The three of us who were leading the European policy agenda in Whitehall at official level were Jon Cunliffe working for Gordon Brown in No 10, Kim Darroch who was the Permanent Representative in Brussels and myself and we formed a sort of triangle between the Cabinet Office, the Foreign Office and UKRep which I think worked well. In fact I think that it worked better than it has since to be honest with you. We had weekly meetings, we worked together very closely though Jon is not exactly the most transparent operator. It wasn't always very easy and there were tensions in Whitehall between Departments.

I was in the job for a limited period of time because what happened was that completely unexpectedly in October 2008 Gordon Brown suddenly asked Peter Mandelson to come back from Brussels to London. I had left Brussels in February 2008 thinking "Goodbye Peter Mandelson" and suddenly in October I was on the phone to him saying "I gather you are coming back". Lo and behold he was back and he was put in as Business Secretary in what was then called BERR, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform.

AW: It's changed its name a few times!

SF: Yes indeed and we'll come to more of that, but it had previously been DTI. Peter came back and was effectively made Deputy Prime Minister or First Secretary of State and Business Secretary. His Permanent Secretary was Brian Bender who was coming up to retirement, so they needed to find a Permanent Secretary in BERR. I didn't actually apply for that role because I felt it was too soon, I'd just got back, so I didn't in the first instance apply for the job. I think the role was given to Ian Watmore who was Permanent Secretary in a department called DIUS, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Science. Ian was a very able guy. However having won the competition Ian decided to go off to become the Chief Executive of the Football Association, a slightly left-field move, and so the job became

available again. So at that point I said to Gus O'Donnell "I think I would really like to apply for this" and I did and I'm not sure how many other applicants there were. Long story short, I became Permanent Secretary at BERR in May 2009. In fact Gordon Brown's approval of that appointment happened in the car on the way home from the G20 Summit at the Excel Centre.

2009-2010: Permanent Secretary, BERR (later BIS).

I moved to BERR and this was an unusual thing. It was rare for a Foreign Office official to have become Permanent Secretary at a mainstream domestic department other than DFID, the aid department. I think that Donald Maitland had done it at the Department of Energy before, but I'm not sure if there were others. It was a bit of a trailblaze. Clearly the fact that I knew Peter Mandelson and could work with him was important. I did have a relevant trade background but I didn't really have the domestic policy or business background.

AW: He must have been pleased?

SF: Peter? You'd have to ask him that! I found working with Peter Mandelson in Brussels very interesting and usually rewarding. I get on well with him. I think he's an interesting personality but also a clever man, he works well with officials, it's a pleasure to work with him, he engages with officials well and we had a good understanding.

I very much enjoyed my time at BERR which soon became BIS. Let's just deal with that. Literally a month after I arrived there was a decision to merge DIUS with BERR and to create something called BIS, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Being completely new to the Department and not even knowing my own team I now found I was handling this big merger of two departments. We ended up with a very big Department which had a budget of £20 billion, because it covered higher education, science, skills spending and business spending. It had about fifty arm's length bodies associated with it and it had thirteen Ministers! It was an absolute monster. I was trying to put this thing together, which was a challenge. I must say I was pretty stressed at the time because I was a completely new Permanent Secretary. I got a lot of support from Gus O'Donnell and people at the centre, but basically just had to get on with it. I think we did a good job of it. The trouble was that I knew it was only one year to a General Election and it wasn't clear that this machinery of government would survive after the election, so there was a certain amount of

resistance to making big strategic changes. There were some people who were obviously playing the long game and trying to keep an eye on after the election.

AW: Looking over the shoulder?

SF: Yes there was that, but I think we did a good job of it and for me it was a very interesting challenge to take it on.

The big policy question we were dealing with while that was going on was the Government's response to the financial crisis, the impact on industry and the economy, a lot of support, for example, to the automotive sector and other parts of business who were feeling the crunch, plus of course lending to small businesses because bank lending had dried up. Many schemes were put in place and there was a much more interventionist, proactive government policy stance which was brought together in an industrial strategy which we called 'New Industry New Jobs', which we wrote and looked after working out of BIS with the Treasury and others. This was interesting because industrial strategy is not something that British Governments were traditionally keen on, so it was a significant shift towards a more proactive stance which the Treasury did not like: they felt it was government intervention, picking winners, going back to the policies of the seventies. But it was interesting for me and I really enjoyed my time in BIS. It is very different from the Foreign Office. In a domestic department you have people who have a much greater in-depth expertise and stay much longer on one issue. They have deep content knowledge. It's also more political, domestically, than the Foreign Office and it's certainly more Parliamentary because you have legislation and more local political issues to handle. Actually it was a bit too domestically focussed.

AW: Did this make it a bit siloed?

SF: Yes, it's a bit siloed and people get a bit narrow-focussed on their issues. I was trying to bring a strategic approach to it.

AW: And then we have an Election?

SF: Yes, we have an Election in 2010 because it was time for it. We knew that Labour were going to lose that election. Peter Mandelson was in charge of organising the Labour campaign, running the Election and advising Gordon on it. He knew that their chances of winning were very small. Gordon Brown had failed to have an Election earlier on in 2007

when some people thought he had an opportunity. His performance as Prime Minister was not very successful apart from what he did on the G20 and the financial crisis. He did not have the right personality for the job: too controlling and into the detail: not sufficiently uplifting or motivating. Labour had in any case come to the end of a long period in power. The expectation was that they would lose it and they did.

What did that mean for me? I, as Permanent Secretary, had been authorised, as Permanent Secretaries are, to engage with the spokesperson of the Opposition in my area to talk to them about it. The Shadow Business Minister was Ken Clarke so I had some very interesting discussions with Ken who is a fascinating personality, about how he was going to handle the portfolio which I enjoyed very much. But what actually happened was the Conservatives didn't win an outright majority and so we had a Coalition Government and who should eventually turn up as a Minister after the Coalition negotiations, not Ken Clarke, but Vince Cable, completely unexpectedly, both for him and for me, out of the blue. I'm not sure whether he really wanted to be a Minister. He had been very effective in opposition but he was less comfortable with some of the responsibilities, certainly the policies that he had to push through, for example, in relation to student fees which we were responsible for. It was quite challenging for him and he was working with a Coalition Ministerial team. We had David Willetts actually doing higher education on the Conservative side. We had a mixed team of Conservative and Lib Dem Ministers. This was uncharted territory for all of us because we'd not had a coalition government before and in BIS we were right at the political sharp end of it because the Government's agenda on austerity, cuts, support for business and responding to the crisis was focussed very largely on the BIS agenda.

It was an interesting transition from Peter to Vince, but for me it didn't last very long because at the same time one of the things that the Government had decided to do, and was on the agenda of David Cameron, was to create a new National Security Adviser post. We hadn't had a National Security Adviser before but Cameron's solution to the conundrum as to how the centre should exercise coordination on foreign policy was to create a National Security Adviser and a National Security Council, which we'll talk about. His candidate for that role was Peter Ricketts who was the Permanent Secretary in the Foreign Office. Suddenly I discovered there was a vacancy for Permanent Secretary in the Foreign Office and I was encouraged to apply for it, and so I did. There was a competition, there were four candidates and I was successful in that competition. By August 2010 I found that I was heading back to the Foreign Office.

2010-2015, FCO, Permanent Under Secretary

Usually Permanent Under Secretaries have a rather sedate six months or so to learn the ropes and work out what they want to do. I had ten days, which was actually my summer holiday. William Hague having been appointed was in a hurry to get on with it. I was under a lot of time pressure to get started.

AW: Time must have run out with all the coalition negotiations?

SF: Exactly. Also there was a lot to be done and William Hague, who was the new Foreign Secretary, had been a long time, I think it was six years, in opposition, occupying the shadow job, so he had a very clear idea of what he wanted to do and urgently wanted to push on. In retrospect, I have to say, I regret that because I frankly came into the job without having a chance to think about it properly having been outside the Foreign Office for many years, other than the short time when I was DG for Europe, and that was definitely a disadvantage for me. It was suboptimal, but that's life.

The reason I was selected for that job was because the Government wanted to put a very heavy focus on economic issues and I had that strength in trade and I was brought back I think with that in mind. I was surprised to get the job, firstly because I had worked for a long time with Peter Mandelson who was a very senior Labour politician, and I thought there might be some sort of inhibition about that, but secondly I had never met William Hague. To my mind it is greatly to his credit (though I would say that) that he appointed me without ever having the opportunity to meet me. He took the recommendation of the panel, chaired by Gus O'Donnell, and he accepted it. When we look at the behaviour of some other Ministers in relation to appointments, it is one of the things I would say in praise of William, that he was very proper in the way he approached those things.

He was in a hurry to get on and also felt that the Foreign Office had lost influence in Whitehall and needed to assert itself. He asked me to address that agenda, the Foreign Office's institutional agenda, our role in Whitehall, the economic policy agenda and engagement with emerging markets and so forth. That was my brief and one which I was very happy with frankly. I strongly felt that the Foreign Office needed to assert itself, and the other advantage that I had was that I'd worked in Whitehall on the domestic side, so I think that also played in my favour. I also felt that the Foreign Office needed to have much more economic understanding of the world and to focus more on economic issues.

But what happened when I got there was that we were faced immediately with the 2010 cuts, a very significant austerity budget, which led to a 25 percent cut in spending on the Foreign Office's operational budget. Quite a lot of it was taken up by the transfer of the World Service off the Foreign Office budget, back to the BBC, but it nevertheless required some really tough decisions. The most difficult decisions for me were cutting overseas postings for junior Foreign Office staff which was very controversial and reducing the provision of accommodation for people overseas. These were cuts which really affected people, difficult stuff. That is where the fact that I'd been outside the Office for quite a lot of time made it difficult for me to understand exactly what the best decisions were. But I think we did the right thing, even though it was very tough. It was hard for me personally because I got a lot of criticism, really quite vituperative criticism, but that comes with the territory. But at the same time as we were doing those cuts that absorbed a lot of our energy, William Hague wanted a very ambitious agenda of projecting Britain in the world, he wanted to increase the size of the diplomatic network and he wanted to shift resources into the major emerging economic countries like China and India. So we were really on an agenda of trying to do more with less, and there was a lot of pressure in the system. That was what I was trying to lead the organisation to do successfully.

AW: And how did you find William Hague as Foreign Secretary?

SF: William Hague was very strong in many respects as Foreign Secretary and we were able to address this agenda because he was good at motivating the Office. He engaged with the Office and was supportive to officials, and he understood that if you are going to ask people to do tough things then you need to be with them. He actually generated a lot of positive feeling in the Office and I think from the perspective of a Foreign Secretary who actually leads the organisation and is seen to care about it, he was probably the best Foreign Secretary I've seen. He did fight for the money and he did a deal with George Osborne on the Foreign Office's budget so he worked for us and I give him credit for that. He sugared the pill for us and the Foreign Office responded very well. They liked working with him, the clarity he brought and the sense of motivation. He was also, and this is very important, powerful in Cabinet. With Cameron and Osborne he was one of the triumvirate leading the Conservatives alongside Nick Clegg and his team. For the Foreign Office if you are going to be influential as a Department in Whitehall, you have to have a strong leader in Cabinet. Unlike the Treasury, you don't control the money, you don't have your hands on the true levers of power, you have to have influence, and Hague was good for us.

AW: And he had been Party Leader ...

SF: Yes, he had influence, exactly, David Cameron looked to him. And also he delivered credibility in a large part of the Party, particularly in the North of England, for Cameron and Osborne. And also George Osborne had worked for him, so he was very well placed and it was a good time for the Foreign Office.

AW: And then we had the Arab Spring – so what happened?

SF: Yes, what happened? I was doing all this, a neat plan, budget cuts, expansion, and then suddenly the rest of my time became an exercise in crisis management because by December 2010 having just got into the Office, problems started. The Arab Spring started in Tunisia, it spread to Yemen, it spread to Egypt and to Libya, to Syria, to Bahrain and we were suddenly into a very tough period of crisis management. Again for me, having been outside, it was an additional challenge to get it right. In the end much of the rest of my time in this job was dealing with these crises. And it wasn't only the Arab Spring, we had a massive earthquake in Japan and all the problems associated with that, we had Ukraine, Crimea, the shooting down of MH50, the Eurozone crisis ongoing, we had Ebola. So in different ways, politically and in consular work, we were doing a tremendous amount of crisis management and it was very high pressure.

One of the things that we really had to tighten up on was consular crisis response, where to be honest with you, we were found wanting at the start. The systems were not strong enough. When it came to evacuating people from Libya, for example, we had some tough times dealing with that so we had to put stronger procedures in place. We spent a lot of money in upgrading the Foreign Office's Crisis Management Unit which is now quite state of the art but which was a bit Heath Robinson prior to that. I was shocked to discover that staff could not even get a mobile phone signal in the centre and that there was no air conditioning. This was a very big agenda for us and it was clear the credibility of the organisation was on the line with the Prime Minister and others – “why can't you deliver this?” “Why don't you know how many British nationals are in this part of Libya?” and so forth. Of course now that people can ring the media from their mobile phones in the middle of a desert and say “What can't somebody rescue me from, say, Oasis Three?” it's hugely challenging both politically and operationally. Expectations have risen very high and politicians encourage this.

On the Arab Spring, did we get it right? I don't know. I think we had no alternative but to respond the way we did, i.e. to support this movement, because it was a very real movement and it was happening. If we had just said to the Egyptian people "I'm sorry you might not like Mr Mubarak but you've got to stick with him" I don't think that would have worked, so I think we were in a situation of choosing the lesser evil, and that's what foreign policy often is.

The biggest challenge operationally was Libya which actually was a conflict, and I want to use that as an example to illustrate the working of the National Security Council, which I think is really relevant for the Foreign Office. The National Security Council, in normal times, met once a week, chaired by the Prime Minister. People said that this was a threat to the Foreign Office because it was shifting the foreign policy making to the centre, but the reality was that it was there anyway. I put a different interpretation on it, I said if we use it properly it's actually an advantage to the Foreign Office because we write most of the papers that go to the National Security Council and we control the delivery of the follow-up, so we are the Department that still has the resource and can use this to instrumentalise and magnify our influence. Up to a point that's true, and I think we did manage to use the National Security Council in our interests but of course as the central Secretariat grew around it, clearly it's a challenge to the Foreign Office. What you see now is a lot of very good Foreign Office people moving in to staff the National Security Secretariat, you have Mark Sedwill, Christian Turner and others, and maybe that's the way to go. But institutionally it is a challenge, there's no doubt about it. The FCO risks becoming the department for delivering foreign policy but not making it.

When it came to Libya the National Security Council was meeting, chaired by the Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister, at least once and sometimes twice a day, pulling Ministers together. It became a nightmare to service this because of the briefing machine – you were so busy preparing the meeting that you didn't actually have time to execute decisions of the previous meeting. It was a huge challenge for the Office and our posts, people were working absolutely flat out. But it worked. If you compare it with the Iraq War, of which I've been critical earlier on, what you had here was transparency in decision making. You had, for example, Dominic Grieve, who was the Attorney General at the time, in the room giving legal advice on all the options in plenary in a way that I thought was really commendable as an example of how Government should operate. I thought it was good but

very difficult to manage. And of course the really sensitive operational decisions were made in camera.

Personally I want to say that the decision to intervene in Libya, although it was driven very much by David Cameron himself with Sarkozy, they worked very closely, and there was some reluctance in the military and amongst diplomats – what are we getting into? Where do we take it? (with the experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq behind us) - I think the decision to intervene was justified. There was a very clear and acute humanitarian crisis developing in Benghazi and I think to have stood aside from it would have been indefensible. But as in all these cases, what happens of course is that as soon as you intervene the game changes and you are then into a military operation. The original objective might have been to prevent a civilian massacre in Benghazi but once you're engaged your political and military goalposts shift. It became rapidly apparent to me and I remember saying to William Hague "You know now we're involved this can only end when Gadhafi is removed from office". And of course that rapidly became the case. But this is the trouble. You get mission creep, events aren't isolated and how do you define success? And that's what we saw in Libya and, as in Iraq, what we failed to do (having won the military operation) was to work through the post military nation rebuilding, institution building and so forth. It was well beyond our capacity to deliver and that is where we failed in Libya, or at least we have not yet succeeded.

The other interesting thing about Libya was the extent of US reluctance under Obama to be involved. It was very much driven by the UK and France, but at the same time you saw very clearly that without the US we were not capable of doing it, even in Libya. We could not have taken out Libya's air defence system without American support. And that is Libya. So imagine on a bigger scale... It revealed to me starkly the limits of our capabilities without American backing. People who make vainglorious claims about the foreign policy reach of "Global Britain" after Brexit should be clear about this. That is very important when you turn to Syria. Syria is a much more complex and difficult and important geopolitical challenge. It was very clear that we just didn't have the capacity, having done Libya, to take on Syria and intervene. Because they live next door to Israel they have a much more sophisticated air defence system and capable military. I think the options for large-scale intervention in Syria were much fewer and William Hague was right to say that there was no one-size-fits-all solution. Foreign policy is about the art of the possible and it is very often about choosing the lesser bad, and there were significant constraints on what we could do in Syria. You could argue that we were wrong not to be more proactive, and clearly history

demonstrates our policies have not been successful in Syria. What you learn from Libya and Syria is that you can intervene and not succeed and you can not intervene and not succeed. You can't always succeed and that is a harsh reality.

Syria was particularly personally difficult for me because I'd been posted there and had a great affection for the country.

AW: And you had visited so many of the places?

SF: Exactly. Aleppo, Homs, I know all these places and the destruction that has taken place there is tragic. The whole fabric of that country and civilisation, the accumulated history of the Levant has been torn apart. I don't want to go into that in more detail except to say that the defining point in all of this, and I think the defining point in William Hague's tenure as Foreign Secretary, was the vote at the end of August 2013 not to intervene militarily in a limited, surgical and contained way when we had compelling evidence that chemical weapons had been used. In a sense it was the crystallising moment about this great debate about whether we intervene or not. What it revealed was that public opinion had shifted a lot. I had come back from summer determined that there was not going to be a division between the Foreign Office officials and Ministers on this as I felt there had been on Iraq. So I convened all my senior officials in the Foreign Office, the Board, and said that I wanted to know that if we as a group believed there was a case for targeted military intervention against Syrian use of chemical weapons, and that there would be no question of officials detaching themselves from it. So I went to William Hague and told him that the senior officials of the Foreign Office were behind a surgical strike and believed it was the right thing to do, despite the risk of mission creep and all the risks I have described above. This was, I think, on a Sunday afternoon and he said to me that was great, but of course we would have to have a vote in Parliament. I hadn't been focussing quite on that issue, which was a political issue, and they had made a commitment in their manifesto. I think I fault myself now for not challenging him a bit more on that and asking if he had really prepared this. But I took the view that it was for the politicians to deliver, that it was a political issue. Of course that was what they miscalculated and were unable to deliver. It's true that there were some pretty sensitive discussions with the Leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband, whose position I think changed during the course of the week on this. But one way or another, they failed to deliver the votes in the House and of course William Hague took that very hard. He felt that a) there had been a miscalculation and b) how could he be Foreign Secretary if his hands were tied.

I know he felt that very strongly and I think it was a decisive moment not only for our foreign policy but personally for him as well.

The other big thing! The other thing that had been going on in the background all this time was Europe. Whilst we had been doing all this crisis management and thinking about the Middle East, the EU crisis was brewing. Dissatisfaction in the Conservative Party was brewing. The Eurozone crisis was happening and was really affecting people's perception of Europe. While we were managing the wider international crisis, the Treasury, the Foreign Office and others were also dealing with the Eurozone crisis. We were doing contingency planning to help people who might be unable to get back from their holidays in Greece if they could not get money out of the cash machines. I have to say that I was rather at the tough end of the spectrum and saying "well you know if people go on holiday in Greece, I think they can probably look after themselves" but the Government wanted to provide a gold-plated service, so there was a lot going on.

The real point is that UKIP was gaining strength, calling for a referendum. The Prime Minister faced a rebellion on the back benches on this and he kept feeding the beast by making concessions, and in the end was forced to concede the idea of a referendum on our membership of the EU. That's a very truncated version! The reason, in my view, that he agreed to the referendum was that he thought it was inevitable at some point, and was playing for time, so he said that we would have a referendum in the next Parliament, this was in 2013 when he made the Bloomberg speech. He was pushing it back beyond the first five years. I think it's legitimate to say that he probably didn't expect to win that election in 2015. Labour were running pretty strong, and certainly the Conservatives didn't expect to win an outright majority, so he'd have to be in another coalition, so he may well have thought he'd fight this battle again when he saw what happened and might find a way out. But I think he was surprised to win that outright majority and of course the Liberal Democrats were absolutely hammered and he was faced with the responsibility of then delivering the referendum. I had personally argued against the referendum in 2013 when the Bloomberg speech was made, but it was very much a politically driven decision.

I would like to say on Europe policy that whilst I had a very strong relationship with William Hague on most issues, I always felt that on Europe my views were not sought by him or at the centre of Government because I was seen to be associated with it, having worked in the Commission and so forth. I was considered too much of a Europhile. One of David

Cameron's weaknesses in my view was that he surrounded himself with a group of like-minded people and seemed reluctant to seek diverse advice.

AW: You'd gone native?

SF: Yes, possibly. The Bloomberg speech was not shared with the Foreign Office. It was written in No 10 and in particular the key passage - which was the political passage, was not Government policy, it was Conservative Party policy about the referendum - was not shared with the Foreign Office. I asked to go and see it. I said that I was the Permanent Secretary in the Foreign Office and I needed to see it. I was allowed to go and read it and I commented on it but that is just a little vignette about how tightly and politically these things were managed. We have to cover that because it has been so influential in what's happened ever since.

I left the Foreign Office in 2015, I did five years as Permanent Under Secretary which is actually quite a long stint.

AW: Did you leave straight after the Election?

SF: I had to make a choice, having done five years, was I going to stay or was I going to do something else? I took the view, and I was 57 at that time, so I was relatively young, I may even have been the youngest person to be Permanent Secretary, I thought if I do another round I would need to stay in for at least two or three more years and the Election is a good time to make the choice. I made the choice before the Election and I told the Foreign Secretary in March 2015 that I wanted to step down, so it was very clear that this was not me either jumping or being pushed after the Election. I made that choice for a number of reasons but partly because I felt that I'd had done seven years as a Permanent Secretary and that if I left now I could do something else. I was quite interested in doing something outside Government and I had actually been talking to the people with who I subsequently set up my business, and so I made that choice and I told Jeremy Heywood.

AW: Did you see Philip Hammond in as Foreign Secretary?

SF: Yes. I did four years with William Hague and then he decided to stand down and Philip Hammond came from the Ministry of Defence and I had him as Foreign Secretary for one year. He's a different personality from William Hague and of course hadn't been preparing for it in the way William Hague had. Philip Hammond made a very serious effort to engage

and he particularly made a very serious effort to engage on European diplomacy, given that we were going to have the referendum and given that we were also conducting the negotiation to try to seek the reforms of the EU that David Cameron wanted prior to the referendum. I was impressed by his energy and involvement in that. In a sense he did more on European diplomacy than William Hague had, he really focussed on it. He, like William Hague, was personally Eurosceptic but like William Hague, largely I think as a result of holding the office of Foreign Secretary, came to understand the strategic advantages of EU membership and in the end campaigned in favour of Remain. In both cases people said that the Foreign Office 'had got to them'. I think it was actually exercising the responsibility of the office of Foreign Secretary which brought that perspective to them. Philip Hammond was not Foreign Secretary for a very long time but I think really put some effort into it whilst he was doing it.

The thing I haven't talked about very much is Ukraine and the Russian invasion which was a major issue he had to deal with, because he came later in my tenure and a lot of that was in the period when he was Foreign Secretary.

AW: You would like to talk about your reflections on the Foreign Office?

SF: The experience of being Permanent Under Secretary was very rewarding and I'm glad I had that opportunity. It is a very tough challenge because you're running an organisation which is operating all round the world, there is always something going wrong, there's always some crisis like the Embassy in Tehran being invaded and there's quite a lot of firefighting. Very many people in Government have a finger in the foreign policy pie, whether it's defence or DFID, or other agencies. I was doing it at a time when there was an immense pressure on resources: frankly the Government does not resource the Foreign Office to do the job it wants the Foreign Office to do. Cheeseparating all the time. It's a tiny budget in public spending terms and frankly the savings that are made are not worth the opportunity cost of the savings. I think the Government has got to address that issue. I don't know how they do it. The Foreign Office living out of the back pocket of DFID is not really satisfactory. DFID has a budget which is now ten times the size of the Foreign Office's budget. There's a huge distortion in the funding of our international activity which has got to be addressed. After Brexit, if we really want to have a serious global diplomacy, this issue has got to be tackled. You've got to have the people, you've got to have the skills and you've got to have at least the basic resource.

Having said that, I think there is also a lot that the Foreign Office can do to improve itself. There is a challenge for foreign ministries about how they demonstrate relevance in a world where heads of government speak directly to each other, where information is flowing so freely, diplomats don't have a monopoly of negotiation or information or analysis. Diplomats need to think a lot about what their role is and how they add value and differentiate themselves. And the answer is there is a role, they are the professionals in government at doing international relationships, understanding international affairs and interpreting countries to each other and speaking the languages of different countries. That is very important but they have to do it professionally and they have to understand what the service they are delivering is and the outcomes they are achieving. I tried to bring to the Foreign Office a strong agenda of focus, improvement, of excellence. I had a project called Diplomatic Excellence which was my overall mantra: that we've got to explain what diplomacy is and why we are good at it, and we've actually got to be good at it. We've got to modernise our system and we've got to think in modern ways: to reach beyond traditional diplomatic circles, to be relevant to domestic policy, domestic departments and different parts of our national community as well as internationally. There is a big ongoing challenge for the Foreign Office.

Part of the modernisation agenda and one of the things that I was really most pleased about when I was PUS was the progress we made in improving diversity and inclusion of wider groups of people in the Foreign Office. I think we were starting from a fairly low base actually because it wasn't a very diverse organisation but while I was there we managed to make some significant changes gradually over time. By the time I left more than one quarter of the Heads of Mission were women and indeed half of the members of the Management Board of the Foreign Office were female as well. I think that was quite a significant change and it was reflected also in the structure of the Senior Appointments Board, the group of people who made the most senior nominations to posts. There were also some very good examples of greater diversity in terms of acceptance of different types of sexual preference. We had openly gay ambassadors and, indeed, some same sex couples in ambassadorial roles which was a big step forward, at times, in some countries, quite controversial. I think that is very important particularly in the context of the social background of the Foreign Office. When I joined it wasn't long after the time in which women had to resign when they got married and if you were a gay man you weren't allowed to be in the Foreign Office and be openly gay until the 1990s, so big changes have been made. More needs to be done and I

know that the Foreign Office is still pushing ahead on this agenda, in particular I think we need more outreach to the minority ethnic communities so that the Foreign Office is more representative of the structure of our modern British society. There's a lot more to be done but I do think we had laid some strong foundations for that work.

I wanted also to introduce better skills, economic skills, financial skills, language skills, so we invested quite a lot of money in reopening the language school which I think is really state of the art now, and try to reinforce the case that diplomats have to be trained in the core skills of diplomacy, negotiation, languages, and expertise in different countries. At the same time we invested a lot in improving our IT because quite frankly we were not equipped to be fast and fluent enough in IT and there was a tremendous tension between the security requirement and the need for people to have modern technology that worked and allowed them to be truly connected. I think we have cracked a lot of that now and I would like to take some credit for that.

The other thing which is important is that we slimmed down the London Headquarters so we moved out of the Old Admiralty Building and we ran a major refurbishment of the second and third floors of King Charles Street, an £80 million project which we delivered, I think, successfully.

One of the things that I wanted to do was professionalise the management and the project delivery of the Foreign Office whilst also keeping the focus on core diplomacy. Did I succeed? Did we succeed? I think we did make progress but it's an ongoing challenge. The Diplomatic Service has got to continue to react and move on and be relevant to the world and redefine itself if it's going to survive and flourish. I think that is the last thing I'd like to say. Brexit is going to be a huge challenge for the country, I think it is a strategic error that will damage our international standing and our interests. But it is also a huge opportunity, actually, for the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office has to seize that opportunity and give thought leadership in Whitehall about where we are going, what sort of presence and role we want to have in the world and how we achieve that. I will be sorry if that leadership leaches out of the Foreign Office to other parts of Whitehall, and I hope that the Foreign Office will be able to assert itself because that is the challenge for our diplomacy in the next decade. The FCO needs to be bolder and tougher in arguing its case and imposing itself across government and Whitehall. If I helped to set the organisation up to respond to that, then I'll be pleased. I think that takes me to the end of this piece.

AW: I think it does. That is absolutely marvellous, thank you so much.

SF: I would like to end, however, with sincere thanks and appreciation to the men and women of the FCO both UK based and those engaged overseas, who gave me such dedicated, professional and unstinting support during my years as PUS.