

## **BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

### **SUPPLEMENTARY INTERVIEWS WITH LORD JAY OF EWELME GCMG**

CM: This is Catherine Manning recording an interview for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme on 16 November 2016 with Lord Jay who was Ambassador in Paris from 1996 to 2001 and PUS from 2001 to 2006.

Michael, you did an earlier recording for the Oral History Programme, but at that stage you chose to omit your period in Paris because there were various enquiries and an inquest into the death of the Princess of Wales going on. Those have been resolved and we are now taking the opportunity to fill in the gaps and record your memories of your time in Paris. You went to Paris in July 1996 from London.

MJ: Yes, I had been Director for European Union Affairs and then Director General for EU and Economic Affairs from 1992 until 1996. I went to Paris in July 1996, after having spent one term at St Antony's College Oxford, to decompress after the Foreign Office and to have time to read and to talk to people about Paris and historical and contemporary France and to do some lecturing and talking, particularly on aspects of EU policy.

CM: Paris was a familiar place to you.

MJ: Paris was a familiar place because I had been Financial and Commercial Counsellor in the Embassy from 1987 to 1990 and that was a huge advantage, because a lot of the people whom I had got to know when I was there then were in different positions, and often in positions which really mattered a lot to me as Ambassador, but who would have been that much harder to get to know had I not got to know them the first time I was there. I think, for example, of Alain Juppé, who had been Budget Minister when I was Financial Counsellor, was then Prime Minister, then fell out of favour while we were in Paris.

When I look back on the Embassy, what strikes me about it was that it was essentially a mini-Whitehall. People tend to think of Embassies as being extensions of the Foreign Office, which in a sense they are. But the Embassy in Paris when I was there as Ambassador, as well as from the Foreign Office had representatives from the Treasury, the Ministry of Agriculture, as I think it was then called, Ministry of Defence, Department for Education, DTI, all reporting to their own departments, as well as reporting upwards to the

Ambassador. So the Ambassador's job, in a way, was to keep the whole show together as a unified organisation, but recognising that its constituent parts would all report to different parts of the Whitehall machine.

As well as the Embassy in Paris there were then four Consuls General in Bordeaux, Lyons, Lille and Marseilles, who were mostly concerned with commercial work, though with a certain amount of consular work as well. Rather oddly, the Consul General in Marseilles was also the representative to Monaco, because Prince Rainier and the Monegasques didn't like the idea of being linked too closely with Paris, but they were happy for the Consul General in Marseilles to be the representative to Monaco.

All of that meant that the work of the Embassy and indeed of my own work as Ambassador was not primarily work for the Foreign Office in the sense of foreign policy work. That was, of course, important and there was a lot of involvement with the French in the late 1990s on, for example, Iraq. And foreign policy was clearly important to both Britain and France, because they were both permanent members of the UN Security Council, so they had a lot of interest in the main foreign policy areas, which were not of particular interest necessarily to Britain or France, but were important to each because of their permanent membership of the Security Council. That I think is what differentiates the Embassy in Paris from that in Berlin or Madrid or Rome. They were hugely important from a European point of view, but less so from a foreign policy point of view, because they didn't have the same link to the UN Security Council. And because my job as Ambassador was to deal with whatever was important at the time this meant that I was not really reporting anything like as much to the Foreign Secretary as to other ministers and Secretaries of State in London: clearly, the Prime Minister, but also the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary, Secretary of State at the DTI and the Department for Education, and the Defence Secretary and the Chiefs of the Defence Staff. These were all important relationships and I felt it important to have good relationships with ministers on the British side as well as good relationships with their counterparts on the French side. Because in a way, as an Ambassador, one was, if not exactly a sounding board, a sort of conduit sometimes for ministerial frustrations and emotions. You as Ambassador became the target, because it was easier to talk to you sometimes than to talk to your opposite number. I think, for example, of a time when there was a truck drivers' strike of some kind, which was affecting British truck drivers' ability to get through France safely and I had John Prescott shouting at me down the phone from London. Equally, when Marks and Spencer's unexpectedly, without warning anybody, closed all their stores in Paris,

then Elisabeth Guigou, who was the Justice Minister, came icily on the phone to me about M&S's flouting of French labour laws. The job of the Ambassador, I felt, when that sort of thing happened was to calm both sides down, then to decide how you were going to take the matter forward. Ministerial contacts that you had on both sides were hugely important.

Another thing that is worth saying is that there is an assumption in Whitehall that if you are Chancellor of the Exchequer then your counterpart is the person to speak to on something. Quite often it is not. It might be if it was the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister of Finance, but if it was the Minister of Agriculture or Commerce, then the most interesting and influential person in Paris would very often not be that minister. It was just as likely to be a rather invisible senior official in the Elysée Palace working for the President. It was he or she that you needed to get in touch with. It was very important to make people realise who were the key people to talk to on a particular issue, very often not the obvious person, but the person who could really get things done, the person with whom a quiet word on the phone, a quiet word at a party, a quiet word at a reception could be equally as effective as a formal message from minister to minister.

CM: I'm just going to interrupt here. I wonder whether it would be useful to indicate who was President during your time and who you had as Prime Minister in France.

MJ: Yes, while I was in Paris, President Chirac was President throughout the time I was there. To start with we had Alain Juppé as Prime Minister, then an election and then what the French call *cohabitation*, when you have one party in the Elysée and a different party in Matignon, the Prime Minister's office. We then had Lionel Jospin, a Socialist, as Prime Minister. Having Chirac as a very right-wing President and Jospin as a very left-wing Prime Minister made an ambassador's job more difficult, but much more interesting, because Whitehall never really understood exactly what the roles of the Elysée were and what the roles of the government were and were always getting into a bit of a muddle as to whom they should be talking on which subject. So one of the jobs during that rather difficult period of cohabitation was to ensure that messages which were sent to one but really destined to the other got re-transmitted to the right people at the Paris end. It was also an interesting time because there were tensions between President and Prime Minister and sometimes, if you weren't careful, you could get caught in the middle of that and it was important to try to avoid that happening.

Chirac was a mercurial character and my own personal relationship with him was at times very good. For example, after the death of the Princess of Wales, which we'll come back to, he was on the phone, extremely friendly, very constructive about sorting out what we should do on that crucial day. A couple of years later I was at a bi-lateral summit between Tony Blair and Chirac in Cahors, in the south-west of France. At a small informal meeting before the summit there was Chirac and Blair and there was me and there were some of Chirac's people and Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell. For a reason which I've never discovered, Chirac suddenly turned to Blair and said that he had enough of the British Ambassador being so disloyal and critical of the French. I had no idea why Chirac said that. I wrote a letter to him personally afterwards. He never replied. I talked to his staff and they were unable to give an explanation. I think it probably did my standing with Blair's people quite a lot of good, to be seen to be standing up to the President. Maybe it was an early sign of his dementia, which he went into later on; I don't know. It was never explained to me.

My relationship with Alain Juppé as Prime Minister was good because I had known him before, when he was Budget Minister. Lionel Jospin I had not known when I was first in Paris, but I got to know him as Leader of the Opposition before he became Prime Minister and got to know his staff. We had a perfectly correct relationship when he was Prime Minister, but I never felt that it was a particularly close relationship. His own relationship with Tony Blair was important for both of them, because they were both left-wing, but very different sorts of left-wing prime ministers. I remember being at a meeting between Lionel Jospin as Prime Minister and Tony Blair as Prime Minister when they were talking about the importance of getting support from the social democratic left and I remember Jospin saying to Tony Blair, 'Tony, I completely agree with you that one needs to get the centre-left on your side but I don't believe you need to go there to get it.' And that, in a way, was the classic difference between the traditional Socialist Prime Minister, as Jospin was, thinking you shored up your base and moved from there and Blair realising that power depended on getting to the centre and winning the centre ground, and keeping your base happy but also expanding your influence into the centre right. It was a very interesting conversation, because one realised that there was a deep and unbridgeable political chasm between them, even though they were on the same side of the political spectrum.

The issues with which I dealt as Ambassador and the issues with which the Embassy dealt were hugely varied and not the obvious ones. Much of our time was spent at one period on

mad cow disease, on BSE. Much of our time towards the end was spent on foot and mouth disease, when that cropped up. I found myself as Ambassador having the sorts of conversations with ministers which I had not expected. I remember a discussion with the Minister of Agriculture about the pros and cons of removing the innards of sheep by vacuum suction. This was not the sort of thing which at the beginning of my Foreign Office career one thought I was going to do. But it's a good example of what modern European diplomacy is. It's not just foreign policy; it's everything that matters between two countries and very often that is not foreign policy, but almost any aspect of domestic policy.

That was one big issue. Another huge issue which was present throughout the time I was in Paris was immigration and migration and the problems of the camp at Sangatte. This, of course, was the precursor of the Jungle which has just been closed. When we were there it was the camp at Sangatte, and exactly the same thing happened. It got out of control; it was very difficult to manage; it prejudiced relations between Britain and France and, after a bit, the French closed it and it went somewhere else and then it came back, which may, of course, happen this time as well. That meant that meetings between the Home Secretary and the Interior Minister were extraordinarily important, whether it was Jack Straw or David Blunkett or Michael Howard who was Home Secretary when I first arrived. Those were negotiations on a really intractable issue, and hugely important for the Embassy.

CM: On the subject of BSE, did that difficult issue affect your relationships and your standing inside France?

MJ: We tried, and I think for the most part succeeded, in making certain that if you had a particular problem over BSE or foot and mouth or over immigration, that was contained and you dealt with that, minister to minister, prime minister to prime minister, as necessary, and you tried not to let it taint the overall relationship. To an extent that worked. I felt when things began to get out of hand and you began to get difficult press coverage, then it was the Ambassador's job to be on radio, be on television, be giving interviews, explaining the British position, showing that there was more logic to it than sometimes appeared, trying to defuse tensions. That part of the job was crucial. Interestingly, I found myself more and more getting phone calls from Alastair Campbell in No.10 saying, would I please appear on British television or British radio or the Today Programme or World at One, to talk about a particular issue. Because No.10 felt it was easier, in some ways, to get the British Ambassador in Paris talking about an issue and defusing it, than to have a British minister

doing so, which, if they weren't careful, was going to exacerbate it. So to that extent being Ambassador in Paris, you were facing in both directions. You were constantly in touch with London, you were constantly in touch with key people in Paris and as far as public diplomacy was concerned, I was talking sometimes to the French press, sometimes to the British press; sometimes on French television, sometimes on British television, dealing with the tricky issues which arose.

France and Britain: they're both basically the same size; they have the same sort of influence in the world. They have a huge amount, therefore, in common, particularly on defence and on foreign policy, but because they are so close, because they are so completely interwoven, there are constant battles and struggles, sometimes trivial, sometimes really important, so the relationship is extraordinarily intense the whole time and that made the job of the Embassy important and the job of an ambassador particularly interesting, I felt.

CM: About the Press, did you find one more difficult to handle than the other, the British or the French?

MJ: The British press were curiously respectful of ambassadors. I found when I appeared on British programmes that, though the issue was often seen as a tricky issue, you weren't seen as a target. You were seen more as someone who was explaining a tricky position and you were treated more in that way, than a government spokesman in London would be. It wasn't always that way in France. If there was a difficult issue like foot and mouth disease, or mad cow disease, it was often quite tricky. There was a lot of anger in the country and that would be directed at you as Ambassador, so you had to prepare quite carefully for television interviews and you had to mug up on the language if it was tech-y language, which it quite often was, and then try and calm things down. You got occasional oddities. At one stage, I recall, one or two of the press regarded the American Ambassador and me as almost interchangeable. If the American Ambassador was out of town and they wanted a programme on Iraq, for example, they would ask me instead and I would sometimes get a call saying, 'Felix Rohatyn's not here, could you come on?' Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't. The only time it got really slightly tricky was when I was being interviewed on television and they flashed up behind me a cartoon, a rather lewd cartoon, of Clinton and Monica Lewinsky and said, 'What did I think about that?' I managed, I hope, to get over that.

One crucial part of the Embassy's work was commercial work, obviously. I tried to have regular breakfast meetings, one on one, with the top French industrialists. It was quite useful for them, because they came in early in their cars; they could park in the Embassy car park. They would come at 8 o'clock; you could have three quarters of an hour's breakfast and discussion and off they'd go to their offices. That was an extremely good way of not just finding out what their intentions were of investing in Britain, talking about the British economy, but also, because these were highly intelligent, politically aware people, who had very close links to the French government, it was a way of discovering things about French politics and particularly about relationships between ministers that you wouldn't get just from the ordinary contacts with a minister or from his *cabinet*. So that was an important thing to do.

Consular work was always extraordinarily sensitive because murders of British citizens, car accidents involving British citizens always got the *Daily Mail* excited. As soon as you knew something was happening, you always had to try to get the Embassy people there before the *Daily Mail*, to calm things down, talk to the families, send a senior member of staff if necessary. The media management of consular crises was a hugely important and difficult issue, in addition to the central task of helping the victims and their families.

CM: The Residence in Paris is perhaps the most famous of the great residences that the Foreign Office own. Perhaps it is the most beautiful. How did you use the Residence when you were living there? Did you enjoy living it in?

MJ: Yes, it was an extraordinary privilege. The history of the Residence is extraordinary. It used to belong to Pauline Borghese, Napoleon's sister. It was bought from Pauline Borghese by the British government in 1814 for the Duke of Wellington when he became Ambassador, after the campaign in Spain but before Waterloo. It was the first residence bought by the British government as a residence. Before that ambassadors would be sent and they would find somewhere to live. When the Duke of Wellington said he wanted to buy it, the Treasury said it was far too expensive, so nothing has changed there, but he had sufficient clout to ensure that it was bought. It is the most extraordinary place, because it is a wonderful eighteenth-century building in the middle of Paris, quite close to the Elysée Palace. It still has much of the furniture it had when Pauline Borghese was there. There was lovely table in the one of the big drawing rooms called the *Salon Jaune* which still had underneath it the delivery label saying 'Madame Borghese' which had never been taken off. We discovered,

my wife and I, that the dressing table that she used in our bedroom was the dressing table which had been used by Pauline Borghese when she lived there. We were conscious of this extraordinary French history and, because the Duke of Wellington had been there and there were relicts and pictures from his time, of the Duke of Wellington too. This, of course, made it a very powerful symbol of Franco-British togetherness and relationships. We played up both sides of it. One of my predecessors, Ewen Fergusson, had acquired a bust of Napoleon and a bust of Wellington. As you went in at the front door, there they were, facing you, so you were conscious from the very beginning that this was a key part, a rather moving part, of Franco-British history. The French therefore loved coming to it. It was kept in an immaculate condition by the Foreign Office, who arranged for John Cornforth, who was a great architectural historian and decorator, to be responsible for modernising and designing and re-equipping the Embassy, room by room by room, and it was therefore in beautiful condition. It wasn't always the easiest place to live in, I suppose. Subsequent ambassadors created a flat for themselves on the top floor. We lived in the main part of the Embassy, sleeping in a bedroom that had been Duff Cooper's and Diana Cooper's, and our bathroom was a tented bathroom which Diana Cooper had installed when she was there in the 1940s. We used the different dining rooms and drawing rooms depending on the kind of event we had and the time of year it was. To that extent it was as old eighteenth-century houses were. They didn't have formal dining rooms, but you moved around and ate in different rooms, which is exactly what we did. It meant you could have dinners from anything from 2 to 120 in wonderful surroundings and use the house to the full, which we did. We had, I think, between 12,000 and 14,000 people a year coming through the house for a combination of large receptions, intimate gatherings, cultural events, musical events. Some of those were paid for from Embassy funds and from the Ambassador's fraiss, as it was then called, but increasingly paid for, because funds were getting tighter, by companies who would pay to have a reception. One of the things we did was to have a relationship with a British organisation called the Young Classical Artists' Trust which helped young, highly talented, British musicians to bridge the difficult gap between university and professional life. They would come and perform in the ballroom of the Embassy. That was sponsored by a British law firm. They paid for it; they invited half the guests; we invited the other half. We had wonderful events of that sort, which was just a way of making the money that the British government gave you go further, so you could make the best possible use of a fantastic asset which was the Residence in Paris.

We also wanted to modernise the Embassy. At the back of the Residence there is a glazed gallery which looks out onto the garden and which was rather dire, frankly, when we arrived. It had Austrian blinds, string things, which caught flies. Then all the way round the walls there were huge pictures of dead royals, because the Government Art Collection didn't have anywhere else to put them, so they put them on our walls. We decided that was just not what Britain in the late 1990s was like, so we got rid of all the dead royals and put proper anti-light material on the glass. The newly appointed head of the Government Art Collection, Penny Johnson, and I went round art galleries in London buying contemporary art to put on the walls. The French hugely appreciated that. To come into a house which is a historic house and is the symbol of the Franco-British togetherness, because of the Pauline Borghese and Duke of Wellington associations, and then to go through the wonderful rooms and out into a gallery full of contemporary British art was enormously appreciated by them and enormous fun for us. And that still exists, as far as I know. The paintings have been turned around and new ones brought in, but there is still the concept of the back of the Residence as an exhibition of contemporary British art. That was well worth doing.

I used the Embassy in all sorts of different ways. I've talked a bit about breakfasts with industrialists. There would be regular small lunches for ministers, either just me and a French minister or a small gathering if a British minister was there to meet French counterparts. For example, François Hollande would come, as a *député*, to meet British officials, or British MPs, so you could get to know people who would one day become, in this case, President of France. We had a lot of cultural events; we had musical events; we had artistic events. Some of them were unexpected. I remember there was an exhibition which the Royal Academy organised called 'Sex and the British', which my staff decided that I should not be allowed to know about, but I heard about it. So we invited all the British Brats or whatever they were called at that stage, Tracey Emin and the Chapman brothers, Sarah Lucas. They all came round to the Residence for a reception and I have a wonderful photograph which I took of Tracey Emin on Pauline Borghese's bed. That took place at a time when we had upstairs in the Residence an *Any Questions* team, including Ken Livingstone and Leon Brittan amongst others. Tracey Emin heard about this and said could she come upstairs and meet Ken Livingstone. I said, 'Of course,' and took her up. The extraordinary thing about living in the Residence with events like this happening is that connections are made which would never be made anywhere else. On another occasion we had Margaret Thatcher staying. Normally, she stayed in a hotel, but she couldn't find one

this time, so we said that of course she could come and stay. There are two things I remember about that. She was staying at a time when England were playing Argentina in a World Cup football match and Margaret Thatcher said to Sylvia that she would like to watch the match on television, but it was very emotional for her and she would like to have the sound switched off. So Sylvia and Margaret Thatcher watched this football match, neither of them having the faintest idea of what was going on, in silence, with one of the footmen watching another television just outside the room, so that when a goal was scored, or Beckham was sent off, he would come round and tell them what was going on. As the same time that this was happening we had downstairs the Intelligence and Security Committee for a briefing. The Intelligence and Security Committee decided after about ten minutes of briefing that they would rather go and watch the match in the scullery where there was a television which the footmen and others used. They all went off in there and left Yvette Cooper, who was then a young MP, alone. I said to her, 'Have you ever met Margaret Thatcher?' She said, 'No.' I took Yvette Cooper up to the *Salon Vert* and introduced her to Margaret Thatcher, thinking that Yvette Cooper was young, she was bright, who knew whether one day she would become leader of the Labour Party or Prime Minister. This was the only chance she would ever have to meet Margaret Thatcher. I don't think it was a huge meeting of minds, but it was the sort of thing that living in those rather privileged conditions, you could do.

I think I mentioned that we got to know Alain Juppé quite well. I'd known him to start with when I was Financial Counsellor and then when he was Prime Minister. We had a house in the south-west of France and he was Mayor of Bordeaux, so we asked him to come to dinner. We got a rather po-faced response from his office to say that the Prime Minister never had dinner with embassies. So we went back and said that we were not asking the Prime Minister for dinner at the Embassy, we were asking the Mayor of Bordeaux for dinner at the Embassy and were intending to invite a large number of people from the South West to come and join him. So he said yes. So when he was Prime Minister, we had dinner for some fifty or sixty people from the South West for dinner at the Embassy. It was a way in which you could use the Embassy in an imaginative way which strengthened relationships, in this case with the Prime Minister, because we'd established the relationship with him at an earlier stage. We enjoyed doing that. The other thing we used to do, because then there was the money to do it - I don't think there is now. Every Christmas we would have in the great dining room a big Christmas dinner for maybe a hundred and twenty people and we would

have a singer, a British singer, who would sing carols. It was a very moving occasion that enabled us to bring musicians in. I would give a speech saying who was there, and how pleased we were to see them. The most important person I think we ever had - the only person I've had to dinner that caused everyone to take in their breath – was when we had the man who was known as the Truffle King of France, who came from the South West and whom we'd met when we'd been in the South West of France. He was known to everybody, but nobody there had met him. That was an example of creating the sorts of conditions where people wanted to come to the Residence because they would meet other interesting French people, not necessarily British people, though sometimes they had to do that, because that was part of the job too. But it was getting them to come to your Residence, getting to know them, because it was a place that they wanted to come to themselves.

Somebody gave me this advice: he said, 'If you want to invite French ministers, don't invite them with all the boring people you normally have to invite ministers to meet. Find out when they went to ENA – they all went to ENA – and then work out who was in their *promotion* at ENA and ask them.' So we used to do this. We would ask a Socialist Minister or a right-wing Minister, saying, 'We'd very much like to give a dinner for you and whichever members of your *promotion* at ENA you would like invited.' People loved doing that. The result was that we would get round the table twelve people whom you would never think, as an ambassador, would ever know each other. Yet they were close friends, often from completely different political parties. It was a way of getting to know people in circumstances which they welcomed. Some of those dinners would go on to 12 or 1 in the morning. That was a good way of using the Residence.

The other interesting thing about having a wonderful Residence was the British people who would come. Looking at prime ministers, we had Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Gordon Brown, Theresa May at different times. It was not just ministers or the royal family – we had the Queen staying – but it was often the cultural people who came. Once we had eleven members of the Redgrave family for dinner. We had David Hockney, with a lunch for him. It was hugely enjoyable for us, meeting people like that, but also it was wonderful for the Embassy, with the help often of the British Council, to get their French equivalents into the Residence to meet people that they might otherwise not meet. That was enjoyable. I think I mentioned that my staff wouldn't tell me about the exhibition on Sex and the British, nor did they tell me there was a big exhibition of Gilbert and George, because that was a bit iconoclastic and they thought that I might not like it. We discovered that was on,

went to it and then invited Gilbert and George to the Embassy. I am afraid that I wanted, and succeeded in getting Gilbert up one end of the garden while George was still in the house to show that they were sometimes apart.

I was very good friends with the German Ambassador, Peter Hartmann, whom I had known earlier on in the Foreign Office before I went to Paris. This was at a time when the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which of course we had bombed, was being restored and Peter and I decided to have a fund-raising event to raise money for the Frauenkirche. It was perhaps a slightly risky thing for the British and German Ambassadors to ask the French to contribute to a church in Germany which the British had destroyed. Felicity Lott came and sang for us; some very interesting and wealthy French people came along and it was a very successful evening. The Duke of Kent was there as the guest of honour. That was another example of being able to use an extraordinary residence, in that case with the emphasis on reconciliation, cementing relations with Germany and France and helping to strengthen the Franco-British-German triangle. That was also well worth doing.

Another example of how we tried to exploit opportunities which were presented to us I will never forget. The French decided to give the Legion d'Honneur to all surviving First World War veterans. To start with the Ministry of Defence said this couldn't be done. We said, 'Don't be so silly, of course it's got to be done,' and spoke to Downing Street and in the end it was done. A dozen First World War veterans, aged between 99 and 104, came to Paris to get their medals. We invited them all to tea in the Residence afterwards and we invited twelve twelve-year-olds from the British School to come as well. Each veteran got out of the bus and was greeted by a twelve-year-old, who was then his mentor during tea. The thinking behind this was that if you had somebody who was a hundred in 1998 and you had a twelve-year-old who was old enough to remember this, that twelve-year-old would be able to tell his or her grandchildren that they had met a veteran of the First World War and so you would get two hundred years plus of memories. It was a very moving occasion. I played ping pong with one of the 99 year olds in the garden. I remember talking to one old chap about being strung up on the fences in No Man's Land at the battle of the Somme and what it was like. It was an extraordinary experience to be able to hear all of that. All these are ways in which with a certain amount of imagination and in a relationship which really matters between two countries you can use a Residence in unexpected ways to bring people closer to each other and governments closer to each other.

I remember the Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine, said to me once towards the end of my time there, 'Do you know,' he said, 'Apart from you and Jack Straw (who was then Foreign Minister) I don't know any British people.' So I said, 'We'll give you a dinner to meet some interesting British people.' We organised a dinner and we invited a number of British friends and British people who spoke French and we put Kristin Scott Thomas on his right. We had Michael Frayn and Claire Tomalin; we had Colin Blakemore, the scientist, we had about twelve, really distinguished people, all of whom spoke French, and had a fascinating dinner. I know, because the head of his office told me afterwards that Hubert Vedrine had gone back to his office that night at about half past eleven to finish off his work, saying what a wonderful evening it had been and that he had been sitting next to Kristin Scott Thomas. It was a way of cementing relationships in a rather unexpected way with a Foreign Minister. Not a single word of foreign policy was spoken, but that wasn't the point. The point was to get him to have a different sort of view of Britain and British people than he would get in the normal course of events.

People came from London too. Edward Heath would come from time to time. I first met Edward Heath at the Embassy when I was Financial Counsellor and Ewen Fergusson was Ambassador and was promoting English wine. I attended a lunch which Ewen Fergusson gave for Edward Heath and I think Giscard was there, and Jacques de Larosière, the Governor of the Bank of France at the time and I was invited as Financial Counsellor. I remember Ewen Fergusson saying, 'Sir Edward, wonderful that you're here. I am tempted to serve you a delicious English white wine.' 'I hope, Ambassador, that you'll resist that temptation,' was his reply and the white wine was removed from the table. He came. He was elderly, grumpy, and only really came alive when something was going wrong with the Conservative Party. Mrs Thatcher I've talked about.

John Major came fairly regularly. He came when he was Prime Minister and I went with him to various summits. There was a summit in Bordeaux when Juppé and Chirac were there, which was a good event, though that was towards the end of John Major's time when I think he knew that he wouldn't win the next election. He came quite often after he had left office and spent some time drafting part of his book with us and we'd go for walks together. I think he found it difficult in the immediate aftermath of losing office, understandably. The advantage of that house was that it was a wonderful house; the staff were friendly; you were completely secluded, so if for whatever reason you just wanted to escape from the pressures elsewhere, it was a wonderful place to come, easy to get to from London, to come for a

couple of days, to come for a weekend, go out if you wanted to, see friends if you wanted to. We felt, I felt as Ambassador, and Sylvia felt, that people who had been Prime Minister or who had been Foreign Secretary who wanted to come and stay in the house, even after they had left office, as far as we were concerned, they were very welcome.

Tony Blair came regularly as Prime Minister. He came first of all before he was Prime Minister. He came as Leader of the Opposition with Robin Cook and with Angie Hunter, Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell. I remember they were upstairs in the bedroom doing some work in the afternoon and I'd gone up to talk about something. I remember going into the room and seeing Tony Blair sitting on the bed with Alastair Campbell and Angie Hunter and Jonathan Powell quite close around him and Robin Cook against the window in a chair looking the other way and you just had an instant sense of a kind of inner circle and a Foreign Secretary, or future Foreign Secretary, who was not part of it. One of the things you noticed as an ambassador sometimes: people would relax and behave in ways abroad that they wouldn't at home and you would see relationships in a way in which you never would at home. This was a good example of just getting a sense of how that relationship was not going to work.

Gordon Brown didn't stay in the Residence, but he came once or twice. He came once, I'm glad to say, at a time when we had an exhibition of contemporary Scottish art and he was obliged to say that he thought that was what embassies should be doing. Otherwise he was not on the whole disposed to give embassies compliments. Theresa May came as shadow Education Secretary when William Hague was Leader of the Opposition. This must have been in about 1998, in the first year of the Conservatives in opposition. William Hague came once. Apart from that, as far as I recall, for about a year or eighteen months no Conservative Front Bench spokesman came to Paris, except for Theresa May. She genuinely wanted to learn about French education, to talk to the French about education policy, to see what lessons there might be for Britain from French education policy. From that moment on I've always thought of her as somebody who was more open-minded, had more sense of curiosity, than many others of her party.

We had quite a few members of the Royal Family who came. This was a slightly tricky subject because at some stage before we went to Paris there was an agreement reached with the Palace that only certain core members of the Royal Family had the right to stay in embassies without being invited. Before that there had been a tradition that any member of

the Royal Family could go and stay in an embassy, because it was in a sense their embassy. Some embassies and some consuls general found that they were seriously embarrassed and out of pocket, because they simply could not provide the sort of support which, say Princess Margaret, expected from embassies. I remember shortly before I went to Paris as Ambassador, President Chirac was in London for a state visit and there was a banquet at Buckingham Palace, at the end of which – I felt rather naively flattered by this – virtually every member of the Royal Family came up and said how glad they were that I was going to Paris, what a wonderful place it was, and how much they enjoyed staying in the Residence. I sort of smelt a rat here, so I resisted issuing invitations on the spot. As it turned out, we had some wonderful visits from members of the Royal Family, but always on official business. By far the most interesting and most important visit was when the Queen came to stay. I'd been talking to Robin Janvrin who was then the Queen's Private Secretary and he had said that he would like to move to a situation in which it was possible for the Queen to visit countries without it being a State Visit. If it were a State Visit, then she had to stay in the state apartments; but if it was an official visit but a non-state visit, then she could stay in the Embassy. He said it would be rather nice if that started with a visit to Paris. We worked on that and we agreed that to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War in 1998 and the unveiling of a statue of Winston Churchill the Queen would come to stay with us. We gave a dinner for her: my wife and I and the Queen and the former Governor of the Bank of France, Jacques de Larosière, to whom she had given an honorary knighthood that evening, some other friends of ours, the then young, very able and bright Director of the Musée d'Orsay and his wife – he subsequently became Director of the Louvre – and one or two hunting friends of the Queen's, just round a table of twelve. The following morning she met all the members of the Embassy which was nice. I told her, as we were going round the Embassy, I said, 'Ma'am, there's a young boy here; it's his sixth birthday.' As the Queen went round, she said, 'Hello, I hear it's your birthday today. How old are you?' 'Nine.' We moved on.

The Prince of Wales came fairly regularly; the Duke of Kent was wonderful. He would come for the first day of the Battle of the Somme. That was one of the things I enjoyed most about Paris life – enjoy is perhaps the wrong word – the commemoration of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1<sup>st</sup> July, at Thiepval at the great memorial there. But it had got into a sort of a rut; there was a priest there who always read the same prayers and he always read the same poem, which I thought was an inappropriate poem for reconciliation. We decided to

change things one year and I asked Sebastian Faulks, whom we'd got to know, if he would come and read whichever First World War poem he would like to read at the ceremony. Again it was making things slightly more modern and up-to-date and it was very moving. We then all went off to one of the inns in the local village which had all been destroyed in the First World War and met the local mayors. That was a nice thing to do.

Fairly regularly while I was in Paris the remains of British soldiers on First World War battlefields were unearthed and on every occasion there would be a proper burial ceremony which I would go to if I could. They were extraordinarily moving, not least because the Ministry of Defence were extraordinarily clever in tracing the descendants. I remember one really cold, miserable January or February day I was in Picardy for the burial of the remains of a British soldier and his granddaughter or great granddaughter, I think from Newcastle had been invited. I don't think they knew anything about the soldier's death until they were traced – but they were there, clearly moved by it, but also puzzled about why this was going on almost a hundred years afterwards. The French always took these sorts of events very seriously as well. The mayor would come; the local dignitaries. It was a way of cementing relations between France and Britain through some piece of shared history, which we have, which is not in itself particularly important, but which all add up to a strengthening of the relationship. This is particularly true outside Paris. I used to go quite often to commemorations of D Day and I remember being at one on the 6<sup>th</sup> June in one of the small Normandy towns which had been liberated by the British. The old veterans were marching past with their medals. A former Chief of the Defence Staff was there, with a bowler hat and an umbrella over his arm, which is what they did, and marched past. I was standing next to a young woman *député*, subsequently a minister, and suddenly saw that she was in floods of tears. I looked at her and she said, 'I'm sorry but it's difficult when you're in Paris to know just how moving this sort of thing is for those of us who live in the towns and villages that have been liberated.' In Paris sometimes you get a rather hard-nosed relationship with a focus on the difficulties, but when you get outside Paris, when you get into the countryside, particularly into those bits of the countryside that have suffered under the First World War or the Second World War, or towns where a British bomber has crashed in the Second World War and there are the gravestones of the people who perished there, it is still a hugely important part of the relationship. We are not conscious of it in London, but it is very important in France. Not having been invaded since 1066, we are less aware what it means to

have been invaded, what it means to have got rid of the invaders and what it means for the relationship with those who have helped you do that.

I regularly got out of Paris, partly because it was important to go and see the Consuls General and partly because it was important to see parts of France which I didn't know. Quite often there would be big trade fairs in Lyons or trade fairs in Cannes. There was always a series of trade fairs in Cannes; there's the film festival, of course. But also I discovered after a bit, if you really want to meet a minister or a senior politician, you had far more effective and meaningful time with him or her on their home territory, than you did in Paris. No *cabinets* around to get in the way. I remember going to call on former President Giscard d'Estaing in the Auvergne, Clermont Ferrand, which was his fiefdom, and him taking me out to lunch in a local inn with a couple of local mayors. You got a sense of local politics and how Paris related to the rest of the country, that you never get in Paris. You can't do your job as an ambassador, even in a centralised country, like France, if you just stay in Paris. You have to go and see what's going on elsewhere and get a sense of how it works, how it operates.

You get caught out sometimes. Quite early on in my time I went on a trip to the south of France, ending up in Nice. The Mayor of Nice knew I was there and said, 'Come round for a cup of tea before you catch the plane.' So I said, 'Fine.' The Mairie of Nice is an enormous sort of palace, and my wife and I were pretty exhausted after a day's visits in the south of France. I was walking beside him and he said, 'We'll just go in here.' He opened the door. I thought it would be a little room where we would sit down and have a cup of tea, instead of which it was a huge auditorium. There were lights flashing; there were about five hundred people in the auditorium. I was told to go and sit on a seat which I did. The Mayor then got up and made a prepared twenty-five minute speech. Suddenly it dawns on you: My God, I'm going to have to get up and make a reply. There were a lot of the British community there as well, the first time they'd seen a British ambassador. How do I cope with this? Anyway, I did my best. It taught me a lesson that you have to have a prepared speech if you find yourself in this predicament. You have to say what a privilege it is to be wherever you are - you will always know one thing about the place you're in and why it is important - and how wherever you are and its relationship with Britain - and every French town has a relationship with Britain - is symbolic of the importance of relations between Britain and France, and how that Franco-British relationship is such a key relationship in this troubled world. You have a kind of structure so that wherever you are, however you get caught out, you can respond in French in a satisfactory way. That was a useful lesson to learn.

One of the things that I thought was important was to work to strengthen the links between the British and French armed forces and therefore to work with our military attachés and the Ministry of Defence to strengthen relations between our Armies, Navies and Air Forces. Because my father and my grandfather had been in the Navy and I had been brought up in naval establishments around the world, I was particularly keen on the Navy. It was quite exciting to land in a helicopter on the *Charles de Gaulle*, the aircraft carrier, in the middle of the Mediterranean. I remember sailing in to Brest on a British nuclear submarine which was paying a visit and tying up alongside a French nuclear submarine, quite symbolic of the relationship between Britain and France, these twin nuclear powers at the heart of the Alliance.

CM: We are resuming after a short pause and Michael, you are now going to talk a little bit about the policy and politics in France while you were there. Perhaps it is a good idea to start with the European Union and the Euro which was on the cards for us at that time.

MJ: Yes, looking back on it, what I am conscious of is how far the work of the Embassy was concerned with European Union issues. Although European Union issues were, and are until we leave, negotiated in Brussels, what matters hugely is what line the French and the Germans in particular are going to take on the different European Union questions arising in the Councils in Brussels. The best way of influencing them is by talking to the key people in capitals, not just in Brussels. For that reason the Embassy staff dealing with agriculture, the environment, foreign policy and so on, and on institutional issues would talk to their counterparts the whole time in Paris, to try to influence the French view on an issue that was going to come up at a Council in Brussels in the following month or so. Since there are Councils virtually every week, covering pretty well everything and since the French view on all those is crucially important, there was an absolutely constant communication in Paris between the Embassy and counterparts in virtually every French ministry. Very often there would be ministerial visits, from the Minister of Agriculture, the Secretary of State for Education, most ministers really, to talk to the French about European Union issues. The European Union was not by any means the totality of the relationship with France because on foreign policy and defence the relationship was sufficiently close and sufficiently important to transcend EU issues. But without the EU the intensity and nature of the relationship would have been, and will become, much less important. That's much less the case in France than it will be the case, I suspect, in other EU countries. As I say, in France, because of our joint membership of the UN Security Council, because we are nuclear powers, because we always

have had a very close defence relationship, the relationship is going to remain an extremely close one. That will not be the case to anything like the same extent in Germany, in Italy, in Spain or in other countries. Curiously enough, it may become so, perhaps, in the countries bordering Russia, the former Soviet Union. Because of the NATO connection, those may become more important relationships, but not, I suspect, in some of the smaller western European EU countries – Ireland of course excepted.

The issue that dominated my first two or three years in Paris and the time of many visitors from London, from No. 10 and so on, was the Euro. At the beginning of that period it wasn't absolutely clear that the Euro was going to come into being in 1999, as planned, nor exactly what form it was going to take. I had constant discussions on this with senior Treasury officials, with Dominique Strauss-Kahn who was at that time the Finance Minister, with Governor of the Bank of France, and others. The interesting thing, looking back on it, was that the politicians were absolutely clear that the Euro would come into being in 1999, because it was seen as an essentially political act. This was part of European construction, as the continental Europeans like to call it, and the creation of the Euro was an essential part of the march towards a more integrated Europe. When I talked to people like Jean-Claude Trichet, the Governor of the Bank of France at the time, their view was a little bit different. It was: Yes, it's going to happen because it's a political act and it has to happen. It is not going to be straightforward because it's going to create strains between, in particular, the north and the south of Europe, and we are going to have to find ways, we civil servants, we central bankers, of massaging those strains, so that this political concept can come into effect and can succeed. Looking back on it and thinking about some of the things I wrote and the records I made at the time, I'm quite struck by how far amongst the technocrats there was a realisation that this was a political process, with risks, but that equally there was an absolute clarity that it was going to happen. There were one or two maverick ministers, or seen in France as maverick, who were against it or thought it would be too risky, but that was very, very much a minority view. There was a separate question, of course, of whether Britain would join. It became fairly clear, fairly early on, certainly under the Conservative Government, that we were not going to join the Euro in 1999. Under Blair, to start with it wasn't entirely clear. There was, certainly, a view that we might decide to do so, but it didn't hold sway for very long. It became clear fairly early on that Gordon Brown as Chancellor was not going to countenance our membership of the Euro. The question then became, What would happen to the European Union when the Euro came into being and what would the relationship be

between the Eurozone and those of us, including Britain, outside? That was the tenor of the debate. That was a pretty key and central issue. We'd negotiated in the Maastricht treaty the right not to take part in the inevitable lead up to the Euro at some stage in the future. That left open the possibility of our joining, had we wanted to. What we had opted out of was the obligation to do so.

The conclusion I draw really is that EU affairs, whether one's talking about the Euro or the ordinary day-to-day conduct of European business, right across the board, were a crucial part of the Franco-British relationship and a crucial part of the work of the Embassy, not so much of the Foreign Office bits of the Embassy, but of all the other bits of the Embassy which were the representatives of other Whitehall departments. The European Union and the conduct of the Franco-British relationship within the European Union was a crucial part of the overall relationship and of negotiations and discussions between ministers. That doesn't mean to say that there weren't other things. I have talked about foreign policy. There were other important bi-lateral issues, particularly the migration problem which I've talked about already, which meant that the relationship between the Interior Minister and the Home Secretary was very often about difficult migration issues.

The other issue which was a constant throughout my time in Paris was defence. There were two aspects to this, which were linked. One question was whether France, which had been semi-detached from NATO since de Gaulle took it out of the integrated structure in the 1960s, was going to move back into it? At the beginning of my time in Paris there were constant, detailed, high-level very secret conversations between Peter Inge as Chief of the Defence Staff on our side, his French counterpart, the Elysée and others with a view to explaining to the French exactly what NATO was and NATO wasn't, why it was in NATO's interest, Britain's interest and France's interest to become a full member and not a kind of partial member of NATO. There was a time when we thought that would work, early-ish on in my time in Paris. Chirac pulled the plug and so it didn't work, until later. That was an intense part of the relationship for the first couple of years or so, which didn't result in France joining the integrated military structure of NATO at that point, though they did join later.

That that did not mean, of course, that there was no intensification of the Franco-British defence co-operation. There was, particularly after Tony Blair became Prime Minister. He was extremely keen that there should be a closer relationship between France and Britain and he and Chirac negotiated the St Malo Agreement in 1998 which was an agreement between

France and Britain to work closely together on defence issues within the EU and within NATO. It was quite an important defence agreement. It was not a completely straightforward one, because there was concern, certainly on the British side, that there would be American resistance to France and Britain apparently creating the sort of bi-lateral defence relationship which wasn't obviously compatible with the existing structures within NATO and with the American role in NATO. I can remember a meeting early one morning in St Malo just before the agreement was due to be announced and John Holmes who was then Private Secretary in No. 10, saying to Tony Blair, 'Prime Minister, I think we just need to be very clear before we finally agree on this, that it is going to be acceptable to the Americans and we're not doing something which is going to cause difficulties with the Americans.' Blair, in a rather typical way, said, 'Leave the American side to me. I'll sort it out. This is going to be fine.' He was right, because it was fine and the Americans did understand and it was a very important part of closer Franco-British co-operation in defence which led to other forms of relationships between the armed forces. These early years of Blair, 1997 to 1999, these were years when, from a European perspective, it looked as though the British approach to the EU would be fundamentally different from the scratchy Conservative approach to Europe under John Major and that there was a chance of a closer British relationship with the EU and influence on the EU, a chance of a closer Franco-British defence relationship which would help strengthen European security, and maintain at the same time a close relationship with the United States. This was quite a big game which was being played really, I think, up until the late 90s.

That didn't mean to say that there weren't difficulties. There were difficulties over Iraq in, I think, 1998 with differences over the interpretation of the No-Fly Zone, over whether incursions by Saddam Hussein in the No-Fly Zone justified bombing of Iraq in order to deter him. These differences between the British and the French were, in a way, a precursor of what would come later when Clinton was replaced by Bush and American policy hardened. Blair decided that staying close to the Americans was a crucial part of foreign policy if he had to make a choice. This rather promising British overture to Europe foundered on Iraq in the run up to the invasion of 2003. For a time it seemed to me that Blair thought that he could somehow keep the two apart and that having a particular kind of close relationship with the Americans did not prejudice a closer relationship between Britain and the European Union. The more the relationship over Iraq became difficult, the harder it became to ride those two horses at the same time. But none of this obscures the fact that the

Franco-British relationship on defence was absolutely fundamental to both countries. It didn't always work, but it was fundamentally important. Now at the same time you had all sorts of crises: you had BSE; you had foot and mouth disease; you had Sangatte; and immigration; you had consular cases; you had completely unrelated, highly sensitive issues to handle, like the death of the Princess of Wales. But what this shows, looking back on it and I think I was conscious of it at the time, is an intensity of relationship between Britain and France, in which the Embassy played a key role, which meant that no one thing ever dominated. The Franco-British relationship was never a one-issue relationship. There were always half a dozen really important things going on at the time, three which would be really difficult, two or three of which would be really positive. It was the complexity and intensity of the relationship which I remember, rather than a relationship which focussed one issue which you were always trying to manage.

I think St Malo was a particular high. There was a very good atmosphere. More generally, it was an extraordinary time. In 1997-98 every journalist wanted to interview Tony Blair; every journalist wanted to come to the house: Christine Ockrent, Anne Sinclair, all the great journalists, they all wanted to go to London to interview Tony Blair. Every politician wanted to meet Tony Blair from Left and Right. I remember Nicholas Sarkozy coming to the Embassy. 'I must come and have tea. I must come and have tea.' He came, ran up the stairs - I was breathless trying to keep up with him - wanting to talk about Could he meet Blair? This was when he was a right-wing MP. All politicians wanted to meet Blair, either in London or in Paris. He was seen as a new kind of politician, a young politician, to start with a very European-minded politician, with an important trans-Atlantic relationship, with ideas, with an approach to capturing the centre ground of politics which appealed to people of both Right and Left and this made him a very, very attractive figure that everybody wanted to see and speak to. He came to Paris to make his speech to the *Assemblée Nationale*. This was a huge event. He spoke in French and made a joke at the expense of the Socialists at the beginning of his speech, which got everybody, except I think for Jospin, roaring with laughter. He said his first experience of Socialism was working in a pub when, like everyone else, he put his tip in a communal bowl, but by the time he came to take it out, it had all gone; everybody else had taken it. 'That was my first experience of Socialism.' He was quite nervous about this speech. I'm not surprised. He was going to speak in French in the *Assemblée Nationale*. Certainly no British prime minister had ever spoken in French in the *Assemblée* before. I remember we were walking through a tunnel in the *Assemblée* building

to get to the chamber and there were drummers playing as we walked through, drummers, drummers, drummers. Blair turned to me and said, 'I feel you know I'm going to the tumbrels at the other end of this.' It was not the sort of approach to make you feel at ease. He did it supremely well. It was a great success.

The real low over Iraq was after I had left. There were some lows. The relationship with Chirac towards the end of my time, early 2000s, was going downhill. Iraq was difficult in 1998; there were agricultural issues that were difficult. The difficulties with the management of the Euro meant that the French were focussing more on the German relationship than on the British relationship. There were some very scratchy meetings in the margins of European Councils, so I don't think it was one particular thing which caused a low, it was just a sense that the heady heights of early Blair and the Franco-British Defence Agreement at St Malo had gone off the boil and the relationship was going to get more difficult. Clinton had a good relationship with Chirac and Pamela Harriman, who was US Ambassador when I was first there, was very close to Clinton and close to Chirac. The Blair-Chirac-Clinton relationship was manageable; when Bush came that became much less true.

CM: You've just mentioned Pamela Harriman, whom you must have known quite well.

MJ: One interesting thing about being Ambassador in Paris is that on the whole you don't have to get to know other ambassadors because they're not very important to your ordinary, day to day life, with the exception, in my case, of the American Ambassador and the German Ambassador. There were three American Ambassadors while I was there. The first was Pamela Harriman, who was an extraordinary figure. She was in her late seventies; she was a highly effective ambassador, because she knew the key people in France and because the key people in France knew that she had a good relationship with Washington and in particular with President Clinton. She was an impressive figure as an ambassador and she was much more than that. She had the most extraordinary history. She had been the lover of many of the great French figures even in my day, Maurice Druon, Agnelli. She was known by all of that circle, the Rothschilds, Elie de Rothschild, another lover, they knew her in all sorts of ways. We got to know her at the very end of her time and at the end of her life. Because the British Residence and the American Residence are next door to each other, we saw a certain amount of each other. I would call on her and she would sometimes ask us round. There are two things about this that I remember in particular. I went to call on her, almost the first time I'd met her, and we had a meeting and a cup of coffee and then she said to me, 'Do you know

that I can see your garden from my bedroom.’ I said, ‘I didn’t know that, Pamela.’ She said, ‘Let me show you.’ She led me into her bedroom and I thought to myself as I followed her, I am following in the footsteps of some of the greatest men in Europe since the War. We walked to the end and looked down into the garden and walked back again. The most moving occasion was when she asked Sylvia and me to supper, just the three of us. I suppose this was just a couple of months before she died. We had supper and then we were sitting in her sitting room and she said, ‘I want to read you something.’ She got down from her shelves a little book by Winston Churchill, called *The Dream*. She said, ‘It’s not very long. I’ll read it to you.’ The story is that Winston Churchill had a dream that Randolph Churchill, his father, said to him, ‘Now, my son, what have you done in life?’ He says what he’s done in life and he talks about his early life, South Africa, switching from one party to another party but never quite succeeding. Then just before becoming Prime Minister he wakes up, so his father never knows he becomes Prime Minister. This sense of insecurity is very moving in itself, but the interesting thing was that the more Pamela Harriman read this, the more her American accent disappeared, and towards the end, the last ten or fifteen minutes or so, it was the young, minor aristocratic lady from Dorset, the daughter-in-law of Winston Churchill reading this. Sylvia and I both had the sense, as sometimes happens to someone towards the end of her life, her real wish in a way was to go back to the beginning, to go back to the Churchills and go back to Dorset. She’d had problems with her American family and so in a funny kind of way this was a precursor I think of her dying just a little while after that. Her funeral – or rather her send off from the Embassy - was an extraordinary occasion. It was February, I think, and it was of those early February days, the sun was shining, birds singing, cold. Sylvia and I were sitting on chairs in rows in the garden. The coffin was up on the steps behind the house with the Stars and Stripes draped on it. Behind us were sitting several of her former lovers: Agnelli, Elie de Rothschild, Maurice Druon. Cardinal Lustiger came first of all and gave a blessing and then Chirac came and presented her with the highest award of the Legion d’Honneur, which she had been offered before she died, but had not been invested with, and therefore she was allowed to have it posthumously. He laid it on her coffin. It was a very, very moving occasion. The coffin was then taken and the family, Winston Churchill, her son, and others, followed it out into the Champs Elysées.

Her successor, Felix Rohatyn, was a terrific ambassador. He had been in Czechoslovakia before the War, had had to flee Czechoslovakia to Paris and then had to flee Paris again to New York. He spoke French fluently and he came back as Ambassador, appointed by

Clinton when Pamela Harriman had died. He was immediately absolutely *bien reçu* by all the key people, Chirac and others, and was a highly effective ambassador. He too became a very good friend. They were both extremely good ambassadors.

The third ambassador whose name I can't remember was a chicken farmer from California who didn't speak any French and I think he had some difficulty. He was there at 9/11 which happened just as I was about to leave. He couldn't go on radio and television because he didn't speak French, so what all the French radio and television did was to ring up Felix Rohatyn in New York who spoke French and who was in effect the American Ambassador in absentia. It must have been galling for the chicken farmer whose name I can't remember. He had only just arrived and it would have been very difficult for him in any event. But not speaking French made it completely impossible.

CM: You mentioned Elie de Rothschild and I think you know Elie and Liliane rather well.

MJ: We did. Yes, one of the curious things about being an ambassador is that you are on the same level as everybody else, anybody else. Jean Gueguinou who was the French Ambassador in London, whom I spoke to just before going to Paris, said to me, 'Michael, one thing you must never, never, never forget, is that absolutely no one in France would regard it as in the least odd to be invited to the Embassy for a meal.' He said, 'The same is true of me here in London.' I suddenly realised when he said that, he was absolutely right. You operated in London as No. 2 in the Foreign Office or whatever, as a civil servant, and then you are going into a completely different order of life. If this is going to work, almost like an actor, you are going to have to transform yourself into somebody for whom having lunch *à quatre* with the Rothschilds or whoever, is a perfectly normal and natural thing to do. Sometimes this does lead to real friendships. Elie and Liliane de Rothschild, who were a wonderful pair, did become good friends. It is always difficult when you are an ambassador to be able to escape and the Rothschilds had this wonderful house just north of Paris, the Abbaye de Royaumont, and they would invite us there, sometimes just the four of us, and we'd go there on a Sunday afternoon. We'd go for a walk with the dog, come back and then sometimes we'd sit down in the study and Liliane would say, 'I think we'll watch a film.' An extraordinary kind of screen was lowered from the ceiling and I remember we sat there watching *Brief Encounter* before supper. It's quite difficult sometimes when you're ambassador to have friends. That was a very special relationship which we treasure.

There were the three actresses, the three British actresses who lived in Paris, all completely different, all of whom became good friends. Jane Birkin, Charlotte Rampling and Kristin Scott Thomas. Jane Birkin was absolutely wonderfully eccentric, a complete original, extremely friendly. We'd go to her flat and meet all sorts of really interesting cinema people, actors and producers and you'd all be together trying to cook the meal. There was another dimension which was extraordinary. We once went to the launch of a book by the father of a friend of ours, Brooks Richards, who had been captain of a Motor Torpedo Boat during the War and had published a book about this. To our surprise Jane Birkin was there. 'Goodness me, what are you doing here, Jane?' She said, 'My father was a naval officer and a friend of Brooks Richards'. It was one of those curious coming together of two entirely different worlds. We remained good friends of hers.

Charlotte Rampling was a different character, but also was a good friend and we'd see her a lot and Kristin Scott Thomas we saw most, and still see. She would come with her then husband and children and they'd play tennis and have games on the lawn. They were all three good friends, all completely different, but just gave one an entrée into an aspect of British society in France, which we wouldn't otherwise have had.

Bernard Arnault we got to know quite well, because again the wealthy, highly influential, politically inclined, French industrial intelligentsia was hugely important both for commercial and industrial reasons and also because that was a way into the politicians. If you got to know them, you got to know the politicians who were their friends. Arnault was Chairman or Chief Executive, I forget which, of LVMH at the time. We saw quite a lot of him and of his wife. One of the more curious occasions on which we met them was when we gave a dinner for Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser in the Residence, to which we invited Peter Brook and Natasha Brook, and Anouk Aimée and Bernard Arnault and his wife. It was great fun, a terrific occasion. I made a little speech of welcome to Harold Pinter and he then made a speech, a rather Pinteresque speech, about how Britain under Tony Blair was, if not fascist, far, far removed from the Socialist democracy which all good, thinking people expected to see and wanted to have. Bernard Arnault was sitting on the other side of Sylvia and kept turning to her and saying, 'But I thought Tony Blair was a Socialist.' He was completely bemused by all of this. That was a good occasion.

François Pinault we knew quite well and Sylvia became good friends with Maryvonne Pinault, his wife. They became really quite good friends and we saw quite a lot of

them. Again you'd be likely to meet Madame Chirac at their house, or a top industrialist, so again it was a case that you needed to see and get to know as many people as you could in any walk of life if they were distinguished and successful, because France being France, you'd be meeting all sorts of other people. You never knew when you went to a dinner party whom you'd meet there. It was particularly true of the right wing; it was less true of the Socialist government. It was harder to get to know the Socialist politicians in the same way as right-wing politicians. Though there were some like Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the champagne Socialists, who did move in those sort of circles. Jospin and those around him didn't. You soon began to know instinctively which were the sorts of occasions and which were the sorts of people, where, if you went there, you'd meet the politicians and others you needed to know. There were times when you'd go to a dinner party or a reception and you could be pretty certain of having five minutes with three or four ministers on topics, which if you'd asked to go to see them in their offices you'd have just got a blanket No from the *cabinet*. Diplomatic life is not just going to see the key people, it is getting to know the way in which the capital of the country works, so that you can much more easily get your messages across to the people that matter and hear from them about how the country works.

We knew Maurice Druon well. The Académie Française is an extraordinary institution. He was *Secrétaire Perpétuelle* of the Académie Française which is hugely honorific and a position of high standing in French society. The Académie Française has all the great literary figures. They meet fairly regularly and they dress up in the most ludicrous uniform. Sometimes people would come to a dinner we were giving en route to or from the Académie Française and would arrive in their blue and green uniform with oak leaves everywhere. We would get invited sometimes to dinner there and that was a very good way again of getting to know that part of France. Maurice Druon had particular links with Britain because he had been here with de Gaulle. That was another important and very moving side of Paris life. There were elderly and very brave French men and women who had been involved in the War, who maintained a strong affection for Britain, particularly those who'd been involved in the SOE and the Resistance. We realised that these were the last remnants of that side of Franco-British life. We used to give receptions for the French or British Resistance people who were still alive. We'd have some elderly women, in their 90s sometimes, who'd done the most astonishing things behind the lines, of real bravery, in the Resistance. It was quite humbling talking to them all. I won't say it's forgotten now because it's not, but this was the last opportunity to meet them.

CM: Michael, I think we're drawing to the end now, but I cannot let you go without getting you to say something about British food at the Embassy. You've mentioned Ewen Fergusson and his English wine. I don't know whether you served English wine to the French, but I know that British food and British cheese and British menus were a very, very important part of what you did. So I want you to finish off by saying something about them.

MJ: Well, they were. It's not really me to say this; you should be talking to Sylvia because she was the great promoter of British food in Paris. She was head of the British Cheese Association and became later on Director General of the British Food and Drink Federation, partly because of what she had done and been seen to do with the promotion of British food in France. We did make a point of always having British dishes at all meals and we tried to experiment with them. When, for example, Gillian Shepherd, as a minister, came for dinner, Sylvia would discover that there was a particular kind of Norfolk – which was her constituency – pudding or recipe and that would appear on the menu. Sometimes this was genuine, sometimes there was a little bit of interpretation, but it was always an attempt to make British food seem interesting and relevant and always, because we had an absolutely brilliant Chef, delicious. Sylvia made a particular point of boosting British cheese. We hardly ever served French cheeses. There are an enormous number of British cheeses; it was very difficult to get British cheeses to Paris and we had arrangements with Neal's Yard. We almost had runners bringing cheese across on the Eurostar and in vans for big events. But people were immensely surprised by the variety and quality of British cheese. We served British white wine regularly; at any meal the first wine would be a British white wine. We felt that we could not go so far as to serve the French anything other than a French red wine, because it would not go down well. A good French red wine preceded by a perfectly acceptable English white wine, would lead to the French going away, saying, 'Well, I suppose that white wine wasn't so bad after all.' That was a step up in how things were before. At times you could turn this to advantage. As a result of BSE British beef was banned in France for the first four years we were there. Because we only served British ingredients, we felt that we could not serve beef at all, because if we couldn't serve British beef, it would clearly be French beef. We did however, have one triumph. Just as the ban was beginning to be lifted the French said that British beef could be imported to the great agricultural show at SIAL, provided that when the show was over the British beef was either burned or taken to the British Embassy. So we said, 'Ah ha, here is an opportunity.' So we took the beef and had a great lunch for French chefs and journalists and so on, so that they

could eat delicious British beef. I am glad to say that this featured on the front page of *Le Monde* the following day, the excellence of British beef, just as British beef was about to become acceptable again in France.

CM: There is a myth about the famous wine cellar in the British Embassy in Paris. People believe there's wine stocked there from the 1920s. Would you like to explain about the British Embassy cellar?

MJ: The British Embassy cellar. I have no idea what it is like now. All I can tell you is that when we arrived at the British Embassy in Paris and went down into the cellar, it was empty because you buy the wine which you need for when you're there and our predecessors had used everything that was there which they had bought. They'd used it up before they went. So when we got there, there was virtually nothing in the cellar at all. We then had to go about creating a wine cellar. We were fortunate in two respects, firstly we had a sommelier, Ben Newick, who had been in the Embassy for a long time and knew wine well. More important, he knew all the great wine growers, and so he was able to get wine for us at a price which other people could not get. Since we knew, or hoped, we would be there for four or five years we could buy wine at the beginning which we would serve at the end so begin to build up a cellar. Then when we had really big events, we had special arrangements. For example, when the Queen came, we got Philippine de Rothschild and the Pol Rogers to provide special wine for her.

#### INTERVIEW 2 WITH LORD JAY 10 DECEMBER 2016

CM: Today is 10 December 2016 and this is the second interview with Lord Jay for the Diplomatic Oral History Programme about his time as Ambassador in Paris. Michael, I think you said you would like to talk a bit about the death of the Princess of Wales, which was a very tragic and dramatic moment in your time as ambassador.

MJ: Yes, the details of what happened that day I recorded in a diary that I kept all the time I was in Paris and that I wrote down at about midnight, I suppose, on the Sunday night, having got up at half past one on the Sunday morning, when I was first told about the accident. That diary was read out at the inquest and so is available on the website of the inquest

([http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090607230252/http://www.scottbaker-inquests.gov.uk/hearing\\_transcripts/110208pm.htm](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090607230252/http://www.scottbaker-inquests.gov.uk/hearing_transcripts/110208pm.htm)). Coroner's Inquests into the Deaths of

Diana, Princess of Wales and Dodi Al-Fayed. Hearing Transcripts: Lord Jay, 11 February 2008, Afternoon Session.)

Rather than go through the day, bit by bit, because it's all there, I'd rather just talk about one or two of the lessons, thinking back on it, which I drew from that day.

One thing which strikes me that there are every now and then, I suppose, in your diplomatic life things which are completely unexpected and for which you cannot be trained and for which you cannot seek advice. This was particularly true here. Here was an utterly unexpected accident which happened in the middle of a Saturday night at the end of August, which is a not a time when the machinery is working particularly well in London. I had to handle it throughout that day from half past one in the morning as I and the team from the Embassy who were with me thought was the right thing to do. There was no training for it; there can be no training for an event like that. There were attempts, perhaps not unexpectedly, by people to give advice. Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, was in Manila at the time. I had various phone calls from his people saying that he wanted to announce the Princess's death. I said we were going to announce it, because we were the people on the ground, we were there and we would have to do what we thought was the right thing to do. I had advice from No. 10 with advice from the Prime Minister on how I might handle the Press Conference and who should speak first and so on. Again I said that these were decisions that I would have to take as I was there, and nobody else was there apart from me and the Press Counsellor and the Head of Consular Services and so I would do what I thought was right. That was understood.

One quite interesting thing. In his autobiography Tony Blair talks of his having rung me that night (Tony Blair, *A Journey* (2010) p.136) and in Jonathan Powell's book he talks of Blair's having rung me. He didn't ring me. I was telephoned by, I think it was Dominic Chilcott, his Private Secretary, which was fine. I can quite see how, looking back on an event which was enormously important, Tony Blair might have thought afterwards that he should have rung me and therefore it becomes in his diary that he did. In that way myths sometimes get created.

It was the sort of event which I felt I had to handle in the way that I thought was right, with the help of Tim Livesey, who was the Press Counsellor, who was with me throughout that day. It was the sort of event that you have to handle minute by minute. It is so enormous you can't allow yourself to think about the enormity of the event. You have to get through it

minute by minute, whether it is talking to Downing Street, or talking to Balmoral, or arranging for the Prince of Wales to come, or the French President coming on the telephone wanting to be helpful. You just deal with these things and when you look back on it afterwards, you think, Good lord, what an extraordinary twenty four hours that was and you wonder how on earth you managed to get through it all, but you do it bit by bit by bit, minute by minute. I was also conscious that although I was doing it minute by minute, that this was an event of huge global significance and the press implications were enormous. I don't think any of us knew quite how big they would be, but we were conscious from the start - I was conscious from the moment that crowds began to gather round the hospital - that this was an event that was going to be hugely important.

I think that the one moment when that really struck me was about 4 in the morning when I was going into press conference to announce it with the surgeon who'd been caring for the Princess of Wales and with Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the Interior Minister, who was there, and I suddenly thought, Hang on, I must stop. I went into a little ante-room and just for about two minutes wrote down on the back of a receipt, I think, the key points which would need to be made during the press conference. Then we went into the room, which was quite a small room, in an annexe of the hospital and the three of us were sitting behind a table and the whole of the room, so it seemed, was full of journalists and flashing cameras and television screens and we were sitting there and people were leaning forward over the desk, pushing things right up into your face. It was an extraordinary experience. You just had to keep very, very calm and just say the few things that needed to be said, knowing that what you said then was going to be flashed around the world instantaneously and you had to get it right. The thing which I remember thinking most was that what I must do - it happened to be true - I absolutely must at the start say I'd like to thank the hospital for all they had done to try to save the Princess's life, because I knew that if there was any chink there then this would become a huge, or risked becoming a huge, anti-French story.

In fact, despite all we did, it very nearly did. The following Monday morning the Sun published a front page which said, *Ten Questions For the British Ambassador to Put to the French*, and they were clearly working themselves up into a story about how this accident was somehow or another due to French incompetence. I rang Alastair Campbell in No. 10 and said, 'Look, if you have any influence at all with the press, then just ring the Sun and tell them to back off, tell them to stop.' I could see this becoming an issue as important as that great long list of issues in Anglo-French relations from Agincourt, right through Fashoda and

Mers-el-Kabir and Joan of Arc. This could just poison the relationship for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years. I don't know what Alastair did, but the Sun never came back at all on that. I think they realised that this was just so huge that that was not the right angle to pursue. And it wasn't correct anyway, because the French had done a huge amount throughout, first of all to try to save her life and then to handle the whole aftermath extraordinarily effectively and properly.

The other thing, looking back on it, which strikes me about that day is how as an ambassador you are, of course, the figurehead and it is your job, when something as important as that happens, to handle it yourself. It was very lucky that I was in Paris, rather unusually to be in Paris on a Saturday night at the end of August, but luckily I was. It is the way in which the response is a response of the Embassy as a whole. Clearly the people most involved apart from myself, were Tim Livesey who was the Press Counsellor and Keith Moss, the Consular Counsellor, and they were with me throughout that night. But the following morning when we came into the office, about eight o'clock, I suppose, or nine o'clock, having been at the hospital most of the night, on the Sunday morning, the Embassy was full. Nobody had been summoned, but everybody had heard about it and the Embassy staff just knew that this was something that involved the whole of the Embassy and they wanted to be there. So I had a full Embassy. One of the drivers had driven from Normandy. He'd heard about it and thought, Well, maybe drivers will be needed, so he'd driven back overnight on Saturday/Sunday and come into the Embassy on Sunday morning. Sherard Cowper-Coles, who was the new Political Counsellor, and was down in Clermont Ferrand, perfecting his French, heard about it and got into a car and drove straight up. My Private Secretary was there too. It was a very good example of an Embassy, when the crisis comes, really working together, both the London-based staff and the local staff, because of a clear sense of responsibility that they had, because they knew the Embassy had it. So those were just some reflections on the night itself.

Of course, what began to happen astonishingly quickly was the beginning of a conspiracy theory and I was, perhaps naively, completely unprepared for this. I began to find, after about three or four days, I'd be at events in Paris and people would be talking about this, but at almost every event somebody would say, 'Oh, but of course, it's not what it seems, is it? It is not possible that it wasn't known that the Princess of Wales was coming and quite clearly there was an attempt by somebody, perhaps the British secret services, or somebody, because of the consequences, potential difficulties that the Princess of Wales was causing the Royal

Family to arrange an accident of this sort.’ The extraordinary thing was that people, really quite serious people really believed this. It was my first experience of what has subsequently become really a rather important part of public life, I think: a sense that rational thought and the truth doesn’t really play the part that we’ve all been brought up to believe that it should play. I was constantly having to say that this was not the case. But of course the very fact that I was saying it gave credence, in their view, to their belief that this was a conspiracy by the Establishment, of which obviously I was part.

This conspiracy theory began to be taken up by the British Press over the next two, three, four years. I was accused at one stage by the Daily Express of conspiring with the Duke of Edinburgh to murder the Princess of Wales. Quite extraordinary. The most extraordinary stories were put around: that Robert Fellowes, the Queen’s Private Secretary, had sneaked into the Embassy late at night and had got control of the communications system and had sent messages off and was clearly the force behind it. It was quite evident that Robert Fellowes was in Norfolk throughout that time. It was quite clearly stated and proven, but it didn’t make any difference. So this began to run and run. I had the Daily Express when I was back in London, so this was four or five years later, knocking on the door on a Sunday morning, wanting to know what I thought about the instructions I’d given for the embalming of the Princess of Wales. It was very, very, very odd and curious. I thought the conspiracy theories would go away, but they didn’t go away. A lot of people do believe them. I was asked about this and what I said at the time was that I can understand that there an awful lot of young impressionable people, particularly young women perhaps, for whom the Princess of Wales was an almost mythical figure when she was alive. She embodied both their aspirations of beauty and royalty, but also she reflected their own faults, because she had the same faults that they had, so people were able to identify with her. Given that was the case, it was almost impossible for people to believe that she had died in the most banal way possible, which was a drink-driving accident in a concrete underpass on a Saturday night. You could not believe that this had happened to your fairy princess. I can understand that, but what I think was so surprising, surprising to me, though perhaps naively, was that so many clearly intelligent and well informed people appeared to share this, and how the press, no doubt for their own reasons, began to give it oxygen which then lasted for years.

Mahomed Al-Fayed’s role was a curious role. I met him first at about four o’clock in the morning of the day in which she died. I was walking to the press conference. A car drew up. He got out. I said hello. He knew that his son was dead. He didn’t know that the

Princess of Wales was dead, so I told him that. I commiserated with him, condolences and so on. Jean-Pierre Chevenement, who was with me, asked one of his staff to take Mohamed Al-Fayed into the hospital, which he did. That's the first time I came across him.

I then came across him indirectly afterwards, because one of our consular duties was to look after the parents of the bodyguard who had been very, very badly hurt, but who survived. Quite rightly, in a way, Mohamed Al-Fayed offered to bring them to Paris and to look after them. They came to see us because they wanted to know what was happening and what would happen and so on. It became clear early on talking to them, that they were very suspicious of talking to us and we couldn't understand why. Mohamed Al-Fayed had clearly been saying to them that they mustn't trust anything to do with the British government. So we had to be quite straightforward and quite careful in offering the help we could. Slowly they began to rely more on us and less on him and moved out of the flat that he had arranged for them and I think we succeeded in gaining their confidence, but it was a very curious period of weeks or so while the bodyguard was so seriously ill and we were trying to help the parents. That was the first sign we had that Mohamed Al-Fayed regarded us with suspicion. I didn't know all the background about his trying to get British citizenship. I knew he hadn't got British citizenship, because there was a moment when one of our consular officials came to see me and said that Mohamed Al-Fayed had asked that his son's body be repatriated straightway to be buried according to Muslim rituals. The consular officer said, quite rightly, 'But he's not a British citizen.' I said, 'Look, in these circumstances it simply doesn't matter whether he is a British citizen or not. If Mohamed Al-Fayed wants his son repatriated, just organise the repatriation of his son.' That was done. So from the beginning we were trying to be helpful to all those who had suffered in this way.

You do sometimes meet people for whom there is genuine difficulty in separating truth from fiction and right from wrong. I think Mohamed Al-Fayed was such a man. He said for example that he had seen the Princess of Wales's body. I know he hadn't. But I believe he believed he had. So I think you were dealing with someone for whom the rational thought processes and the distinctions between right and wrong and truth and fiction didn't apply. What I think was unfortunate was the way in which he was able to - suborn really - lawyers and others onto his cause. I know my lawyer friends would say about Mike Mansfield, well you're paid a fee, you do the job and when it's over, you forget it and move on to something else. But it's when Mike Mansfield gave a talk at the Hay Literary Festival at which he said that he still thought that something funny had gone on, I suddenly thought,

Hang on, this isn't just somebody who is doing a lawyer's job, this is somebody who is going beyond that. I found this, I still find it, odd and distasteful to be honest.

The accident didn't, of course, go away because there were a whole series of inquests which were attacked by Mohamed Al-Fayed and started and then cancelled and started and then cancelled and eventually a formal inquest was set up. This was held in 2007; it was after I had left the Foreign Office. I was called as a witness with many others and was cross examined by Mike Mansfield on behalf of Mohamed Al-Fayed, as well as by the lawyers for the other side. I was advised by the Treasury Solicitors' Department. They were not allowed to give advice on how to handle the inquest itself. All they were allowed to do was to give me advice on the facts, they were not allowed to advise a witness on how to handle the sort of questions that he or she might be asked. They can be slightly elastic but not much. So you read up all the facts, some of which I remembered anyway. Then you are there, on a witness stand with a big screen in front of me. Then I was cross examined by Mike Mansfield and his team. They had various tricks that they played, which I suppose all lawyers play. Up on this screen would flash a document and they would say, 'What did I think about that?' You weren't warned about this, it just suddenly appeared and there you are at the inquest. You had to have your wits about you when you were responding to all this. He made one or two mistakes. I recognised the handwriting and the signatures on some of the documents. He hadn't known who they were from, so I was able to demolish the arguments and the documents disappeared rather quickly.

I had told the Treasury Solicitors' Department that I had kept a diary and had shown them the pages I had written on the day of the accident and on the following days. They'd shown these to the judge and the judge had said it would be very helpful if I could read out verbatim the diary entry for the day in question, which I did. It's rather moving, reading it out. I think this was the only contemporary piece of evidence, account of that day. It was written that night and anybody who doubted that could easily have taken the document away and shown that it clearly was written that night. As far as I was concerned, having read that out, there wasn't really much of an argument. Of course, the inquest, the painstaking inquest, did in the end, as it inevitably was going to, with a jury, come to the right conclusion. But it was a hugely long process, almost ten years after the event.

I forget exactly the circumstances, but early on, when I was still in the Foreign Office, there was an inquiry by the police into accusations of misdeeds of some kind, because the

Metropolitan Police Commissioner, John Stevens, came to the Office and I had to give a witness statement and I had an interview of about three hours with him on what had happened that day, which again was quite distressing. No account seemed to be taken at all, by the press or Mohamed Al-Fayed, of what the impact of all this would be on Prince William and Prince Harry, which looking back on it I find most appalling really, that that did not seem to enter into their calculations at all.

There were some other oddities. We opened a condolence book in the Embassy in Paris immediately afterwards, then we opened another. We had six condolence books and people were snaking out of the Embassy right round the block. We had one for VIPs as well, and ambassadors came. Lech Walesa happened to be in Paris and he came and signed it, and I met and talked to him. In the end, we closed the condolence books when we discovered that tour companies were organising bus tours from London to Paris as part of which would be signing the visitors' book at the British Embassy and we realised that this was becoming an industry. So we closed it at that stage.

CM: Michael, ten years of the inquest into the death of the Princess of Wales, an investigation by the Metropolitan Police into possible criminal aspects of her death, and other inquiries that you have been a part of. Would you care to talk about what this means for being a senior official nowadays?

MJ: I have thought about this quite a bit. The Princess of Wales's accident was in August 1997, the inquest was in 2007, so that was ten years afterwards. In addition to that there was the Iraq Inquiry which ended with the publication of the Chilcott Report in 2016 and, in addition to those, I was asked to provide a witness statement for the police inquiry into the rendition of Belhaj, one of the Libyans from Malaysia to Libya. The effect of all this was that from 1997 till 2016, for nineteen years, I had inquiries of one sort or another always at the back of my mind, always hanging over me. I don't know whether you can say that is now going to become the norm, because I think the effect of these inquiries, particularly the Iraq Inquiry, has caused politicians from both parties and the Cabinet Office itself to realise that there needs to be a very different and more focussed approach to inquiries of this sort. I do think, nonetheless, that given the growth of litigation in public life, any public servant is now likely to face inquiries of one sort or another towards the end of or for some years after his or her working life and this is something you have to be prepared for. They're not at all pleasant.

Appearing as a witness in the police inquiry into the Libyan rendition case involved two or three or four days of going through enormous numbers of papers which had been put together by the Treasury Solicitors and the Foreign Office lawyers. These were all the papers that I had seen or might have seen in that they had been copied to me or to my office. Now, the way in which public service works is that you do not see the vast majority of papers that are copied to you, but that is not a defence or a relevant factor. If something is copied to you it is your job to make certain that you see it and it is no defence that you didn't, although it is true that you didn't. You couldn't possibly see all the papers copied to you. When I was in the Foreign Office I tried to prevent the proliferation of copies of papers on the grounds that they needed to go only to those who really did need to see them. The Office had got into a sort of overdrive of copying everything, for whatever reason. Then I had three or three and a half hours of interview by the police and it was just like, in many ways, the police dramas you see on television. They start off smiling and ask straightforward questions and you get lulled into a false sense of security and then after an hour or so when you're feeling a bit tired, somebody else starts asking questions and you realise that they're homing in on the thing which they really wanted to catch you out on all the way through. In my case, it was that I had been at a meeting with Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary on the afternoon on which he may or may not have received some phone call from MI6 directly or indirectly about the event. I had the sense that the police thought throughout that there was some sort of conspiracy, that I had not gone to his office in order to discuss, as I had done, the restructuring of the Foreign Office which was a big issue at the time, but for some other nefarious purpose and you suddenly realised that you're operating in a context to which you are not used. Anyway, we got through all that, and then afterwards, a little bit later, they ask you back again to go through the evidence. So in total seven hours of quite aggressive interviewing by the police. It wasn't at all pleasant. That was that one.

Then there was the Iraq Inquiry - I don't want to go into all of that now. The way it was set up was clearly wrong and there were no proper parameters set up from the beginning about what its terms of reference were, what the time scale should be in which it operated, so it ran on and on and on and got out of control. I wasn't asked to give evidence in private, but I gave evidence in public for three and a half hours or so. Then the extraordinary part of it all was what they call the Maxwellisation process, when you are given those sections of the report that affect you. I was called in to look at these - there were some two hundred pages. I started reading through them and I could not believe what I was reading, because this was

two hundred pages of ill thought out, ill drafted comment and fact and criticism, duplicated, inconsistent with each other. I thought, What on earth am I supposed to do with this? The first instinct is, if it is as bad as this, just leave it, because when it finally comes out it'll be rubbish. But then of course, as a good public servant, you think you can't do that, so you settle for week after week after week after week, going through all the papers, putting it right, on your own and with the help of the lawyers that are there to help you. I likened it sometimes to when you're going to be taken to a place of execution with a rather nasty uncomfortable hempen noose and you are told that if you like you can spend the next two months replacing the hempen noose with a silken thread to be put round your neck. It's the same thing in the end, the criticism is there, but it is a far more coherent criticism because of all the work you've done. It was a very peculiar process, looking back on it all. I think one of the lessons is that if you do have an inquiry like that it has to be a proper judicial inquiry. You have to have lawyers doing it and it has to be properly and objectively drafted. You can't have non-lawyers producing something, after seven years, of such astonishingly poor quality and leaving the people who are going to be criticised to get the whole thing into a proper order. It's very, very odd. Then of course when the Chilcot Report came out itself, it happened to coincide with the Referendum, the collapse of the government, the most extraordinary set of political circumstances since the Second World War. Apart from Tony Blair who was vilified in the press, it rather fell away and no one's heard much about it since.

The question I often ask myself is that if I knew there were going to be sixteen years of inquiries and inquests and witness statements and going through in immense detail huge numbers of documents which you had or hadn't seen when you were in the service, would you want to take on the job? I think it is a moot point. If you've got alternatives they might well be preferable. I think that anybody who is deciding whether or not to take a top job in the public service needs to think that an inquiry into some aspect of the work in which they will be involved is quite likely.

There is one other interesting point about all of this which comes out of the Iraq Inquiry in particular. This is that much of the criticism was not what I had done, but what I hadn't done. Part of the reason why there is no record of my having done things was because I had conversations and gave advice to the Foreign Secretary which was not always written down, partly because I was extraordinarily busy and partly because the point of a relationship between a Permanent Secretary and a Foreign Secretary is that you can have conversations

which are private conversations which you don't write down. The conclusion I draw now is that for any civil servant who gives advice to a minister, even if the suggestion is that he should not write it down, perhaps because of Freedom of Information, it really is imperative that after the meeting with the minister, he writes down what he said and what the minister's response was, so that if there is an inquiry afterwards, it is quite clear what has been done and what has been said. This could be awkward because if there is then a Freedom of Information request and it is then released, the minister will then say, 'Well, why on earth did you write that down? I told you not to.' You've got to accept that you are risking your relationship with the minister, but you are safeguarding your position in the event of some kind of public inquiry later on. I think it is something which ministers and civil servants have got to be aware of.

The only other thing I thought I might talk about, going back to my time as Ambassador in Paris, was the saga of President Mitterrand's collar. This was one of those surreal things which sometimes happen to you as an Ambassador. Shortly before I arrived President Mitterrand died. I remember going to call on his widow early on, a charming but rather dotty lady. Shortly after that, I got a telegram from Buckingham Palace saying that they had noted that President Mitterrand had died and would I please, therefore, recuperate the collar of the GCVO which he had been given when he paid a state visit to London, because of course the collar was only given on the condition that when he died he would give it back. I received this and I thought, this is one of these things that I just decide that I'm not going to pay any attention to. So I paid no attention to it. I thought this was so outrageous that I wasn't going to do anything. So I did nothing. After about three months I got a rather peremptory telegram followed by a phone call from the Palace, or from the Central Chancery of Knighthood, on behalf of the Queen, saying that they had heard nothing from me and would I please get on with recovering the collar. I thought I'd better do something, so I rang up a friend of mine who was the Head of Protocol at the Elysée, Frederic Grasset, and said to him, 'Look, I'm terribly sorry, but I've been asked to do this.' There was a pause and then he said, 'It seems to me that is an absolutely outrageous request that you should be asking the family of someone who has recently died to return some piece of kit.' So I said, 'I am not quite sure I see it that way, but I will report what you have said.' So I thought, and once again I did nothing. Then I got a very, very peremptory request a few months later, to say that this was absolutely scandalous and would I please do something. So I thought, What do I do now? As it happened, I was having lunch at the Conseil Constitutionnel of which Roland

Dumas was President. I had known him some years earlier when he was foreign minister and I knew he had been a great friend of Mitterrand. At the end of lunch I said to him, 'Look, I'm sorry to raise this, and I do so with some sense of embarrassment, but I have been asked to do this, and this is the background.' He said, 'Leave it with me.' I went back and nothing happened for a while and then after a bit I got a call from him to say, 'I've discovered that President Mitterrand gave this chain to his mistress, Mme Pingeot, and Mme Pingeot has given it to her daughter, but if your private secretary were to approach Mme Pingeot at the Musée d'Orsay, I believe she would be in a position to return it.' So I asked my private secretary to ring Mme Pingeot, which she did. Mme Pingeot said yes, she had got it. She had given it to her daughter, but her daughter had given it back to her and it was in the Musée d'Orsay waiting to be collected, if my private secretary would like to go to collect it. She went round and she was indeed given back this collar in a shoe box which then was returned to the Embassy. I am afraid to say that the private secretaries then danced around the room wearing it a bit, and then it was sent back to the Palace.

I just think this was the most extraordinary and most completely unnecessary parade, which I imagine is going on all the time. I imagine quite a lot of them get lost. If you give this to an African dictator, frankly, you're not going to find that you can recover it. So I suspect quite a lot get lost. I did say to the Palace that I think they need to find some other way of doing this. One thing they could do is that when they gave it the private secretary could include a note saying here is a list of the people who received this collar before you. The list will no doubt have kings and presidents on it, and if any of them have fallen on hard times, like Ceausescu of Romania you can cross them out.