

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

HOLT, Dame Denise Mary (born 1 October 1949)

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Career (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Research Analyst, FCO, 1970–84	pp 4-7
First Secretary, Dublin, 1984–87	pp 7-9
Head of Section, FCO, 1988–90	pp 10-11
First Secretary, Brasilia, 1991–93	pp 11-13
Deputy Head, Eastern Department, FCO, 1993–94	pp 13-15
Assistant Director, Personnel, 1996–98	pp 15-19
Deputy Head of Mission, Dublin, 1998–99	pp 19-20
Director, Personnel, FCO, 1999–2002	pp 20-21
Ambassador to Mexico, 2002–05	pp 21-26
Director for Migration and Overseas Territories, FCO, 2005–07	pp 26-30
Ambassador to Spain, 2007–09	pp 30-37

BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF DAME DENISE HOLT DCMG RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY IAN HAY-CAMPBELL

IH-C: This is Ian Hay-Campbell recording Denise Holt on the afternoon of Tuesday, 13 October 2020.

Denise, your connection with the Foreign Office goes right back to your time of birth, does it not?

DH: It does. When I left the Foreign Office, I used to like to startle people by telling them that I'd been in the Foreign Office for 60 years. But it is actually true. There was no year between 1949 and 2009 when I was not, in one way or another, a member of the Foreign Office.

IH-C: That must be some kind of record!

DH: I should think so.

IH-C: So, your parents were working in the Foreign Office?

DH: Yes, they actually met in Geneva but they were at the time both Foreign Office employees. I presume that in the immediate aftermath of the War a lot of people were hoovered into the Foreign Office from various backgrounds because there was everything to be started over again. So, my mother began working in the Foreign Office in the Durbar Court as a cipher clerk. She was translating from code into making it *en clair* and she was posted in that capacity to Geneva. Whereas my father – I've no idea what he was doing in Bletchley at the start of the War - he was extremely young and had come from the Isle of Man but I don't know what that route was. But he was posted to Geneva to the embryonic United Nations. I would assume it was about ensuring the protection of our communications in what must have been a very primitive organisation at that time.

IH-C: As you grew up in this Embassy setting, albeit as a child, it was a world in which you were a part of but a fairly distant part in terms of maybe the diplomats themselves?

DH: Yes – of course we’re jumping forward a few years before I remember anything but probably the earliest intimation I would have had of that was when we were living in Moscow, probably in the early 1950s when there would have been families with children of my age who were diplomats and there would have been other families such as mine who were not diplomats and regardless of the fact that you might have 2 four year old girls – they didn’t play together.

IH-C: You seem to have developed quite an early interest in what one might call geopolitics from your time growing up in an embassy.

DH: Well, in a way it was my life. Probably from the time I was aware of anything, the World Service news would have been on every hour on the hour and one of my earliest memories is of marching to *Lillibulero* that used to signal the BBC News, so it was always present. If you’re living in Moscow when Stalin dies; or if you’re in Beirut when there’s a civil war and you have to be evacuated; if your maid is a Christian Arab Palestinian from Nazareth who had to flee in the 1948 conflict in Israel/Palestine – you’re really aware of the world. I remember when we were in Beirut, Nasser took the Suez Canal and nobody spoke of anything else at the time. I remember when Burgess and Maclean fled and again, the embassies were alight with that. It was the subject of everybody’s after dinner conversations. So, all of these events were an education in themselves.

IH-C: And obviously something you continued to be conscious of in your schooling and possibly influenced you as to what you wanted to do when you went to university?

DH: Maybe – maybe not. At school the thing that I really remember is intense irritation at teachers who did not understand geopolitics and who would tell you all about “Eye-Ran” when I knew perfectly well because I’d lived there that it was “Iran”. Minor, every day irritations which showed that teachers were indeed fairly ignorant on things that went beyond the normal. But, as for influencing my choice of career – I was a linguist, quite simply. Now, that may have been because all through my childhood I was playing with other children and learning in different schools in other languages. I spoke Japanese when we were in Tokyo, I spoke Arabic when we were in Lebanon. My schooling was in French and Italian and it just became my easy thing. And that’s what led me to do French and Spanish at

university but I did it in a modular degree with politics because politics was something that really interested me. So, I suppose you could say that it was a sub-conscious choice but I didn't consciously say that I wanted to train for the Foreign Office and therefore I would do French, Spanish and Politics.

IH-C: So, you had these studies that you did at Bristol. What happened at the end of your time at university?

Research Analyst, FCO, 1970–84

DH: Life is very odd. I remember looking at a copy of the *Sunday Times* and seeing an advert for someone to work in the Foreign Office's Research Department to cover Spain and Portugal and thinking: "I would know about that. I know the Foreign Office and I'm not intimidated by it and it could be interesting." So, I applied and indeed, in the end, was successful but there was no planning involved at all; it was pure happenstance and I think what happened was that they had recruited someone altogether different in the previous year and she went off. She didn't like the job. So, it was advertised again for a second time and I just got lucky.

IH-C: What was the atmosphere like in the Office when you joined? How were you received? How did you initially get on?

DH: One of my ways of working out how long ago something is, is to imagine when I was born or when I did something, the same amount of years back and how different the world was. In 1970 I was on an induction course and I remember distinctly we had a talk about what life is like in the Foreign Office from someone who looked ancient to me but who was probably about fifty-five, who talked about when he had joined the Foreign Office and they had people coming round with shovelfuls of coal to put on the fireplace and there were sort of servants walking round catering for their every need. When I joined in 1970 we were still given a bar of soap and a towel once a week with which to wash our hands and there was still a trolley that came round three times a day offering tea and coffee, sandwiches and biscuits. We didn't have passes to wear round our neck. I do remember passes came in in my first year or two and you had to remember to show them but really, they knew. It was still small enough and nobody ever moved. Everybody knew everybody.

IH-C: Could you just explain to us the function of Research Department in those days? How did it operate and what was it there for?

DH: Research Department was established during the Second World War and the core of Research Department was at Bletchley. It was the country specialists who overlaid the intelligence being gathered with specialist knowledge of Germany and people and places and so on, so it made, essentially, rather terse communications useful by being able to put them in context. That was its origins and, in fact, my Head of Section when I very first joined was a Miss Ivy Giacardi and she had been one of the original researchers working at Bletchley during the War. I believe, though I'm not absolutely sure, that, in addition to the German component, there was also a Soviet component – which would make sense. But essentially, after the War, people had to work out whether they wanted it and where would they put it. So, they moved a smallish core of researchers into the Foreign Office. My team and one or two others worked in Cornwall House which is now part of King's College, London just off Waterloo. We worked quite separately from the Foreign Office as a cadre of specialists and there were still in 1970, out of a team of six working on Western Europe, three were working on Germany and they were mostly still following and parsing, if you like, the Quadripartite Agreement and what each term meant and what you could do and couldn't do, and the French and the Americans and the Russians and so on. So, Germany was still a major focus of interest which is slightly surprising so many years after the war.

IH-C: You were on the Iberian side. So, your expertise, your ability to do research in depth would be called on from time to time by the geographical department concerned or, indeed, by anyone else?

DH: Yes, the Office I think probably during the '60s realised that the story was no longer just Germany and so it (Research Department) gradually expanded with France and Italy. And then someone looked at Iberia and thought: 'Crikey, these dictators are getting very old and they're going to die some time. They're not in NATO. Spain had been through a particularly horrendous civil war. What will happen when their dictators go?' So, they recruited somebody for the Iberian Desk which, in the end, was me and it was a complete blank sheet of paper. There were no back papers except for Foreign Office files that you could call on and no tradition of knowledge of Spain. Spain has always been sort of in 'outer

orbit' for the United Kingdom; it's not quite central. If anything, it's a rival and probably not one we were very keen to be friends with back then. It was not long after a particular storm over Gibraltar which took place in the 1960s. I remember it was famously said that our Labour Foreign Minister came out of a session of negotiations and said: "My God, they're still fighting the Inquisition in there!" Not a lot had moved on.

My job was really to educate the Foreign Office about Spain and Portugal, starting with the desk officers and helping to prepare the Office against the day when things would explode one way or the other. Who would be the players? Where would be the areas of tension? What were already areas of tension? So, Portugal's African wars were really an evident source of tension because Portugal was trying to be a major power and it just did not have the wherewithal. And they were particularly horrendous wars: Angola and Mozambique were very difficult. So, Portugal, as it happened, was where the trigger was pulled and they were completely unprepared for it. From one night to the next day the Colonels were out on the street marching and overthrowing the Government and nobody had the first idea what to do next. That was called the 'Carnation Rebellion' and it worked out reasonably well but I think only because Portugal was so poor and so ignorant and without mass media communications. Up country Portugal was living in the 16th Century at that point.

Spain of course was always regarded as much more dangerous and potentially explosive because it was a more modern country, a bigger country and it had a violent history.

IH-C: And, of course, with things like Gibraltar as well, it had the capacity, presumably, for a greater impact on Britain's own external affairs?

DH: Yes, undoubtedly. Actually Franco, for whom there is very little good that could be found to be said in any area – from the UK's point of view, he took the view that one day Gibraltar would fall into Spain's lap as a low hanging fruit and he didn't propose to waste any time trying to take it on. So, although the border was closed which meant that Gibraltar's economy was purely centred on the Royal Navy, and there was really no tourism in those days ... actually I remember visiting Gibraltar in 1975 or 1976 and staying at the Rock Hotel on the top of the Rock and looking out. The whole of the Sixth Fleet was in the harbour and it was the most extraordinary sight – just what Gibraltar was there for, only no longer is. We don't have that many ships, these days. But it was an astonishing sight. So yes – Gibraltar

was an issue but not so much with Franco. I think everybody did think: “Gosh, this could get difficult” and from our point of view, it was one of the reasons why we hoped to persuade democratic Spain to join NATO so they could share our objectives rather than oppose us.

IH-C: And by the end of your time in Research Department both countries, Spain and Portugal, were heading for EU membership.

DH: They were from very early days, actually. It was clear probably from the mid to late ‘70s to both countries they would benefit both in terms of stability and in terms of economics if they joined the European Union and they were willing to make all the efforts that were required of them – the guarantees on judicial independence, for example, the sorts of things that had never been on the agenda for Iberia were all suddenly do-able. They benefited hugely from what you could almost call ‘coaching’ that Europe was willing to give them. Because the prospect of Spain and Portugal not joining the European Union would have been catastrophic.

First Secretary, Dublin, 1984–87

IH-C: So, we come to 1984 which is quite an abrupt change for you in the sense that you’ve had this extensive period in Research Department and then suddenly off you go into what one might call a more conventional diplomatic career. How did that come about?

DH: I suppose I’d spent 14 years in Research Department but I’d used it to broaden my scope. There comes a point after you’ve dealt with Spain and Portugal for maybe seven years when you feel you really know everything you need to know about Spain and Portugal – except what’s going to happen tomorrow, of course! – and so I took on other countries. I dealt for a time with Malta, I dealt for a time with France which gave me a broader perspective. I was also particularly increasingly drawn to operational work, to the sort of work that the desk officers I was supporting were doing, rather than in-depth research. I liked doing the research but I found it very boring to have to write it up afterwards. So, it didn’t really suit me for much longer.

Actually, I went off to New York to do the General Assembly in about 1979 which I adored. It was terrifically interesting and cemented in my mind that it was time to move across. So, I

went for a limited competition where members of the Service who are not Fast Stream entrants could in those days bridge over. I don't think you need to do it anymore. I think they're much more flexible about how you come through from one sort of entry point to another.

I did that. The first time I tried, I failed. But in 1984 I went to Ireland and that was a 'give me an overseas posting and see what I can do' attitude and, I must say, Personnel were fantastic at that stage. They were really keen. They put me forward for a couple of postings, one of which I remember – Santiago – the Ambassador came back and said: 'I've already got one woman. I don't need another'. No – I tell a lie. That was Mozambique. Santiago said: 'I'll take Denise Holt (or Denise Mills, as I was then) but as long as you give me a proper Grade 5 as well'. On both occasions Personnel came to me and said: "What do you want us to do, because we think this is unacceptable and we will face him down. You can have that job if you want it'. But I said I only want to go to a Post where the Ambassador wants me to be there because it would be a miserable bloody existence otherwise. Then Ireland surfaced and the Ambassador at the time was Alan Goodison who had been Head of Southern European Department really during the peak period for Spain and Portugal so he knew me very well. He was extremely welcoming, delighted to take me on board and it was a very happy posting.

IH-C: It was an amazing time because there was an awful lot going on at that time, wasn't there?

DH: There was, even unbeknownst to me. As First Secretary (Political) I found out two years later that my Ambassador had been engaged in secret talks that I knew nothing about! At least that showed that they were really secret. But it was clear that something was going on and every now and then Alan would fire off a telegram to London picking out something I'd reported and I didn't really understand the significance of this but of course it was where there'd been something that had potentially leaked out from the secret talks or that impacted on the secret talks. It's very difficult to understand a situation if you're not engaged in the really delicate stuff but it was absolutely top level. It was his equivalent in the Irish Foreign Ministry; the Cabinet Secretary, Robert Armstrong; both of them on the Committee and maybe one or two others. It was seminal for Ireland. It was the start of a really serious intent to work out how you could bring the two communities – after all, by then they'd spent over

10 years slogging the guts out of each other – these talks were to say we really have to find ways to bring the two communities together so that they will provide the answer in due course, rather than Dublin and London trying to impose a solution on Northern Ireland.

IH-C: You were unaware of these talks formally but of course as Political First Secretary you had your own need to have contacts with Irish politicians and others. How were you received at that stage?

DH: Hugely welcoming. I mean, I never met an Irish politician who didn't have family in England, who didn't feel great warmth and affection for many contacts in England. They were not "Shinners" [i.e. supporters of Sinn Fein's methods] at all. Even Fianna Fáil, who were more culturally aligned to the Republican position, were a delight to work with as were the media. And like any First Secretary, Political anywhere in the world, if you were prepared to do a bit of trading, they would be very helpful guides to what was going on. That didn't mean that it wasn't a tense situation. It wasn't very long before - in the 1970s actually - that the British Embassy had been bombed and destroyed in Merrion Square and it also wasn't very long before that the British Ambassador had been killed by a car bomb. These things were still live; there were still people in the Embassy who had been through those experiences, locally engaged staff obviously, not UK-based because the UK-based had moved on by then. The police kept a very close eye on what was happening. They would regularly find lists – Sinn Fein and PIRA lists – upon which my name or my future husband's name or somebody else's was inscribed. So, you had to be on your mettle all the time. But it was a wonderful posting nevertheless.

IH-C: You've just made a reference there to your future husband. That also helped make the posting wonderful as well, I imagine?

DH: Yes, indeed. Particularly after the birth of my son who is appropriately named 'Patrick' because he was born in Dublin on 16 March – he was a bit of an impatient child, he should have come a day later. I didn't think you could have a child born in Dublin on the eve of St Patrick's Day and not call him Patrick, really. Although my successor, funnily enough, had a daughter born in Dublin very close in age to my son and he called her 'Elizabeth' as a sort of riposte!

IH-C: At the end of that posting to Ireland in '87 you came back to London to Central American politics.

Head of Section, FCO, 1988–90

DH: Yes, I'd had a year off after the birth of my son which was an absolute delight and gave me time to think about whether I did want to go back into the Foreign Office as a diplomat or return to Research Department. It was no competition for me. I wanted to be a diplomat at that point. Of course, Research Department is part of the Diplomatic Service – I was a diplomat – but I wanted to be a generalist. Personnel looked around at jobs that would be available on the right timing and Mexico and Central America Department didn't float many people's boats, but it did float mine. As it happens, in Ireland, perhaps because it is a Catholic country, the troubles and travails of Central America which at this time was the time of Nicaragua, the Sandinistas, El Salvador, gunnings down of priests, there were problems with the Americans who were backing the Contras – that was a period of great tension throughout the peninsula and that was widely reported in Ireland though not in England which had not much interest. So, I could see that it would be a very interesting job. What I didn't know was that one of the reasons the job was coming free was that Number 10 was utterly fed up with the Foreign Office's vaguely pro-Sandinista line and had really said: 'you need to sharpen up and get on-message', to the Foreign Office.

IH-C: That message being?

DH: That message being – and I still feel this today, actually. I have made a point in my career of never doing a job that I was politically or in conscience in any way uncomfortable about. The thing was the Sandinistas, a bit like, years later, the Zapatistas, became a sort of cult in this country. People saw them a bit like hippies in Haight Ashbury if you go back a bit further. They were seen as some kind of vaguely saintly people with a 'right-on' message, that you couldn't be a decent person and not support. Whereas the Contras were portrayed as basically American cannon fodder essentially, people who were deemed not to be in the right and therefore it was seen as very odd if you supported them. I didn't particularly support the Contras but nor did I support the Sandinistas who were extremely undemocratic in fact in their processes. Really, all across Central America there was this battle between right and left which was an odd battle because it got mixed up with the

Church. Across the region, but especially in El Salvador, there were committed left-wing activist worker priests confronting the traditional hierarchy, but spurred on by Pope John Paul and one or two sympathetic bishops. It's at least arguable though, that once it became a fighting war, neither group was really looking after the interests of Joe Bloggs in Central America. They were busy fighting their ideological wars.

An enormous amount of time in MCAD was spent answering PQs, replying to letters from members of the public, very many of whom were fine, upstanding members of religious groups – large numbers of Baptists, I remember – where they had had speeches from the pulpit telling them of the wickedness of the right in Central America. In reply I sought to explain British foreign policy to Central America - in plain English apply a corrective, actually, to saying you're looking at it through a lens that is just too simple.

IH-C: You had the chance to go and see it yourself, presumably?

DH: I did, a fascinating trip. What struck me there was that they are very small countries when all is said and done. Very small countries and very poor but so different one from another. I started in Costa Rica which was really quite modern and prides itself on being peace loving so it hasn't got an army and it is well governed and has good justice and so on. Then I went on to Nicaragua which was like – well they all reminded me of Graham Greene's books – backward, donkey-ridden. The politics in Nicaragua were absolutely bizarre and I believe they still are. El Salvador was quite dangerous at that time. I don't know whether it still is. I think it now suffers from gang warfare but in those days it was political warfare. There were bombs and shootings going on the whole time. But at the same time as that was happening, they were throwing up skyscrapers – El Salvadoreans are very entrepreneurial. – and then you go on to Tegucigalpa which is the one horse town. It is absolutely tiny and boring. I am being very frank here. I hope it won't embarrass anybody!

First Secretary, Brasilia, 1991–93

IH-C: I'm sure it won't. Then you returned to the Americas, as it were, on a joint posting, I think?

DH: It was eventually a joint posting. When I was in MCAD my husband was in the Parliamentary Unit and his time there came to an end and he was posted to Brazil as First Secretary Political and there wasn't a vacant post for me at that time. So, I very happily took time out again to take my son out to Brasilia and we had a lovely year playing by the pool and taking him to kindergarten and so forth. And then a suitable job came free and I took over the First Secretary Political while David went across to be First Secretary Commercial. So, I found myself in the right job after a year. But I was so lucky. I had had that marvellous extra year with my lovely little boy and made a lot of good friends. We all lived in a very nice area and so it was a smashing time. I then started work and we did about 18 months with both of us working and our Irish nanny came out to join us which was super.

But it was not really very enjoyable politically because Brazil did not have a particularly successful history of democratic politics and for much of the previous decade there'd been a military dictatorship, in effect. They had recently held free and fair elections – if not the first time, one of the very few times in modern times and Fernando Collor had won them by quite a comfortable majority. He was from the right. He'd beaten, as it happens, Lula who subsequently became president many years later. But only a year after he was appointed president he was impeached on the grounds of corruption and it was really a very sad moment for Brazil, having built itself up to hold democratic elections and have a democratic president – it hardly lasted any time at all. He was impeached. It was a period of great uncertainty. No constitution handles an impeachment well and theirs was being tried in a very unexpected way. But eventually they did get a replacement president who was much better anyway, really and they kept going with democracy, to their credit, really.

The second big thing that happened while I was in Brazil which eventually took over all my time was preparing for the Earth Summit – (UNCED) the UN conference on environment issues which was the kick off, I would say, for all the environmental work, sustainability, millennium development goals etc. It all began back in 1992. That was quite a bun fight because, as often happens with these countries, they bite off more than they can chew. It was an enormous conference. Every country in the world sent all its best ministers because UNCED had that kind of political weight. I can't imagine the last time the UK sent a prime minister and five cabinet ministers to one international conference. The competition between diplomatic missions in Brazil, just for bedrooms in Rio – it was visceral. Luckily, we had extremely good relations so we got the best hotel which I am still very proud of. I really ran

the logistical side – somebody had to – and I enjoyed it no end. We had our ministers there for about a week to ten days rotating and every one of them wanted to have bilaterals with everybody else under the sun. It was a real jigsaw puzzle.

The conference itself was a landmark in environmental matters. It put ozone layers on all our radars and began a conversation (which is still going on) about things that human beings had been doing and using to destroy the atmosphere. -It didn't necessarily achieve much more than that but it did get it into the mainstream agenda so I would rate it as one of the big events of my life.

Deputy Head, Eastern Department, FCO, 1993–94

IH-C: Then a return to London as Deputy Head of Eastern Department. That's rather an abrupt change.

DH: Yes – somebody said to me that careers only make sense in retrospect. When I look back at my career I think that what I've been involved in almost everywhere I've ever worked has been a transition. A moment when a country is moving from one way of being to another way of being, whether that's Spain going from dictatorship to democracy; whether that's Ireland going from civil war into gradually finding peace; whether that's Brazil staggering into democracy. When I went to Eastern Department it was Day Two, actually. The Soviet Union had broken up but it hadn't really formed its new entities. They hadn't developed their own identities.

I was Deputy Head of Eastern Department, with responsibility for the Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia. Many of which countries, at the beginning of my time there, I couldn't have placed on a map and I wouldn't have been able to name the capital cities. There was a lot of finding out and understanding and in the early days I think you could say that some of them were barely independent. Certainly, the Central Asian countries were carrying on as neo-Soviet entities with strong leadership run in the old way. That would not be true of the Trans-Caucasus where you had on the one hand civil war in Georgia and on the other hand Armenia and Azerbaijan slogging it out over sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh (now sadly back in the news). That's just in that small bit of the Trans-Caucasus.

You had some really big players here. You had Iran to the south, the Soviet Union (still inchoate) in the north, and Turkey to the west. It was potentially, always, an explosive area. In Central Asia you had mining, you had tobacco - you had really big British and other Western economic interests looking for law and order so they could safely get stuck in.

IH-C: This was, in part at least, the motivation presumably for the Foreign Office setting up its representatives in each of these places. That must have been quite a logistical challenge.

DH: It was. We had people going out as explorers to find suitable buildings that would be appropriate. It is actually quite a job to set up a number of embassies with residences, with local staff from scratch in countries that were not previously countries so they didn't have quite the status or the infrastructure that a capital city would have. That was great fun. I remember sitting round a table with people from all the relevant departments and all the people who could buy buildings or install the communications. It was actually really fun.

But then you also had to choose the UK-based people who were willing to go out and be pioneers, which was not easy, with the requisite language which was also not the easiest thing to find.

IH-C: As you say, they would have to be adaptable people. They would presumably be starting their life abroad in a hotel or somewhere as well and living out of suitcases until things got gradually more settled. It must have been a great responsibility to give every amount of support to such people in really quite difficult circumstances for them.

DH: Yes, and at a time when it was really important, so our Embassy in Moscow was a great support - and actually, to name a name that's been a lot more in the papers recently - Tim Barrow, then First Secretary in Moscow would be on the phone daily, actually, talking about how things were going in Moscow, so we were playing a multi-layered game at that point. Number 10 took a very close interest. That's something I've been lucky on because, with Ireland too, Mrs Thatcher could not have taken a more direct interest in Ireland. I mentioned Number 10's interest in Central America. Again, Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia, because of the importance of the relationship with Russia, they (Number 10) were very on it. That's why we had three State Visits from our brand new shiny Presidents - because we needed to get to know them.

In Eastern Department I was able to work as half of the first ever job share above desk officer level. My colleague and I – Ann – decided that we would work Wednesday to Wednesday because that way, there would always be one of us on duty right through the weekend which is a weak spot for job shares otherwise and, as any diplomat will tell you, the weekend is when things always go wrong. It did mean that you'd come back in on a Wednesday and you would have a pile of telegrams to catch up on – I kid you not – a foot high, but that was also good. I remember ringing up Private Office and saying that I'd been catching up and I'd spotted a telegram that came in and that there was no reply from Number 10. Shock, horror. Because they were always so on it at Number 10. But because I was looking through them all together at the same time, I was able to spot it. It worked. It worked fine. We were under the wonderful David Manning's guidance there.

IH-C: At the end of that time, special unpaid leave. Now was that the Foreign Office being reasonably forward looking to arrange that and to be happy with it?

DH: It had been policy – for ever, really. If you had two officers and one was posted, in this case to Trinidad and Tobago, and there wasn't a job for the other officer in Trinidad and Tobago, they would automatically grant Special Unpaid Leave. So that you were able to keep your marriage off the rocks, I guess. That's what I had and it was the third time I had been able to take time out and I did consider myself to be extremely privileged. When my son went to boarding school at the age of nine, I had actually been a full-time mum for half of his life and kept my career going at the same time. I think that was an extraordinary privilege. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago it was also great fun. It was the Caribbean, it was an extremely gregarious posting and it was lovely and beautiful. The only thing going against Trinidad and Tobago was the heat and the humidity which got us down. Two years on we came home, we'd had enough. But we had a lovely time.

Assistant Director, Personnel, 1996–98

IH-C: And that was followed by Personnel Operations Department.

DH: Yes. By way of background, when I was in Eastern Department I was on one of the appointments boards. I think it was Grade 5, First Secretary appointments boards and so

Peter Torrey, who was chair of that board, saw me in operation and, although I didn't know it at the time, he thought I'd done rather well in that. Then, when we were in Trinidad and Tobago our High Commissioner, Dick Neilson was a very ill man (he subsequently died from the side effects). This led to various awkwardnesses in the High Commission which meant we had a procession of ever more senior people out from the Foreign Office. Eventually Peter Torrey came out and again it seems I confirmed his view that I'd be good in personnel. So, although it seems very odd for somebody to have two years out painting their toe nails in Trinidad and Tobago and return to London on promotion to Personnel Department, it all worked out very well for me!

IH-C: Let me challenge you gently over something, Denise. Did you ever have a suspicion that you were being lined up for a job like this because women are good at personnel things and sympathetic in a way? In other words, you were being channeled into a 'woman friendly' job.

DH: Not from Peter, certainly. Peter saw me as a good candidate for the job because I had common-sense and that is actually what you need most in personnel. You don't want people who are dogmatic. You want somebody who's going to apply what they know about the system to a real world situation. Most people's lives are messy and you've got to be forgiving. So, you need somebody who can do all those things. But – was it that job, or when I came back later as Director? I think it was Colin Bell who took me to one side – he was on the Board at the time – and he said: 'I'm so glad you've come to take this job, Denise, because neither the PUS nor the Chief Clerk could be called 'touchy-feely'. And I thought: 'Colin, if you think I'm 'touchy-feely' you've got another think coming!' Nobody who knows me thinks I'm a soft touch!

IH-C: So, your bosses were particularly supportive for this job as Deputy Head of POD and you had various challenges to face?

DH: Well, you kind of always do. That's 'business as usual' in HR. I think the Office is particularly given to this because we do ask a lot of people. They go off to very difficult places where they don't have many colleagues, their marriages may be falling apart, one or other may have had a fling with somebody else. Inevitably the nature of the beast is that you are going to have turmoil and tears. I think the other thing that struck me is that when people

are posted overseas, they're accepted in an honorary capacity at a higher social level than many of them are used to at home. And so they begin to spend accordingly and this can create quite serious problems, debt and how to recover from it. One of the worst decisions we had to make – well, for example, there was one case with a chap that we actually had to dismiss but his children were at boarding school but they refused to accept that that was going to come to an end. So, they kept sending the children to boarding school and the boarding school kept saying: 'Well, you need to pay the fees'. And the children were being made into tennis balls, really. It was just awful.

Then you had people who would come in, in floods of tears because of something that had gone wrong. You had to compartmentalise. You can't take those problems home with you – they're their problems really. But it's about trying to solve them. I remember I had one dear friend who was dying of cancer in Brussels at the time and didn't want to come home to be with his family because his child would lose his boarding school allowance if he came home. I thought this was a small price for the taxpayer to pay so we arranged it so that he could come back and die at home with losing his boarding school allowance. Some of them were heartrending decisions but sometimes you could help which was very fulfilling.

But the most exciting thing in both my times in HR was the sensation of looking at the Foreign Office as a whole with all its many postings and embassies and requirements and looking at your staff – your 'bank' as a whole – and thinking: 'This one would be brilliant here and that one would be brilliant there', and trying to get the chess pieces into the right places. But there's a problem there as well. I remember joining in on Rob Young's awayday when I was quite new in it and they were talking about how to get good managers into posts. But actually what they were doing was sending the best managers to Lagos and the bad managers to New York. Think about it. Which behaviour are you rewarding? But it doesn't help Lagos if you send a bad manager there.

IH-C: On either this first posting as Deputy Head or on coming back as Director, were you there at a time when the system of sending people abroad was changing? I remember from my time hearing from my Personnel Officer: 'Well, we've got this mapped out for you, Ian. You need this experience. Then you're going to go for this and this and so on.' In other words, you were in the hands of Personnel. Then we started what we have now, I assume, which is the bidding process where you might, or might not, be successful for a post that you

apply for yourself. A very fundamental change which has its good and its bad sides. Were you, on either of your postings, tied up in the formation or switch of that policy?

DH: That had already happened some time before I came in. I assume that it came in some time in 1992 or 1993 or '94. But it was certainly already in place when I joined. There were many, many problems about it because, certainly in the early days people really didn't have the experience to know where to pitch themselves. It's one thing to think you'd like to be First Secretary in Washington; it's another to have the relevant experience. I was always very clear that you didn't want a system that merely said you've done this job before therefore we know you'll be good at it. You have to be able to encourage talent to come through. You have to be open to ambition and open to people saying I did that job before and I did it well and now I know I can do something completely different.

There was quite a lot of learning to be done and of course the other thing, in a way related to it, was that it put a premium on people getting decent feedback from their bosses on what they did well and what they didn't do well so they could make sure they got ongoing development and training, and listened, basically. A lot of people just wanted to carry on doing what they did. Getting the Office to take performance management seriously was a challenge right the way through that decade. But I've found since leaving the Foreign Office that it's a challenge in every organisation I've worked with and in. We've no need to beat ourselves up; we just need to do it better.

IH-C: Because, of course, it will only work well if those who are doing the reporting are honest and fair in their assessment of the people they're reporting on. If they can't be bothered to give them that kind of report, that's not going to benefit anybody.

DH: Yes, there are many problems in the Foreign Office. For example, we've all come across the 'pass the parcel' syndrome where you have someone who really isn't good enough in doing the job they need to do in your post so you give them a super report and get them posted on to somewhere else. Or the alternative is where you've got a small and difficult post where Bloggs has not been very competent and doesn't speak the language well. On the other hand he's the life and soul of the embassy and everybody loves him and he's got good friends locally, he's just not brilliant. You know that if you give him a bad appraisal you'll dent his morale and he won't do the job well. I understand all the reasons why people

embroider or, in some cases, are unfair. But you have to try and cut through that. The thing about a decent performance management system is that you've got evidence from a succession of posts so if you go on getting the same appraisal and it's consistent, then you've got: 'OK, I think I know this guy' and getting a consistent feel.

Deputy Head of Mission, Dublin, 1998–99

IH-C: Let's pass on to your return to Dublin straight after the Good Friday Agreement. A very different place, you must have found it when you got back there.

DH: Absolutely. I think Dublin had been completely transformed. Of course, the 'Celtic Tiger' was the thing, because that had happened in the middle. When we left in 1988, Ireland was still quite poor. It was all Irish people, many of whom had brothers and sisters who'd left as emigrants, in quite recent times. There were virtually no foreign immigrants. This was unheard of. Life was just quiet. It was very traditional. Churches were absolutely packed on a Sunday. People still regularly had ten or twelve children.

Just a decade later, what a transformation. Of course, stuff had begun to come out about the mistreatment of children although it wouldn't really come to much for another decade, I suppose. But the economy was much stronger so people were going back to Ireland to work, not going out of it. There was a surprising number of Lithuanians and Poles who'd settled in Ireland, feeling very comfortable there. It was really staggering to see Middle European immigrants in Dublin. The city was absolutely full of blocks of flats. Actually, town planning was terrible so it didn't enhance Dublin in any way at all but there was money in people's pockets and that changed a lot of things. Also, the other really big development was that Ireland increasingly saw itself as a strong member of the European Union, very committed to the European Union and its whole foreign policy was no longer directed through London, through the UK. The UK was an important partner but then so were France and Spain and Italy and Germany and all the rest. And that took quite a lot of the sting out of Northern Ireland. We were able to discuss it as partners. That was the difference.

IH-C: Despite some of the improvements you mention, the relationship, I imagine, was one that needed very careful watching?

DH: More careful, really, than ever because London had invested a huge amount of time and political capital in the Good Friday Agreement, started by John Major, carried on valiantly by Tony Blair. They had both committed themselves, their governments, to working with Dublin to find an agreement that the two parties in Northern Ireland could make work – power sharing. And the Americans were in on it. You may remember George Mitchell was there as the ringmaster, really, to ensure the two sides played fair. There was absolutely no way that either Dublin or London was going to let this fail. They were going to go on with it until they had a power sharing executive. An early disappointment though was that everybody had thought that the IRA would bury its weapons or hand them in or convincingly give up the armed struggle given that it was now Sinn Fein going through the ballot box, having agreed that's what they would do. Unfortunately, the IRA didn't see it that way and refused to disarm and I think it was a good couple of years, or even longer, before they agreed that they would disarm. However, the level of violence and tension came down pretty quickly after the Good Friday Agreement.

Something I didn't mention when discussing my first posting there was the incessant provocation of marching seasons, those symbolic things that Northern Ireland specialises in. They didn't disappear overnight and the two communities, sadly, know how to irritate the other if they ever feel that things are leaning too far in one direction or the other. Even now the power sharing executive is a fragile beast and doesn't work very well.

IH-C: Now that posting was relatively short because you were recalled to London, weren't you?

Director, Personnel, FCO, 1999–2002

DH: Yes, that was rather odd. I went, expecting to have a full four year posting as Deputy Head of Mission but John Kerr had other ideas and on the whole if John Kerr had an idea, John Kerr got his way. So, I was called back. There were various manoeuvrings going on as there always are. John and I worked well together, I think that would be fair to say. But Richard Dalton who was my immediate predecessor in the role at that time was needed to become HMA in Libya which was also a very difficult post at a very difficult time. So, John saw a way of making these moves – as he always did, actually.

IH-C: Did you think it was a period of achievement for you in the post of Director HR?

DH: Absolutely. There were a number of things that came in at that point. Probably the most transformative was the introduction at that point of assessment and development centres which was about professionalising the senior ranks of the Foreign Office. I gather they've now been abolished which may or may not be the right solution. Who am I to say? But it could be the right solution because they ran for 10 or 12 years and they had the effect of making it clear to people that this was a step change. If you wanted to be a Counsellor, a Deputy Head of Mission or, in many places, an Ambassador, you had to shape up. It was no longer good enough to be good at the political stuff, you needed to be able to manage people. You needed to be able to think of managing upwards as well as downwards.

That really was transformative. I remember I had to front up at the Directors' morning meeting, John Kerr's morning meeting, on the day the first ever assessment and development centre was passing out its results and I think they'd had ten Grade 5s with aspirations to higher things going through this, of whom two passed. The whole room was stunned when I said that only two out of the ten had reached the required state. But John Kerr was unfailingly supportive. He thought this was a good thing. It was going to be rocky and we definitely had a strong current of total resistance from a lot of people, which was understandable, but we stuck with it and people learned. If something is deemed important to your future career, you tend to learn the lesson, don't you?

Ambassador to Mexico, 2002–05

IH-C: You then passed on to your first Head of Mission Post?

DH: I did. I couldn't quite believe it somehow because, as a girl born in 1949 and starting work in 1970, practically none of my contemporaries had worked beyond marriage. And those that had worked beyond marriage had given up on the birth of their first child. I surpassed my expectations somewhere back around – I don't know - Brazil in the 1990s. That was as high as I could have ever imagined myself getting, simply because I was a girl. So, to be appointed Ambassador to Mexico City was amazing.

It was amazing because it also was tremendously exciting. I'd never been to Mexico which is the most extraordinary country. Everything from desert cowboy land in the north to rain forest and indigenous peasants in the south, through colonial cities, Caribbean Sea - it's got everything. It's got the most fascinating history; it's enormously mineral rich and it's just lovely. So, I couldn't have been happier than going to Mexico as Ambassador.

The other thing that was very satisfying was that it's slightly out of line of sight from London. It's not in any big organisation – it's not in NATO, it's not in the EU, it's not a partner that has been traditionally important to us which gives the Ambassador a great freedom of manoeuvre. To find things that are going to be useful to London and to build them up. The thing that I found that was going to be useful to London was that Mexico at the time was the eighth biggest economy and was in line for the G13 and G7-type conferences. It was also the second most bio-diverse country in the world which led directly into the kind of things that came out of the Earth Summit – the environmental agenda that Blair and the UK were very big on at the time. That played straight into the Edinburgh G8 meeting. Sadly, we remember that meeting mainly because of the terrorism that happened at the same time. But Mexico was given a special invitation to come to that summit because they were clearly ready to work with us very strongly on environmental matters. They had been through positive and negative moments but have been a good partner but a non-traditional partner ever since. So, I count that as one of my successes.

I also counted it as a big success for Mexico. It had been a dictatorship – a sort of pretend democracy – for 70 years with one party (the PRI) in office and that one party had been beaten for the first time by President Fox from the right wing. I was there for most of Fox's term and he and his crowd very much wanted to bring Mexico onto the stage, to put it on the Security Council, to get involved in peacekeeping missions, to take a role in the world commensurate with being the eighth biggest economic power. However, the moment they went on the Security Council the Iraq story burst and of course Mexico being this enormous country on the United States' southern flank, the United States tends to expect them to do their bidding. But Mexico could never have supported invading Iraq. It was a total non-intervention country. So, they found themselves in an acutely uncomfortable situation with the key swing vote on the Security Council. It was so stressful President Fox became ill and had to go into hospital. Number 10 sent David Manning and John Scarlett out to try to

persuade them to support us, but to no avail. They just couldn't do it. But I think it meant that their first adventure into the world of the big powers was a very uncomfortable one.

IH-C: That aside, your relations with senior Mexicans were easy?

DH: Yes, easy-ish. It's a very 'traditional roles' kind of country. It's paradoxical. There are a lot of women who have traditionally played a part in Mexican politics, foreign ministers, ambassadors etc but at a social level it's quite difficult for a female ambassador to break through. Their habitual pastime would be to invite the male ambassador to come away to their *hacienda* to ride horses at the weekend. It was that kind of barbecue existence. So, it wasn't the easiest place in the world. On the other hand, because of the security situation, going out in the evening was very unusual so you might have an early evening cocktail but you'd be quite unlikely to be going out to dinner very often. Instead, what you have are lunch parties and lunch starts at 2.30 and finishes at 5.00pm and that was your day gone.

IH-C: Weren't you able to hone your own riding skills?!

DH: I didn't even attempt to. But the most amazing thing that I did that I would never have seen myself doing was to join a lunch group called the "snuffers" in Mexico. It was created by a British Ambassador somewhere back in the 1940s or 1950s and it is the most illustrious lunch party group with former presidents, presidents of the Supreme Court, big business men. You meet, eat, and take snuff. And they'd never had a woman and they were very resistant to the idea of having a woman in this group until former President de la Madrid said: 'If the Queen of England is choosing to send us a female ambassador, she must be part of this group'. And then they all fell into line. And I became the first ever female "snuffer".

IH-C: Just on that theme of 'males', were you a lone female ambassador in Mexico City? Or a low percentage of females?

DH: No. If you look at Third World countries you often get a lot of female ambassadors from African countries, from Asian countries - the Philippines is very good at that, for example. So, if you take the totality, there would have been a fair number of women, maybe 20, maybe 15. Within the European Union – because that was the posting where I was most grateful for my EU colleagues because we tended to see the world through a similar

perspective - my Swedish colleague was female. I was never lonely and really all my working life has been with men. It really was not a consideration for me except I didn't tend to get invited into the *haciendas*. But I had other things to do.

IH-C: Indeed. And your relationship with your American opposite number must have been an interesting one. As you've indicated before, America's special role, as it were, vis-à-vis Mexico.

DH: Yes, although the American Ambassador to Mexico is more like a Viceroy. If you think of Louis Mountbatten in India, it's something of that kind of role. Their every move is reported and they tend to be appointed from among people who are Mexican-Americans who have funded whoever is in the President's seat in Washington. So, they're in a different category from all other ambassadors to Mexico. Although I did try to maintain a practice of having regular breakfasts and so on, actually, we didn't have very much to talk about because Mexico is not that important to the UK except in two or three specific ways, whereas Mexico and the U.S. —that border has always been a major issue: people, narcotics, security etc.

Talking about the Ambassador as Viceroy is picking up the very top level of Mexican society, of course. There are several other angles. One is to remember that the relationship with the United States is all-encompassing for Mexico. It's perhaps a bit more intense than Ireland's relationship with the UK used to be when the UK was the only active foreign policy for the Republic of Ireland. Now, although Mexico has plenty of alternative places to do business, the sheer weight of the United States as a policy maker, as a market, as a destination for Mexican migrants means that it is huge, it's disproportionately important. They feel every slight. And what that leads to, of course, is a very unequal relationship where Mexico is constantly on the lookout for slights and the United States is really just seeing Mexico, usually, as a nuisance.

It's been accentuated since I left by the wall, but the wall was always there; for many years there's been a wall across the desert areas in northern Mexico to inhibit migration. And Mexico feels an enormous sense of commitment to its migrants overseas. It has an enormous number of consulates in the United States. One of the things I did when I was there was to go and visit the Mexican communities in California and in Texas to see whether they were still looking at Mexico as somewhere that belonged to them and they could help to reform on the

back of their experience of their living in the United States, bringing energy, entrepreneurialism etc or whether they'd completely disappeared into their local American communities. I think the truth is that, after the first generation, like all other migrants, they disappear into their host communities. They largely become part of it.

That's not quite so true in parts of California around Los Angeles and so on where you have huge groups of Spanish speaking people who are still migrants who are very poor. But, anyway, it's an important complicating factor in the relationship with the United States, as of course is drugs and violence.

Drugs feed on that alienated portion of the community who don't get decent jobs in the United States. They go over unqualified and what they can do is run drugs – and they do. That has led to an enormous increase in drugs and violence in Mexico and when I was there it was already well established as a source of enormous violence. I mean, decapitation was an everyday occurrence in the newspapers. Groups of paramilitary people setting up as drug runners through the length of Mexico. They didn't have much of a drug problem in Mexico at that stage but that has changed, sadly. So, the corruption that undermines judges, civil service, the police etc feeds on this drug addiction and the running of drugs and crime. And the enormous pull of the United States – that is an inexorable force on what is happening in Mexico. That's a really important aspect. So, there was no escaping it in Mexico. I'm sure you know the saying: "Poor Mexico: so far from God; so near to the United States".

IH-C: So, you've got this deteriorating security scene, fuelled by the drugs and the gangs and so on, and yet here is Mexico increasingly as a holiday destination for both Americans and, indeed, many British people going to resorts in Mexico. It's as if there are two worlds side by side, almost.

DH: I think there are probably more than two. I think the fascinating thing about Mexico is how many different worlds there are in that one country. They do devote a huge amount of effort to maintaining security around the main tourist destinations, although having said that, one of the most famous ever – Acapulco – is largely not favoured these days by tourists because it has become quite crime ridden and a haunt of drugs and so forth. But the attractions of Mexico are greater than the detractions, if you see my point. It has

extraordinary things to offer. I could spend probably the rest of my life enjoying what Mexico has to offer in the way of history and people and sea and so on.

In the end I didn't although I could have spent longer there, partly because of one of the perennial problems of diplomats as they get older which is worrying about parents as they become elderly. I left Mexico rather earlier than I would have liked in order to come back and be on hand when my mother had Alzheimer's. I was very grateful to the Foreign Office that they allowed me to come home a little bit early and take up another role as Director for Migration which later actually morphed to become Migration and the Overseas Territories. It was a strange combination but it was very interesting.

Director for Migration and Overseas Territories, FCO, 2005–07

IH-C: Of course, coming back as Director Migration, you're heading into an enormous, thorny, difficult, global subject. Where do you start with something like that?

DH: That's one reason why I touched on it in Mexico. If there's any country in the world that's going to prepare you for the issue of migration, it's Mexico. So, I'd spent quite a lot of time thinking about it beforehand. But I suppose the job I came back to do in the Foreign Office - obviously the Foreign Office doesn't run the Border Force and it doesn't set policy on emigration or immigration - the role was trying to secure the return to their home country of illegal, failed asylum seekers at that time. People who had sought asylum, not been granted it, had been to the courts, had been found to be a failed asylum seeker - and they were sitting in asylum detention centres but we could not get them to return. It was a question of negotiating with many different countries how we would be enabled to return to them people who we knew came from those countries but who no longer had in their possession their passports and their documentation. As you can imagine, many countries are extremely reluctant to take back asylum seekers for a whole raft of reasons.

It was a fascinating job. Partly because of working very closely with Number 10 because, for Tony Blair, the whole question of failed asylum seekers was one of his key priorities at the time which is why the Foreign Office created the role. I suppose the key thing was to work out first what asylum meant. Who these days should fall into the category of a proper asylum seeker and that had been quite a source of vexation over the years because the international

agreements which underlay this issue came into being after the Second World War when we were looking at asylum seekers largely from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union fleeing to the West from communist régimes. It was a concept which people, by and large, understood and bought into. But over time, as the concepts of human rights and the knowledge of dictatorial régimes across the world expanded, so the number of asylum seekers from countries that had not originally ever been considered as places that would produce asylum seekers, expanded and expanded. People who were no longer actually seeking asylum would also claim it because it was a better route than trying to get legitimate migration.

IH-C: Can I throw in perhaps another complication here? That is, you've got political refugees but you've got so-called economic migrants as well which is another aspect of this surely too?

DH: Yes, indeed. Originally the job was framed as being about failed asylum seekers – my point was exactly that, really. Originally these were people with political causes but more and more it came to be people with economic reasons for migrating. But because it's extremely difficult for people to change their nationality or to gain legitimate entry into the country for economic reasons – just simply to better their lives – they will often claim asylum, or they used to do so, as a way of short-circuiting the process. There was a period in time which was when I was doing the job when the numbers of failed asylum seekers were exploding because we had no way of returning them and we had no way of stopping them from coming in. We were really desperate to find solutions, understanding that at any given time there will be countries in the world where for human rights or for whatever other reason people have legitimate causes to seek asylum. There was always that balance to be struck because you didn't want to find yourself returning somebody who would be murdered the next day by their régime.

When I started the job it was literally me in an office with a desk. So, I had to find a team ...

IH-C: You must have been, initially, one of the most poorly resourced Directors in the whole of the FCO!

DH: Definitely, definitely, because it was a political response. The Foreign Office was under huge pressure to support the efforts of Number 10 and the Home Office by working

through its network with governments from China, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, South Africa ... literally globally and, of course, we do have the network to do that. I just needed a few people on board in London to help me staff up the meetings, for a start. It was very interesting to find, for example, that an awful lot could be done by having good translators who had a deep knowledge of the idioms in, say, Zimbabwe and who could tell what tribe people came from, from their accent, from their use of language. The same thing in India, the same thing in China. So you could, even with no identification, usually get quite close to reasons. And then you would have to, for example, deal with foreign national prisoners - still an issue today, especially with Jamaica where you would have large numbers of prisoners in British jails who really should be in Jamaican jails, or could be in Jamaican jails.

What was interesting about it was that all of us doing it had regularly to check in with our own ethics. Were we doing the right thing? Were we returning people appropriately? Were we allowing people to stay or not returning them appropriately? These are huge decisions and a lot hangs on them. For individuals who are involved, it is literally their life chance. So you can't take it lightly.

IH-C: And you must presumably, with unrest for example in the Middle East, where you get a wave of disturbance, of war, of oppression or whatever it is, you get waves of people wanting to leave.

DH: You do. I developed a concept which worked quite well for us. For example, just before my time, there had been a great deal of fighting in what used to be Yugoslavia between the various states and we had an enormous number of émigrés, refugees from that part of the world. In much of it the fighting had completely stopped, democracy had been restored and it was completely safe for people who had claimed asylum at one moment in time, but hadn't yet secured it, to be returned. There was no threat to their lives or even to their wellbeing. So we could arrange, in those cases, where the conflict had been and gone, we could send people back by the plane load. And we did. We hired planes and filled them up with people who could perfectly well go home.

Then you would have other countries where you were working to open up a route. It was delicate but you could return a substantial number. Congo was like that. There was fighting in certain parts, there were insurgencies but other parts of what is a vast country were

perfectly safe. As long as you used your judgement, you could return a large number of people who were, in essence, the economic migrants that we talked about earlier. The same thing with India, with Pakistan, with Bangladesh. There were large parts of the world where there was no serious reason why people couldn't return, although the governments of those countries were often not as helpful as you might hope.

Then there would be places which were still problematic and there, at that time, the Kurdish regions in Iraq, for example, were relatively safe but the Iraqi regions were not. This was before Syria, of course. But you needed to keep working even with the ones that were very difficult against the day when the fighting would stop so that you had a process where it was safe. As long as you kept your eye on where the flash points were and you were careful about that, it was important to just keep trying. And it was important because of confidence in this country. It's the only job I've ever done where everybody who asked me: 'What do you do?' when I said I worked on migration, everybody has an opinion. And from the point of view of retaining the confidence of the British people, it was really important that the Foreign Office was seen to be doing this and playing its part. So, I think it was good that we did it.

IH-C: Did you have much to do with the International Organisation for Migration (the IOM)?

DH: We did but not a huge amount. As I've said, we were not trying to solve the problem of migration *per se*. We did do a certain amount of strategic thinking about it but you can quickly lose yourself if you start thinking: 'how are we going to stem migration?' So, we would work with the international organisations on their initiatives. They were quite good, actually. How to help countries develop their police forces, how to arrange for camps that are civilised and give people a reasonable life even if they can't go back to their own home country. And we did a lot of bilateral work, for example in North Africa where you have huge expanses of desert that, if it doesn't kill you, you can safely cross because there are no armed forces on it. We did do a lot of investing in borders and trying to help countries to develop the concept of safe border controls, things like that.

IH-C: And as your job developed, it then took in the Overseas Territories as well?

DH: They were on the side, as it were. I don't mean that they were smaller but a reorganisation of portfolios in the Office meant that they needed a Director who could devote – let's say a third of their time to the Overseas Territories and for some reason it was decided that I could do it. So I did and I actually really enjoyed that because there were a number of really important issues at the time such as access to university education for young people coming from the Overseas Territories who were being charged at the time at the same rate as a foreign student, not even the same rate as an EU student which meant that, if you were a West Indian coming from Guadeloupe, which is a French overseas territory, you would be coming in on a much lower rate than if you were coming from Montserrat which is a British Overseas Territory.

There were also very important issues surrounding environmental matters. If you think about the Caribbean territories that are regularly slammed into by hurricanes and tidal waves and so on. So you've almost constantly got something happening somewhere in these very tiny territories with very limited capacity to restore their own economies. I visited Montserrat when I was doing the job. Of course, Montserrat had had that volcanic explosion some years before and I have never been to a sadder place in my life. There were still many Montserratians living in London having fled the explosions and everybody on the island – you had a feeling that they had just completely lost heart. So, a really worthwhile job I think.

IH-C: Then followed by what must have been a deeply satisfying posting, given your Iberian experience and background – you were off to Madrid.

Ambassador to Spain, 2007–09

DH: Yes, you are absolutely right. Going back to Spain as Ambassador was more than I could ever have hoped for when I joined the Foreign Office. It was satisfying in so many ways. Obviously, at a human level I was the first ever woman British Ambassador to Spain. In fact, Spain had had a woman ambassador to the UK, albeit 500 years earlier, in the shape of Katherine of Aragon. I felt that it was appropriate at the time because when I went to Spain, the Prime Minister of Spain at the time was Rodríguez Zapatero of the PSOE, the Socialist Party. He had gone to extraordinary lengths to form what he called a rainbow government which was 50% female. You asked me earlier what it was like to be Ambassador in Mexico as a woman. It was fine but it had its moments. Whereas at that

particular time in Spain, it couldn't have been more appropriate to send a female and I really enjoyed the role.

I was thinking, when we talked about my time working on Spain in Research Department, that I hadn't really pulled out how extraordinary Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy had been. As I may have mentioned, there was an enormous consensus in Spain that they did not want to go back into civil war and so all the parties, from the right to the left including the communists and including former members of the fascist party tacitly accepted – there was no formal agreement – they tacitly accepted that compromise was the order of the day. And that they must form a constitution which was fully democratic and which would put them in the European mainstream.

By the time I went back to Spain in 2007, that period in which the constitution was drawn up was already 30 years behind us. It was 1978 when the Spanish constitution came into being. And that atmosphere of: 'we must bury the past and work together in a consensus' had largely dissipated. Instead, there were all sorts of tensions opening up. The regional issues – they'd never gone away – but they'd become much more acute. Strangely enough, when I was dealing with Spain in the '70s, the problem was the Basque country as you will recall, endless bombings and shootings and so on.

IH-C: ETA.

DH: Yes. And Catalonia, though everybody knew it had an independentist movement, was never seen as anything like the Basque country. Well, things had changed and over that 30 year period, Catalanism, a sense of identity in Catalonia, had really grown, partly I think because it was a rich area, very prosperous, loved by foreigners who all go there on holiday. And it has grown to the point where it felt like the older child in Spain. It felt that it should occupy centre stage in its own universe. It has the language, it has the traditions, it has the universities. It's very sophisticated and it has big business. It was actually funding the rest of Spain because its tax take was higher. Of course, in the UK we're quite accustomed to moving taxes from one part of the country to another. But it rankled in Catalonia. So that was one of the major problems.

But the other thing was that the fault lines between right and left were cracking open too. They were being put under pressure in the time I was there which was early 2007 to the end of 2009 – that coincides, of course, exactly with the economic crisis of 2008, on into 2009, and although the worst of that (economic crisis) hit Spain a bit later, it was putting enormous strain on the government who were desperate to say: ‘We can do this. We are a left wing government but we are respectable and we are operating within everybody’s requirements’. And the right were very hostile to their arguments. They believed that the government was creating fake jobs. Rather as we have seen here in the UK with Covid, there was a great deal of government money being ploughed into the economy to keep things going. You could argue all day depending on your political position whether that was the right or the wrong thing to do. It certainly wasn’t the only country that did it. And it kept the economy going.

But the real weak point in Spain had been over-development. This was very closely related to tourism. If you think about that marvellous coastline that Spain has, which became so popular with British, German and Scandinavian tourists, lots of people who in the ‘50s and ‘60s and ‘70s were sitting on land on the coast which was worth next to nothing, suddenly found they could sell their land to property developers and retire on the proceeds. It was an enormously lucrative thing to do. Property developers brought in large numbers of Moroccan workers, paid a pittance, and built a rash of holiday homes all over the Spanish coast – and the islands, for that matter. And then when the European economy started to deflate and money just wasn’t around anymore, this over-development meant that they couldn’t sell. So, there was a rash of bankruptcies. Anywhere you went in Spain you would see cranes on properties half built, people were losing all they’d invested and in the Embassy we had a very big problem with our British community. We used to say that, depending on the time of year, there would be between half a million and a million British people living in Spain at any given time. Now, this includes people who have gone for the winter, let’s say. But there was an enormous number of British people who had invested their life savings, sold their flat in Willesden or south London or Yorkshire, bought a cheap property in Spain and then found there was no market to sell it when they became elderly, when they needed to come home to be with their children or whatever. We had some heartrending consular problems of elderly people where one spouse had died, the other was suffering from dementia or poor health and just couldn’t go. Luckily, the Spanish health system is and was excellent and they had a great deal of empathy for the people who had set up home. But it was a difficult part of the job.

IH-C: Of course in Spain one has this very big British community for which, in a very broad sense, the Embassy is responsible. When some crisis comes up, it does seem to me that the media in the UK these days forces the Embassy into dealing with it in a rather public way, often involving the Ambassador him or herself in a way that wouldn't have been necessary before. Did you have that experience?

DH: I did, but I think that it's quite important for the Ambassador to think about how they can most effectively manage an incident of that sort. I had a couple of examples which I personally think I handled right but I suppose you could debate. One was actually in Mexico where you may remember quite a long time ago there was a group of potholers who got stuck in some caves there. This turned out to be vastly more complicated than you would have expected because i) to go pot holing in caves in Mexico you need a special scientific pass which they didn't have but ii) they were a group of potholers from the Ministry of Defence holidaying. This was capable of misinterpretation. They were in the middle of absolutely nowhere. To get to them would have involved yomping for half a day as well as probably a day in a car and then living out in a tent for however long it took. Some of the media did go but I took the view that actually what was going to be needed to get the men out was face to face negotiation with the Foreign Ministry, and this was not going to be at the campsite wherever it was. In fact, I was on a plane when all this was breaking. On arrival in Mexico City, one of my deputies whisked me off the plane a back way, took me through an underpass and drove me straight in to the Foreign Ministry. We had a very uncomfortable three or four days. I'd sent a number of staff off to the famous pot holing headquarters but I didn't attempt to go there myself. However, once the pot holers were brought back to Mexico City I had to be seen to be welcoming them and going to their detention centre and making sure they had all that was necessary. Of course, I was delighted to do so. They'd had a very traumatic time and it was the least I could do. But I think it was more appropriate to stay at headquarters than to go upcountry.

Similarly, when I was in Spain we had a couple of really nasty incidents, for example where a bus came off a cliff with a group of old age pensioners in it in the Canary Islands. I consistently took the view that by the time I got there, the police and the local consul would have dealt with everything. It's like a Royal Visit, it's got to be appropriately timed, otherwise you just add to the burdens of people who are already very busy. So, I tended to do what I could from headquarters, make sure they had the facilities, make sure they had the

flights, do the face to face television from Madrid. But other than going to visit troubled citizens who were living in Spain, which I did a lot, or groups of people who were dispossessed or had consular problems which were very important to them, I didn't tend to rush around chasing ambulances because I thought myself, as you have suggested, that it was not the best use of my time.

IH-C: As long as the media understand that and doesn't see a heartless British Ambassador not being bothered to stir out of his or her office.

DH: Absolutely and you know, if you have a massive terrorist incident involving hundreds of British people then clearly, it's the right thing to do to be there. But if it's a one-off incident, I think it's appropriate to treat it as best you can. And I had a lot of excellent consuls who were very good. That's the next thing - we don't have so many consulates as we used to do.

IH-C: In broader terms, the bilateral relationship was on a pretty even keel while you were there?

DH: It was. It's so hard to look back now and think it's only fifteen years ago or so when we were the great architects of the internal market in the European Union at that time. We were working very closely with Spain who saw the world through very similar eyes. I remember distinctly a meeting when Gordon Brown came out for talks with Luis Zapatero and there was nothing they didn't agree on. It was just the warmest meeting you could have expected between two socialist prime ministers.

We were working closely with Spain on most things in Europe and that bigger context meant that, although Gibraltar was still an irritant in our relations regularly, it was not the irritant. It was not unbearable. Neither side saw it as being in their interests to whip up issues which was very helpful. I think the early 2000s was probably the best time for Spanish-UK relations.

IH-C: Was the monarchy continuing to be held in the high regard that it had been at an earlier period?

DH: That was crumbling already, I must say. Juan Carlos himself had an enormous bank of credibility and affection for his really critical part in ensuring that the transition to democracy happened peacefully. You may recall that he personally intervened to cause the failure of an attempted coup in the 1980s and had throughout played a dignified but active part. However, as the years went by ... I think most people would say that Spain is not a naturally monarchist country. It had a number of unhappy monarchies over the centuries and the Republican period which, of course, ended in disaster with the Civil War, was still held very dear to anybody whose family had been on the Republic's side during the Civil War.

They used to talk about *Juan Carlismo*, so it wasn't so much 'monarchist' as 'Juan Carlist'. And there was always some doubt about whether or not his son would be able to capitalise on that when he eventually would inherit the throne. Unfortunately, since I left Spain ... well, you'll remember the story around Juan Carlos who eventually abdicated in favour of his son, Felipe, and as King I think Felipe has done extremely well in retaining his popularity although when I was there it was (and still is) very difficult in Catalonia which is, these days, probably the most republican area.

IH-C: Coming back to the economy for a moment. We had the banking crisis and the downturn in the economy. One aspect of it which perhaps relates to the UK was the Spanish investment in the UK which is quite substantial, is it not?

DH: Yes, extraordinarily. In 2007, which I suppose was Spain's *annus mirabilis* really, the biggest source of foreign direct investment in the UK came from Spain. More than from the United States, for example, which is extraordinary. There are many potential ways of looking at this so I will choose one that I think explains how people saw it. If you go back into the time of Franco-ism, Spain tended to be run on corporatist lines with big state-run entities doing energy, doing banking etc. Then after the end of Franco – and already before to an extent – there was privatisation. A familiar concept to us. All of these big state-run enterprises became privately owned but in some cases it was simply the whole big organisation that transferred. That would probably be the case with Telefonica, for example, which was previously a state-run communications industry. And in other cases it was broken up and run by private companies with a competitive approach.

The banking sector was particularly complex because every region and almost every town, had its own little regional bank (*caja*) which served citizens of that region in a way that we would have been familiar with years ago, but also served to fund worthy projects. So, local leaders liked it because it would fund their museum or deal with their street lights or whatever. But these were not very well run banks, they were not necessarily very well capitalised. So, during 2008/09 one of the big issues was the consolidation of the banking sector so that these little, small, vulnerable banks (*cajas*) were rolled up into bigger ones. At the other end of the spectrum were some really big banks, including Santander which bought up, initially, Abbey National in the UK and then went on during the economic crisis to incorporate Alliance & Leicester and Bradford and Bingley. That really was an extraordinary development that a Spanish bank had come in and had become one of the big banks in the UK.

The same thing happened with Scottish Power where Iberdrola, where I worked for a number of years after I left the Foreign Office, bought up Scottish Power and has grown that into a really successful energy supplier, one of the big six in the UK. Ferrovial bought up Heathrow and Gatwick and Luton and a number of other regional airports. These were not minor investments, they were really substantial. So, that was a way for the Spanish companies to hedge their bets, if you like. They were very concentrated in Spain and they needed to be less concentrated in Spain. The UK, of course, has always been a very open market for foreign direct investment and we welcomed them and they came and they're still here and they've been extremely good citizens, I would say.

IH-C: Looking internally at the Embassy operation in Madrid while you were there, you moved premises which must have been not the easiest thing to do.

DH: No, it was sad. There was a lot of both nostalgia and discomfort for people, I would say. We moved from the not very attractive and not very practical building we had in the heart of Madrid – not historically our original embassy because we'd actually had an embassy in Madrid for 500 years so we'd been in a few buildings over that time. The building we had couldn't effectively be modernised and so, always looking for economies, it had been decided that instead, we should rent three or four floors of a building on the northern fringes of Madrid, actually on the site, I believe, of Real Madrid's former training ground. This went ahead and we took out the lease and then a huge amount of work was

needed to convert the top four floors into a British Embassy. Quite a lot had to be invested to make it a safe and discreet and secure premises. They are magnificent. My office was on the 42nd floor with a view over half of Spain, it felt. Amazing views and so forth. But still quite a long way from the centre where your business tended to be, so for local staff, who had for years been living and working in the centre of Madrid or had arranged their lives around working in the centre, it was destabilising. In the end I think it worked out OK. I think Canada is now in the same building, the Netherlands, Australia – there are quite a lot of friends on different floors. But it was nostalgic and one of the things we did was put in some art works which referred back to our long history with pictures and drawings and something beautiful that the Foreign Office commissioned which was a glass tablet with the signatures (or replicas) of a selection of British ambassadors over the past 500 years. The idea was to say: 'Just because we're in a new building doesn't mean to say we're the new kids on the block'.

IH-C: I hope you had a portrait of Katherine of Aragon somewhere!

DH: We didn't, actually.

IH-C: Never mind! Your time in Madrid came to an end in 2009. You must have left with great regrets.

DH: No – I think that's not quite right. I left with an enormous feeling of having had a wonderful and worthwhile career and having overachieved - feeling it was beyond expectations that I could be Ambassador in Madrid in the days when I joined the Foreign Office. Having done every job I'd had as well as I could and enjoyed each of them – maybe this comes from my time in HR – it's important to know when you've done enough and not to cling. I left earlier than I had to because of course the goal posts had changed. I had always assumed I would retire at 60 and then the age of retirement was moved inexorably upwards. But I was still entitled to leave at 60 and my view was I'd spent 40 years working in the Foreign Office and I would quite like to do something else for the rest of my life. So, I thought it would be better to leave at 60 than at 65 – I'd be probably too old to start something else at that point. So I stuck to Plan 'A' and I've never regretted it.

One of the things I found increasingly, as I went through my career, was that what interested me the most in Mexico, in Migration, in Madrid was cooperating with others on health, on education, on the economy, on trade, which are in fact the sort of things an ambassador does. You don't wake up in the morning and worry about foreign policy in most ambassadorial jobs. What you do is you think: 'Oh God, I've got the Minister of Health coming today and we're going to meet the Spanish Minister of Health and what are the issues that we might be able to push forward?' And I found that those things were incredibly interesting to me. So, when I left the Foreign Office I kind of resolved that it would be nice for once to have time to get under the surface of my own country and to contribute to things like health and education and the economy in the UK - having picked up quite a lot of peripheral knowledge from my role as Ambassador.

IH-C: Yes, looking at your CV since you left, it's certainly a very full one. But looking back at the Foreign Office, and looking at your time there, would you regard it as still one of the pre-eminent Whitehall departments? Or has it lost something of its status these days – possibly vis-à-vis Number 10?

DH: I think part of the problem is identifying what our foreign policy is. If you go back to when I started in 1970 before we had joined the European Union and when – although the Empire was well in the past - there was still a feeling of nostalgia for the days when East of Suez was still part of a wider entity that we felt we belonged in. Somehow the links with the rest of the world over the years have deteriorated, partly because they've all grown up and left home and got their own set of relationships now. So, they're no longer looking to us and we're no longer looking to them. So Europe, for most of my adult life, has been the forum in which we sought to carry weight. So, whether it was NATO or the European Union or the Council of Europe, or the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – all of those things in my lifetime were pre-eminent. For most of my life Russia was one pole and Washington was another and things that happened in the rest of the world tended to be proxy battles, so the Middle East, Africa etc tended to be part of that same global play. We knew roughly where we stood in it, with the democracies, as we would have seen it. And then gradually, as is the way in life, I suppose, global politics became so much more complicated, partly, perhaps, because we're all so interconnected now economically and by the internet and 24/7 news and all the rest of it. And partly because poor countries have become sufficiently affluent for their people now to understand that they could have a better life, like

us, if only they could get here. And so that's where the migration stuff comes in. Also climate change – there are whole tracts of the planet that are running out of water, turning into desert. Or, alternatively, being drowned if they're Bangladesh.

The interplay between all these countries is very complex and I think that is a part of the Foreign Office's problem. It's: Where do you concentrate? What are you aiming to do? Are you aiming to have a "Make America Great Again" type of policy? I never liked the phrase: 'We have no permanent friendships; we only have permanent interests'. I don't believe that's true but I think if you say: well, actually, we are in Europe and, whether we like it or not, we have a lot in common with Europe, that irritates an awful lot of British people who don't want somehow to be in Europe. This has been a problem for the Foreign Office. What is it there to do? What is it trying to achieve? And does the government of the day subscribe to that? Whitehall has become quite uncomfortable these days, anyway. The short answer is: no, I don't think it's a pre-eminent department right now. On the other hand, I'm not totally pessimistic because I think bringing DFID back into the Foreign Office family and making the FCO closer to overseas trade, which I understand is the idea, will mean that the Foreign Office has a wider understanding of the world and hopefully more levers.

IH-C: A final question, if I may. Did you find that experience you had in the Foreign Office, especially the Foreign Office way of doing things, helped you in what you've done since in rather different sorts of jobs?

DH: I think so. I think one of the things that a career in the Foreign Office makes you is quick to adapt. We go to postings and within a couple of minutes we have to absorb the norms and understand the politics, and who's who and why, and fit in. I think we're all quite good at that. Otherwise we wouldn't have survived. So, we go into an organisation and we pick up what matters, who matters and what they're looking to do and then you can work with that. I also think, as a board member, one of the things that any senior civil servant has to do is absorb huge amounts of paper or on the internet, and pick out the key things very quickly and understand what to do about them. That's what you need in board members. I will often get a board pack, from one of the boards I'm on, of a thousand pages to read in a weekend on things that I'm not day to day familiar with. You need that ability to go through papers with a sharp eye and pick out the ones that you've got something to offer on.

And finally, I think, and this is something you don't get in industry so much, the understanding that all civil servants have of what democracy means. That media will be looking for chinks in your armoury, that MPs have constituents that may be impacted by what your business is doing and that you need to have your eye on the wider world. Otherwise sooner or later you're going to fall foul of societal change.

IH-C: Denise Holt, thank you very much.