

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

LONGWORTH, Peter CMG (born 26 May 1942)

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

Labour and Industrial Correspondent, Bristol Evening Post, 1964–66	pp 2-3
Lobby Correspondent, Western Daily Press, 1966–68	p 3
Diplomatic Correspondent, Westminster Press, 1968–74, with observations on Britain's application to join the Common Market	pp 3-7
Joined FCO, 1974	pp 8-10
First Secretary, FCO, 1974–77	pp 10-11
1st Secretary (Economic), Bonn, 1977–81	pp 11-17
Head of Chancery and HM Consul, Sofia, 1981–84	pp 17-25
FCO (Assistant Head of Energy, Science and Space Dept), 1984–87	pp 25-30
Counsellor (Economic and Commercial), Copenhagen, 1987–91	pp 30-32
Deputy Head of Mission, Counsellor (Economic and Commercial) and Consul General, Seoul, 1991–94	pp 32-40
Consul-General, Johannesburg, and Director of UK Trade Promotion and Investment, South Africa, 1994–98	pp 40-51
High Commissioner, Zimbabwe, 1998–2001	pp 51-64

Peter Longworth CMG
interviewed on 18 January 2006 by Jimmy Jamieson

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Education and early career in journalism

JJ: To start at the beginning, you studied psychology at Sheffield University. Did you have any particular end in view when you decided to study psychology?

PL: No. At that stage I wasn't sure where my career was going to take me, and psychology was something that interested me in my first year at university. This was in the early 1960s when psychology hardly qualified as a true discipline amongst some of the harder scientists. But it intrigued me and I pursued it. I was never very good at it.

JJ: And after that you went into journalism. Perhaps your psychology degree was quite useful. Tell me about your journalistic career?

PL: I started as a cub reporter on the Bristol Evening Post with a probationary period doing odd jobs. I was principally the golden wedding correspondent. Eventually, around 1965 I went into Fleet Street with the *Bristol Evening Post* as a general reporter. There was a lot of interest in what was happening in London in those days. It was, after all, the Swinging Sixties so there was plenty to cover. I did a lot of pop culture work and came into contact with some interesting names – the Beatles, Bob Marley, Stones.

Then I became the newspaper's labour and industrial correspondent at a fascinating time.

JJ: Rampant trade unions.

PL: Yes. Industrial war. There was very little ground given or taken between management and trade unions and the trade unions really had the law stacked on their

side, enabling them to take extreme action whenever they wanted to and particularly when they tired of the negotiating processes.

So it was all cliffhanger stories of breakdown of talks, beer and sandwiches at Number 10, big strikes. The biggest one that I covered was a shipping strike which impacted severely on the overall economy. Harold Wilson, the then Prime Minister said his government had been blown off course. Coining another phrase he also said it was the work of “a tightly-knit group of politically-motivated men”. Certainly it was a major strike and very bitter – a sort of precursor to the miners’ strike in terms of the ideological confrontation between labour and capital that it represented.

JJ: After all that excitement and no doubt a lot of front page stories from yourself, you got into reporting on rather more international political matters and diplomacy.

PL: There was a gap which is probably important for the rest of the story. I moved from the industrial to the political beat. So for a spell I was lobby correspondent for the *Bristol Evening Post*’s sister paper, the *Western Daily Press*. I suppose all these things contributed to a general political awareness which I found helpful later on. It was fascinating to see the practice of politics at first hand at what was probably a seminal period. Those were the days of Harold Wilson. Edward Heath was leader of the opposition. There were many ups and downs over labour legislation, over the economy, the creation of a Department of Economic Affairs. And big personalities abounded – George Brown, Enoch Powell, Emmanuel Shinwell. Big incidents in the Middle East, the first hi-jackings, Bloody Sunday.

JJ: This was all good training for you to then cover our attempt in 1970 to get into the European Community, as it was then called.

Observations on Britain's application to join the Common Market

PL: Yes, after my first sacking, I moved to an organisation called *Westminster Press* which was a group of provincial daily newspapers. It was one of the companies under the Pearson Publishing umbrella. They took a liberal approach to covering foreign news in house. This was unusual for provincial newspapers. My arrival at

Westminster Press coincided with the opening of the British negotiations to join the Common Market, as it then was. I suppose my first entry as a journalist on to that stage was the 1969 Common Market Summit in The Hague soon after the death of de Gaulle, whose continued vetoes had prevented British entry. And I think that was actually a threshold event. Willi Brandt was just taking over in Germany and Pompidou in France and there seemed to be a consensus between these two new leaders of the core EEC countries that something needed to be done about the British question. And from then on I followed the detailed negotiations for however long it took – three years.

JJ: This rather does underline the view by many people that if we had applied much earlier when the Treaty was being set up and signed in 1958, I think it was, it was ours for the asking if we'd only taken the longer term view that this was where we should be. What do you think?

PL: Maybe, but in those early days British politicians had other priorities and preoccupations. Wrapping up Empire was still a difficult political problem for successive governments because of the continuing strong sentiments towards the imperial age, which influenced popular thinking at the time. Beginning the process of closer linkages with Europe while we extricated ourselves from the colonies and distanced ourselves from what many regarded as “family” nations would have created political battles which many governments shied away from. I am not sure what compromises would have been available from the continental side which would have made British joining acceptable to the generality of the British public at that point.

JJ: Of course in fact there was another front – the EFTA. Our EFTA colleagues were very concerned that they would be left out in the cold and not enough note would be taken of their interests. So when the negotiations came on they had to keep the EFTA people on side.

PL: There were three basic considerations. One was the mood of the public. It was still not all that long after a continental war in which we'd been spending a lot of time killing and being killed by leaders and citizens of a country that was going to be one

of our principal partners. It was largely a generational issue, but confidence in Continental Europe as a viable partner was very shaky.

Secondly, we had a residual responsibility towards former countries of the British Empire, raising the whole question of Commonwealth preference: for example what would happen to the New Zealand butter market, to the small islands in the Caribbean that were entirely dependent at that stage on access to the British market, which many believed would be negotiated away to the Europeans' benefit. Many British people had close ties to the Commonwealth, particularly the "Old Commonwealth" of Australia, New Zealand and Canada where they had relatives among the large communities of UK emigrants.

And then as you said, there was the EFTA arrangement where we had a looser and rather more easy-going relationship with our non-EEC partners. Mind you, the UK did throw its weight around within that grouping. I well remember Harold Wilson, in an attempt to get out of trade union trouble at home, deciding to build three aluminium smelters against various EFTA conventions.

JJ: You mentioned New Zealand, and of course the Australians were also very keen that their preference should be maintained against French wishes. I remember the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand actually came to Luxembourg in 1972. There were secret discussions between Geoffrey Rippon who was the Minister leading the negotiations, and those other two.

PL: I remember when I was at the clinching negotiations in Luxembourg, the New Zealand Prime Minister arrived and said that he was setting up his battle headquarters at the Cravate Hotel. This didn't sound too brilliant to the Continentals. It led to suggestions that somebody other than the UK was leading the negotiations. But it was all fun and games.

JJ: But that was a key round in the discussions wasn't it. We declared that we weren't interested in keeping sterling as a reserve currency and that was welcomed by everybody except, if I remember, one of the leading members of the Commission who walked out, enraged that this had happened.

PL: Your memory is obviously better than mine. I think you were in the room when he walked out, whereas I was banned to the press room next door to the gents. One of the interesting things about that was that Norway was in the same set of negotiations which nearly broke down over fisheries. Fisheries came back to bedevil the Community well after the UK had joined. When the six members of the Common Market agreed to stitch up a Common Fisheries Policy to their own benefit immediately before opening negotiations with three of the major fishing countries of Europe, it was regarded by those on the outside as a cynical ploy and a demonstration of bad faith. It certainly prevented Norway, a future oil and gas giant, from joining the Common Market.

JJ: Yes, it was surprising that in the very first more or less presentational round in Brussels, Sir Con O'Neill simply referred to the fisheries policy as being one that might cause us some difficulties during the negotiations. He didn't say anything else, but then he didn't need to, did he?

PL: I do also remember Britain's chief negotiator, Sir Geoffrey Rippon, saying that one of the problems was that fish move, which I think summed up the quality of the discussions of the closed meeting. It reveals quite a lot.

JJ: And the MAFF, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, brought in all sorts of maps late at night to try and find a point outside our island.

PL: Closing the Minches.

JJ: That's right. We extend our own waters as far as possible.

PL: Offshore fishermen, hill farmers.

JJ: Basking whales; basking sharks. Anyway, it goes on and on and fisheries still remains a very sore point as we saw in the discussions last week. What do you think overall? Do you think that we played as good a hand as we could since we were the *demandeur* trying to get in?

PL: Yes, I think so. I think the important thing was to get in and see where we could go from there as a member with full powers. There was great disappointment among some EU partners after we got in because they hoped the entry of the United Kingdom would loosen up decision making and bring a greater element of democracy and accountability to the proceedings. Then they found themselves confronted with a line from Jim Callaghan's Labour Government, which they regarded as anti-Europe, anti-Common Market and certainly anti the greater integration of Europe. There was a great sense of disillusion when the reality of British politics became evident to our supporters among the original six member countries. Things didn't get better with the change in the British Government.

I was at the British Embassy in Bonn when Margaret Thatcher took over, and I remember a huge surge of relief amongst German officials and ministers that Labour with its historical baggage on Europe was out of power. They looked forward to a period with a friendlier partner. Little did they know! They were confronted with a very firm line on British sovereignty which created the suspicion that Mrs Thatcher actually wanted to get us out.

JJ: Yes indeed. After your stint in Brussels what happened? How did you manage to change horses?

PL: I wasn't actually based in Brussels. I was working out of London, but I followed events in Brussels, Luxembourg and so on, and also had a lot of other travelling in the course of the job as diplomatic correspondent for the Westminster Press. I did the Cyprus crisis. I went to the Geneva negotiations when James Callaghan as British Foreign Minister was chairing what was essentially a conference to prevent war in Cyprus. Succeeded the first time; failed the second.

And I also made a number of more distant trips. I was invited along with two or three other journalists from Europe to Japan to be presented to the Emperor before his visit to Europe in 1970-something. There was a lot of sensitivity because memories of the war with Japan, particularly the conditions of European prisoners of war were alive and bitter. The Japanese clearly wanted to soften the impact of this mood on the visit

so off I went to Japan and was, to my surprise, presented to the Emperor of Japan, Hirohito, allegedly son of the Thunder god. It was a bit bemusing for a young lad from Wigan to be talking to the Emperor of Japan, but there again it was all part of the experience from those days with *Westminster Press* which stood me in good stead later, and it was a lot of fun.

But I was getting on a bit, heading into my thirties and there wasn't any sign of my going anywhere much. Fleet Street was beginning to contract, so the traditional progress for journalists from weekly papers to something specialised on the provincials and up to one of the big nationals, was beginning to go out of the window. When I tried to sell myself to the sort of newspapers I wanted to work for – *The Economist* or the *Financial Times* – they made it clear that they were now looking for established star journos or at bringing in younger people direct from universities who would go on to the foreign desk and work their way up internally. They didn't really feel able to bring me into the middle of that process.

Decision to apply for entry to the Diplomatic Service, 1974

I was mooching in the newspaper library office when I came across a one-page advertisement in *The Economist* for the supplementary entry competition of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Under this half a dozen people would enter the Foreign Office after the formal entry age which I think at that stage was 26. I think 26 - 33 was the bracket. I decided to give it a go and somewhat to my surprise, I was accepted. In those days there was a great cloud of mythology hanging over Civil Service entry examinations.

The tests for Entry

JJ: Would you just briefly say what the exam was testing? Were there several papers on different aspects?

PL: It was testing a range of competences. I think I was fortunate that by being selected for the competition on the basis of my answers to an application form, I passed over the intelligence testing bit. The regular applicants had to get through a

series of IQ papers before moving on. I suspect I wouldn't have done very well on that. Whether it's because I'm not very intelligent or just not good at IQ tests, I don't know, but things worked to my advantage. The competition started with a series of general knowledge questions. Matching names to jobs. It covered nothing really that would be a surprise to anybody who went to a pub quiz night. And then one went into various practical exercises.

JJ: These are the key things?

PL: We were given a problem that had to be resolved: what to do with a stately home that comes into the possession of the government? Should it be used as an archive for historical papers? Should it be turned into a nature park? A fairground? We were given a number of issues that were related to the future of this house. One was employment in the region. The other was the imminent closure of the railway branch line that could stay open if this thing became a funfair. Another factor was the tree-climbing bears at the zoo, which might or might not have posed a threat to the mediaeval walls of the building. What we had to do was to look at the problem, look at the three options, put down the arguments for and against each option, then draw a conclusion and explain why. A very practical exercise in problem-solving.

JJ: Did you not have to join other competitors and run a committee?

PL: We took it in turns to chair a committee looking at a particular ...

JJ: With psychologists watching – or somebody watching?

PL: There was a team of observers, or examiners. The chair of the board was from the FCO. There was a psychologist, a retired ambassador and some incandescently bright civil servant – in our case it was a lady from the Treasury – who was there to probe your intellectual acuity.

JJ: Quite demanding.

PL: To tell you the truth, I had no expectations of success but thought I might as well just try to see what it was like. It was formidable. I think probably I succeeded in this thing because of my skills at playing dominoes in the newspaper library. One of the residual intelligence tests concerned progressives matrices in the form of a row of dominoes with the final space on the domino left blank. You had to put in the final spots in relation to the sequence. I'm sure if I hadn't been so adept at fives and threes in the Westminster Press lunch breaks I wouldn't have got through..

JJ.: You owe your career to dominoes. So you got through. So what happened then? Did you have some basic training of all FCO procedures and this and that and the other? How to draft a submission to the PUS?

Posting to Caribbean Department of the FCO, 1974

PL: No. I was quite taken aback. I was put straight on a desk. I was first secretary because you were given the equivalent rank of a person doing a reasonable job in the administrative stream at the age at which you joined. Younger people coming in on the competition would be placed as second secretaries. The first secretary desk officer had quite a significant role to play in a government department and my basic training was – that's your in-tray and that's your out-tray and your task is to move papers from one to the other. I was given no training in how to draft.

JJ: You were a journalist!

PL: That was a mixed blessing. The Head of Department wondered about my sentences or paragraphs beginning with conjunctions, for example. I believe that the Office may have gone so far these days that people spend more time training than working. But at that particular stage all I had was a bit of familiarisation. I was taken to Hanslope Park and shown communications. Taken to other places and shown the mechanics of the office. Sat in the bag room for an afternoon, and stuff like that. But in terms of "this is how you write a submission" no, not at all. There were drafting courses which came up on a regular basis and of course I went on these courses as they were scheduled. But I don't really recall any training at all in the practice of bureaucracy.

JJ: That happened for the lower orders.

PL: My memory may be failing, but I'm pretty sure that I only had a drafting course when it came up.

JJ: Which Department were you put in?

PL: I was in the Caribbean Department and this would be 1974. I was responsible for Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago and also Bermuda, which of course is not in the Caribbean but was shunted there for administrative convenience. It was also not just the geography. As a Crown Colony, Bermuda required a completely different approach and probably more work than the other countries on my desk because of the residual competence of the British government for Bermuda foreign affairs, internal security and so on. I got there soon after a Governor had been murdered and left just before (thank Goodness) his killers were hanged creating a sticky job for my successor on the desk.

JJ: And did you go there then?

PL: If only! A while after I'd been in the Caribbean Department there was a new PUS who did a first walkabout in the Office and declared himself shocked that no desk officer seemed ever to have visited the territories for which he or she was responsible. He said under his administration money would be found for familiarisation visits. And of course I was rubbing my hands at the prospect of getting to Bermuda and Jamaica and Barbados. About three weeks later I got news of my posting to Germany. To this day I've yet to put a toe in the Caribbean Sea.

Posting to Bonn as First Secretary (Economic) 1977-81

JJ: Anyway, after some sketchy training and learning on the job you were sent off to Bonn as First Secretary Economic.

PL: To tell you the truth, I had thought whilst in London that I might quit because I had decided that riding a desk in one of the world's great bureaucracies didn't quite suit someone from the anarchistic and unstructured world of newspapers. I didn't feel that I was (a), liking it too much or (b), doing all that well. I really wasn't accustomed to putting in performances that didn't satisfy me. When I got to Germany the whole thing changed because in the new job there was scope for considerable transfer of skills from my journalistic experience. I was First Secretary (Economic) and deputy to the Economic Counsellor. I looked after a number of specific sectors: for example energy, which was a hot issue in those days. In 1977 we were four years after one energy shock and two years before the next one, so the whole concept of energy markets and how the British should treat their partners in relation to North Sea oil and gas were high on most agendas. Green issues were emerging as a front-line issue and all that fell on my desk. It was very interesting and it's a subject that hasn't gone away. I also did heavy industrial sectors – steel, motors cars, all that stuff.

JJ: You were almost back on your old journalistic beat?

PL: All of that, but with the added elements of representation and some rudimentary negotiation. There was a fair amount to do on bilateral economic relations. And multilateral relations as well. I had to deal with a number of Ministries on UK/German approaches to, for example, the GATT, OECD and other multi-national organisations. I also got into the saga of Berlin and the Cold War when Germany was divided. We felt very much on the front line. I don't know if you remember now how sensitive a post Bonn was. Because transport was one of my sectors, the FCO inspectors gave me the civil aviation portfolio. But it wasn't quite like that. It had less to do with aeroplanes than with the agreements of freedom of access for the Western Allies to Berlin and the entire theology of a divided Germany. It also gave us a number of trips to Berlin at an exciting time.

JJ: Very political ...

PL: And sensitive, particularly in our relationship with the Germans. We had a British monopoly to fly through our air corridors which led us into unseemly exchanges on the quality of BA flights. There were complaints from the Soviets over

alleged breaches of the protocols. It was quite a testing job and I was glad to do it. The economic work was good, too. Germany was the economic miracle country of the time and being an economic secretary could be very rewarding. It was also nice to have a finger in the political pie. It was where the real action was and where the focus of the ambassador at that time was turned.

JJ: So I guess you were able or obliged almost to keep contact with your fellow diplomats from other embassies? Western embassies particularly. Perhaps go to meetings and discuss common views.

PL: We had regular meetings of the civil air attachés. There was a thing called the Bonn Group comprising the ambassadors or their representatives of the western allies – Britain, France, the United States and a representative of the German Federal Government – which looked at the whole issue of a zoned Berlin. It is very difficult to comprehend these days that at one time Britain directly administered a quarter of what is now the capital of Germany.

JJ: Was this before Willi Brandt?

PL: This was after Willi Brandt's days as Mayor and after he resigned as Federal Chancellor. Helmut Schmidt was in office during my day. The civil air attachés were a kind of mini-Bonn Group. Our principal responsibility was what happened in the corridor across East Germany to the zones of Berlin which were run by the three Western allies. We had a rail link and an air corridor and there were fiendish regulations relating to the use of both with the constant risk of confrontation with the Soviet Union if they decided these rules were being infringed.

JJ: Helmut Schmidt was an outstanding Chancellor I think. What were his relations with Honecker on the other side in Berlin in fact? Honecker was running Berlin in East Germany? Did you get any ...

PL: I wasn't so much involved in that. I was much more involved in relations with the Federal Republic. As a journalist I had covered a number of German elections including a key election for Federal President in 1969. This was the point at which

the minority FDP party which had been in coalition with the Centre-Right Christian Democrats switched to the Social Democrats. To elect a Social Democrat Federal President, was an event which sparked change in the balance of power from right to left, the arrival of Willi Brandt as Federal Chancellor, and eventually to *Ostpolitik*.

JJ: An opening to the East. That was his phrase wasn't it?

PL: Yes. It was an important period of German history that I had covered as a journalist, which I should have mentioned earlier, but the experience was still very relevant when I got to Bonn as a diplomat. I knew Brandt, and I'd met Schmidt when I was a journalist, in which capacity, of course, you have a different kind of access. If you are a journo you go straight to the Chancellor. If you're a First Secretary at the British Embassy you'd better watch your step. You didn't get above your station in those days.

JJ: Did you have a view – perhaps you didn't – I mean it was your first job and you were doing a very specialised job – did you get a view of what the British government's views were vis-à-vis East Germany at that time? Did the ambassador have things that he was trying to achieve – objectives if you like? Or were we all just holding our position and waiting for something to happen that would cause the eventual collapse of East Germany?

PL: Holding our breath I think. There was a welcome for *Ostpolitik* up to a point, as something that reduced the likelihood of events in Germany triggering a major confrontation with the Soviet Union. The easier the relationship between the Federal West and East German governments the better. On the other hand there were some fundamental sticking points for the Allies in the overall relationship with the Soviet Union in case the West/ East German issue impacted on the power structure of central Europe. There was a degree of concern that we might find ourselves edging into a situation prompted by West German eagerness for reconciliation with East Germany, in which we ended up giving way on important geopolitical issues. We were much happier to see all these things dealt with in the multi-national ECSC – the European Conference on Security and Cooperation – where we could keep an eye on the interests of the broader Western community.

JJ: Who was our ambassador at the time?

PL: My ambassador was Sir Oliver Wright who was a skilled and effective diplomat. Fluent German speaker and a man who actually looked like an ambassador: very tall, well-dressed, imposing bushy grey eyebrows.

JJ: Wore very bright shirts.

PL: Wore very bright shirts and strange ties, and cut a dash. But he was a serious man. He'd been Private Secretary to the former Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. Callaghan was Prime Minister when Oliver Wright was in Bonn. Wright had the security and East-West issues to confront, but he was bedevilled by lack of policy precision in London and the German lack of understanding of the Labour Government's intentions for the EU. First of all, they tried to renegotiate the Treaty. (Renegotiation was not a word that existed in many European languages). Labour's unwillingness to pursue the more integrationist line made Callaghan popular at home, but on the Continent, our partners were confused. Britain was a significant EU player because of our role as an ally and as a superintending ally in Berlin.

But we were also seen as a very awkward, if not hostile partner in the EU. Today when Britain enjoys the best economy in the Community, it's difficult to recall that we were then described as the sick man of Europe and in dire economic straits. Meanwhile, Germany was going through its economic miracle, the *Wirtschaftswunder*. There was strong resentment in Germany over the paradox in their position an economic giant and political dwarf because of the prevailing treaty constraints on their foreign, and occasional, domestic policy options.

JJ: I remember when I was still in Brussels myself and the ambassador in our delegation to the Communities, Sir Michael Palliser, made the point to London that we really needed to encourage the Germans to start acting to their political strength instead of just their economic strength as only then would we have a more balanced force in the West, and Germany would play a proper part in the European Communities as well; and on the world stage. And it's come very slowly, hasn't it?

PL: It wasn't as simple as that in 1977. There were two constraints on Germany. Firstly, the residual constraints from the war in respect of overseas activities and the deployment of the armed forces. By then the Federal Republic was a member of the United Nations but for a long period it hadn't been. The Federal Government weren't in control of Berlin, even though they regarded the city as their putative capital, and there were significant constraints on their freedom of political action. The other factor was domestic politics. There was a new generation in Germany going through a guilt neurosis because of the war. This was a kind of hippy 1968 feeling that had mutated into a socio-political mood among people who didn't share the materialistic imperatives of their parents. There was no alternative to materialism for the older generation emerging from the ashes of war; they had to create a new economy from bottom up or they didn't eat. The new generation were looking for something more spiritual.

It is easy to forget now that there was a ruthless domestic terror group operating at the time. The Baader Meinhof gang were not only shocking the Bourgeoisie, they were killing them, kidnapping and murdering bankers and political and economic leaders. It was shocking to witness, but it did represent in an extreme form the generational division in Germany at that particular time based on questions to parents and other elders such as: what did you do in the war? I probably don't like it; why are you so materialistic? Why are you, mother, wandering around in mink and where is the real life in the prosperity we've created? That didn't mean everybody was a terrorist, but it did mean that a significant group of people existed who claimed to understand the motivation which sparked off the terrorist urge. I don't remember civil strife (except for rioting, tear gas and batons in West Berlin in 1969) but there was a major intellectual and emotional dispute between those who were outraged and those who were speaking for the new wave. These were known as the *Sympathiezanter*. The great post-war writers Günther Grass and Heinrich Böll came in for particular trouble for their liberal and cautionary views and the country became seriously divided. I think Germany was saved at the time from a significant social crisis by the intervention of Walter Scheel, the then Federal President, who had in fact been the German Foreign Minister at the time of the EC negotiation. He made an appeal for unity which was perhaps not appropriate for his constitutional position, but he

certainly served his function of representing the broader interest of the nation and succeeded in putting a halt on to this alienation between the generations.

This was obviously not an opportune time for Schmidt to look at a more robust approach to foreign policy, or to creating muscle for the Federal Republic to match its economic weight.

JJ: Did the Baader Meinhof group have a declared agenda, or did they just react to events which they didn't like?

PL: I can't remember. I think their agenda was the usual sort of 1968 anti-capitalism, anti-America, anti-money thing, but I do recall seeing armoured cars on the streets of Germany.

JJ: So you were there until 1981 so you did a very good stint and obviously got ...

PL: I enjoyed it very much.

JJ: And after that you decided to stay in the Diplomatic Service.

PL: Only to face an acid test elsewhere.

Posting to Sofia, as Head of Chancery and Consul, 1981-84

JJ: You were then sent straight from there to Sofia, Bulgaria in 1981 as Head of Chancery, the man who had to keep his eye on all the balls all at the same time.

PL: I was No 2 and very pleased. Although it was a small embassy, it was something of a vote of confidence to be given that job in a Soviet satellite state, and a place where little things that went wrong could rapidly magnify into big problems.

JJ: What outstanding matters came across your desk, during those times – because Bulgaria was still very much a part of the Soviet Union, wasn't it, and took its orders and its policies from the Russians?

PL: The only real issue was the Cold War, the stand-off with the Soviet Union, East/West relations. Bulgarian internal affairs were of little interest to London, although when things happened, they seemed to do so in a big way like the poisoned umbrella which killed Georgi Markov on a London street, or the attempt to assassinate the Pope. It was essentially a watching post with a strong brief to test the knowledge and opinions of local contacts on events taking place in or influencing the policy of the Soviet Union. It became increasingly interesting with the increase of pressures for change elsewhere in the Bloc.

For example, I was instructed to check for sentiment, particularly within the trade unions towards the growth of the Solidarity movement in Poland. It was giving the Soviet Union a real headache and London was interested to know whether the mood of protest and tendency towards anti-Government activism inspired by Lech Walesa had struck a chord with labour organisations in other Warsaw pact countries. Getting information like that in Bulgaria was not easy and I had to contrive a drinks party for a visiting UK fellow-traveller so that I could nobble the head of the Bulgarian trade union movement in a shady corner of my terrace. It was risky because the Brit was definitely *persona non grata* with the Embassy. It could have been embarrassing, but at least I got the story from the horse's mouth. The principal concern was about the impact of Solidarity on the Polish Government and a possible knock-on effect elsewhere – but definitely not in Bulgaria. The trade union leadership remained loyal and true to Moscow and the workers showed no inclination to step out of line.

It reflected a wider picture; there never seemed to be the fire in Bulgaria that you found in Hungary or Czechoslovakia or with the Poles. You never had a feeling that a group of any significance could establish itself with a realistic chance of creating difficulties for the government. And I think that there are a number of historical reasons for this.

Before the Second World War, countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia were significant industrial economies and doing quite well. There were people there who could remember good times and compared them with the sad conditions which they had to endure under Soviet tutelage. But Bulgaria had always been poor. It was

down there with Albania for many years at the bottom of the economic and standard of living scales of Europe before the Second World War. As a result, Bulgarians actually did see things get a bit better – not by much, but there were recent memories of things being worse.

The Soviet Union also played up history. Bulgaria had been rescued by Russia from the Ottoman Empire. As a result of the Battle of Pleven, Russia drove Turkey out of Bulgaria and created a nominally independent state. That event was constantly played up to suggest a long-standing debt of gratitude to the Soviet Union, although the leadership had to get up to some tricks to fudge the fact that Bulgaria was actually liberated by the Tsar and the pre-revolutionary Russians rather than their Soviet successors.

JJ: The notes that I made recorded that Bulgaria actually changed sides in 1943 to be on the side of the allies.

PL: I think that, rather characteristically, it changed sides from the allies to the Germans about the time the Germans started to lose the war.

JJ: It was the other way round, actually.

PL: Anyway I know they changed sides. I just thought that that was a very Balkan thing, that they actually changed to the wrong side at the wrong time.

JJ: They had a President Zhivkov who was there from 1954 until 1981 so did he depart shortly after you arrived, do you recall?

PL: No. Zhivkov was President until the Berlin Wall came down and the changes in Europe took place. He was then prosecuted by the new dispensation and spent time in jail. Whether he's still in jail or dead, I don't know, but he was actually prosecuted for whatever offences they put together against him.

JJ: It was quite an achievement for him to stay that long.

PL: He stayed very close to the Soviet Union and to Brezhnev. As a result, the Bulgarian Government had a pretty free rein at home. They would always unconditionally give their support to the Soviet Union in anything it did. And if there were things that needed fixing at home which might have deviated a bit from Moscow theology, they weren't to worry because Bulgaria was sound. That's quite different of course from the other places, because the Soviet Union couldn't afford to cut slack for Hungary and Czechoslovakia. And certainly not for East Germany. That's why the Solidarity thing and the loosening up in Poland was so dramatic and why Bulgaria became a really interesting place to be when the Soviet Union began to slide after Brezhnev's death. Andropov who briefly ran the Soviet Union before his own death made it immediately clear to Zhivkov that the cosiness of the USSR/ Bulgaria relationship couldn't continue and that the economic support that Bulgaria had been receiving in terms of discounted Soviet oil and other benefits had to be phased out. A key job when Andropov passed on was comparing the (massive) obituaries for him and Brezhnev in the party newspaper line for line to check for nuances. The arrival of Gorbachev, of course, brought the party to a close.

JJ: What was cultural life like in Bulgaria at that time? Presumably the media were very strictly controlled?

PL: Yes the media were controlled.

JJ: Could books be written and circulated in a normal way, or was there a sort of Bulgarian *zamistat*; an underground circulation of literature?

PL: There were student things and so on. It was not possible to identify a dissident movement. There were no Solzhenytsins. Everything you saw was safe. I mean you could see western movies at cinemas but they were usually those with some anti-US, anti-western slant. So you could see "The China Syndrome" about corporate corruption endangering the safety of the people, "All the President's Men", that sort of stuff. On the lighter side, I saw Tina Turner in Bulgaria. She was just beginning her comeback and she came there with her dance troupe. She got some contract to swing through Eastern Europe because she wasn't a big name anymore. Just coming back after years in the wilderness and it was most exciting. We got our second row

tickets for something like a pound and there was Tina doing her thing. You don't get that kind of chance too often. The Bulgarians had never seen anything like it. Jaws were dropping at the sheer zest and sexiness of the show. People were hanging from trees around the venue in Plovdiv just to get a glimpse. It was a big contrast to the bone-grinding dullness of everyday life.

JJ: Did they have TV there at the time?

PL: Yes. I didn't watch it very much. We went to opera – lots of opera. The Bulgarians had very good basses. The men tended to be better than the women. The basses and baritones tended to come across better than the sopranos. I don't know whether it's to do with Balkan lungs. We had a party for an opera troupe at one stage and they were all smoking – they smoked very heavily, explaining that singing has got to do with the diaphragm, not the throat. They also drank a lot with no excuses.

JJ: Did the British Council venture out there or did they have an office there?

PL: Not in my time. I think they opened after I left, but our second secretary was also cultural attaché, which gave him a great deal of trouble. In those days cultural attachés were automatically assumed to be intelligence officers.

JJ: In 1982, the country launched what they called the new economic mechanism. Didn't work very well I understand. Tell me about it – what you can remember of that. How did it affect the economic situation?

PL: It wasn't very easy to understand then and now you are asking me after many years. It's hard to put a finger on it, but they had decided on some degree of market force to operate within the factories. These were obviously not going to be privatised, or anything that radical, but there was to be a degree of market competition with rewards for effectiveness and penalties for under-performance. There was also to be an opening to foreign capital in various very restrictive ways.

In the event, it didn't amount to a row of beans. It had been put together by the régime as a device to demonstrate that they were responsive to the wishes of the

people and the market. There were shortages in the shops and the quality of food and consumer products was very bad, largely because the system did nothing to encourage a work ethic. There was a fixed and very low wage scale which applied to all whether they did a good job or a bad job. Frankly they'd rather be back home. And so the country was being run on a completely uneconomic basis.

JJ: Soviet lines in other words?

PL: The new economic mechanism was installed first of all to put some motivation into the workforce and secondly to deliver better quality to the public. They used to have factory competitions which passed for TV fun on slow nights. I remember Christina and I appeared on a television show in Plovdiv where various factory managers were demonstrating the improvements and innovations they had brought about. There was a vote for the best and a prize of some sort. The initiative we liked best came from a guy who ran a mass poultry farm who had decided that he would make use of waste products by using the skin from chickens' legs and feet to make purses and handbags and various leather goods. Christina and I voted for the chicken man, which was probably the kiss of death – tainted by a British diplomat.

Language training

JJ: Faux pas. Did you speak any Bulgarian? You had a training course presumably?

PL: Yes I did six months in London at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies and when I got to Sofia I had two classes a week. I got intermediate Bulgarian, and I suppose I should have gone on to get higher Bulgarian, but the moment you can actually operate in a country and if you're busy, your motivation to get to that high echelon is a bit removed.

JJ: I didn't ask about German?

PL: I spoke German.

JJ: Did you speak that already, or was it again a crash course?

PL: I had learnt it at school. I was very good at 'O' level German, and then kept failing the 'A' level German by a small margin and kept retaking it. Every time I failed they gave me another 'O' level as a compensation, so I suppose I must have been one of the most linguistically qualified people ever sent to Bonn – three 'O' levels is a pretty spectacular qualification. They sent me off before I went to Bonn to do a month at a Goethe Institute in Bavaria which I enjoyed. It was half way between Munich and Garmisch Partenkirchen on the edge of the Alps, and it was really good. I'm not sure it was a particularly good thing for me to return to Bonn with a Bavarian accent because there were strong regional rivalries in Germany at that time, but I looked on my period in Bavaria as a considerable fringe benefit..

Family life in Sofia

JJ: You mentioned your wife, Christina, very briefly a moment ago. What was it like for foreigners living a daily life as – I mean you were a diplomat – but was it easy, difficult? Did you have good accommodation? Could you buy things in the shops?

PL: In accommodation we were very lucky because the No 2 at the Embassy had a house quite close to the centre, whereas nearly every other non-ambassadorial diplomat lived in horrid blocks of flats. So we were separate from them. It was a nice house with a little garden and we enjoyed it there. Christina had a housekeeper who – she's not likely to listen to this – was completely useless. She managed some of her jobs but needed a lot of supervision and instruction. People outside the Service often said it must have been wonderful to have servants, but they actually create huge stress, particularly for the spouse, and although they're necessary because of the scale of the place you live in, they can create serious trouble.

As to our time in Bulgaria, Christina says she enjoyed it. We certainly had a good time even though security considerations limited our social circle and there wasn't much in the shops. Every now and again we would notice a banana skin on the pavement, a sign that the Columbian consignment had arrived. We got two a year, and would go rushing to the market before it ran out. I remember feeling that I'd really arrived in Sofia when I discovered an onion seller in a little alley off the main

market and, walking home, was grabbed by a guy asking: “Comrade, comrade. Where did you find the onions?” I thought “I’m a Sofiot, at last”. Paradoxically we got unlimited amounts of good quality fillet steak. There was a hard currency shop. Expatriates were encouraged to part with their dollars, or Deutsch marks in exchange for alcohol, local wine and various cuts of meat. They never ran out of fillet. Whatever you were preparing - you wanted spaghetti Bolognese - you minced fillet steak. We also had a regular monthly supply of things, because ...

JJ: From where?

PL: From Mr O’Toole, a butcher in Hounslow, one of whose customers had once been a member of the embassy. In those days there was a direct British Airways flight from Heathrow to Sofia and Mr O’Toole would take orders; freeze everything, stick it on the ‘plane, and we would pick it up and get it into our freezers before it started to thaw. A monthly taste of home.

JJ: Another point about daily life – I know that in Moscow all our embassy people were closely watched. There were listening devices all over the place. You had to talk to your wife with the radio full on or flushing the loo or something like that. Did you get any of that?

PL: Bulgaria was very hot for this and for some reason there had been a more intensive history of intelligence attack on our embassy in Sofia than in most others in Eastern Europe. There’s a black museum somewhere of trophies discovered in our embassies. Sofia plays a great role in it. Probe microphones that used to run out of drainpipes into the Chancery.

JJ: There’s the famous umbrella?

PL: There was the umbrella.

JJ: Poor Georgi Markov.

PL: That of course was not an attack against us. There was a view that the local spooks – the DS – would try out new gimmicks on behalf of the KGB just to see how they worked. They stuck things on or in our embassy which were always of great interest to specialists back home, because we were sort of a test case. I remember very soon after I went there, there was a search for these devices and a number of microphones which had been there for years because they were very old fashioned, were found behind the spirits optics of the embassy bar, which shows that the DS guys had a shrewd idea of where the loose talking took place. Occasionally we were tailed and the standard thing was to be followed by a white Volvo with a whippy aerial. That didn't happen to us until half-way through the posting. They had previously used much more covert techniques.

JJ: There were no incidents involving the embassy as such at the time?

PL: Not during my time. There is history. One of the things – a very onerous burden on the Head of Chancery was monitoring the security situation, taking a view and warning people to watch their step if they looked as though they were behaving in a way that could bring them to the attention of the DS and lead them into 'situations'.

JJ: Compromising situations. So Peter, after your spell in Sofia you were asked to come back to London and you'd been abroad quite a bit of time by that stage. And you were one of the Assistants in Science and Space Department which perhaps was a rather new Department – covering new areas of activity at that time? This was in 1984.

Posting to the FCO as Assistant Head of Energy, Science and Space Department

PL: Energy, Science and Space Department had been around in many forms. There was once an Energy Department and a Science and Technology Department. These were merged shortly before I came home. It's changed its name certainly three times since I was there and I'm not sure where it is for the moment. There were two Assistants for administrative convenience because it was covering a wide span. The energy side was not necessarily expanding rapidly, but was becoming very political because of the increasing international interest in the oil and gas resources of the UK

Continental Shelf (UKCS) at a time of volatile oil prices, changing fortunes in sensitive areas like the Middle East and the ill-concealed resentment of Britain's partners and allies, most of which were without an indigenous energy source other than coal. There was also a lot of Whitehall politics, since UKCS oil & gas was a huge revenue earner for the Government and the offshore supply industry had become a considerable provider of jobs.

The Science and Space side was also a bureaucratic growth area because of the politico-economics of IT and telecommunications expansion and the implications for international relations of satellite technology. Meanwhile, I was responsible for energy, which was really a return to old territory for me. Energy had been part of my portfolio in Bonn and I was already sensitised to some key issues – nuclear, for example, although there was a separate Nuclear Energy Department in the Foreign Office at that stage – and the whole question of energy supply and demand, the oil balance, gas supplies from Eastern Europe ... the Soviet Union, which is as contemporary today as it was then.

On the friendly side of the diplomatic equation, we had difficult negotiations with Norway on gas pipelines from their offshore fields and a very tricky energy relationship to manage with our own Western partners. So while I was responsible for UKCS oil & gas, the ramifications went a long way beyond the energy balance, for example, the whole issue of licensing and the legality under various treaties of our procurement policy, which our trading partners considered excessively protectionist. It gave us particular trouble with the European Union and we had some nasty discussions with the Americans.

There was also a strong ambition by our partners in the EU, OECD etc to have a say in UKCS pricing policy. HMG left this largely to the companies who were extracting it, but we were constantly being pressed by the OPEC countries to put prices up and cut production and by OECD/EU countries to cut the prices and put production up. The consistent line even from the rather left-wing UK Labour government of my Bonn days had been to leave such decisions to the market appreciation of the companies themselves. It made sense for the UK because of the immense expense of drilling in the very difficult waters of the North Sea. They were deep and treacherous

and the geology beneath was tricky. HMG believed that the greater the conditionality of the licensing, the lower the incentive for companies to make the very high investment required.

JJ: So where did the decisions on these very difficult questions lie? Was there an Energy Ministry at the time or was it DTI?

PL: The Minister for Energy at that time was Peter Walker. The Ministry were very jealous of their position as lead department on energy issues and we at the FCO had a feeling that they were less than sensitive to the international implications of their public utterances or some of their policies. So there were some very brittle discussions in Whitehall over the approach that we should be taking over a number of issues affecting the UKCS oil. It had engineering, employment and energy balance implications for the Department of Energy. For the Treasury it represented 8% of GDP and for the FCO there were heavy implications for international relations. That was my first period as a Whitehall warrior.

JJ: Presumably you had to go to meetings fairly regularly? A lot of issues coming up.

PL: A lot of work with the Cabinet Office. A lot of papers for JIC, difficult drafting in current intelligence groups on the implications of oil pricing on our economy, the security of vulnerable countries, the situation in the Middle East, the strength of OPEC as a friendly/ unfriendly force in the political and economic bourses. That is not to say that OPEC was monolithic. There was a considerable friction among members as there probably is today between the high and low volume producers, those who wished to use oil as a political lever in wider international disputes and those who wished to leave big issues to the market, conservatives versus radicals and so on.

In my day there was a line-up of Iran and Libya on the radical side (not forgetting that Iran was then at war with fellow OPEC member Iraq). Saudi Arabia was the arch-conservative and, with a potential production of 8 million barrels per day kept down to around 2.8 for reasons of OPEC solidarity, the possessor of a big stick which it could never use. Venezuela, as the founder of OPEC was custodian of oil doctrine

and ideology. Nigeria, its production then on the rise, was in constant need of money and regularly broke production limits. Throw into all that the various grades of oil between the sweet North Sea Brent and the heavier crudes and you can see that we were in a tableau of constant motion.

As to the goings-on in the International Energy Agency of the OECD whose meetings I had to attend, we were quite close to the Norwegians and Dutch for obvious reasons (and known amongst our colleagues as “the blue-eyed Arabs”, although it is not my colouring). I had known the IEA Secretary-General, Frau Steeg, quite well during my time in Bonn where she had been Deputy Secretary at the Federal Ministry of the Economy. She had a very attractive personality, but was a stern chairperson in many ways. She would always look grim as I and my Dutch and Norwegian colleagues entered the room late after a long French lunch. No doubt she had us down as plotters, rather than gourmets. In short, there was a perception that we were not playing the game with our partners, nor looking to the broader interests of the Western community.

Of course Britain, Norway and the Netherlands had different interests among themselves. Dutch gas was at the top of its curve, while the UK Continental Shelf was yet to peak and we were still trying to encourage the companies to develop marginal fields. However, in economic terms the Norwegians were really blue-eyed Arabs. I mentioned that 8% of our GDP derived from UKCS oil and gas and supply services. By contrast, Norway had a very small population with a huge percentage of GDP coming from these resources so their overall economic interests could be seen as closer to producers with the same profile – Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, rather than the UK.

All of this involved me in fascinating trips, particularly to Paris for the OECD. It was the first time that I'd been in a multi-lateral organisation of that sort of size. It was a big table and it was a good experience for me. I also went to meetings of the EU Energy Council in Brussels which were less interesting. Negotiations were arcane relating to small figures and not anything of much personal interest.

JJ: Was OECD, the group that you had, were they able, or even allowed, to take decisions or did they just draw conclusions and put them up to their various ministries?

PL: It made recommendations through Frau Steeg to the Secretary General of the OECD. The IEA was subordinate to the OECD. It had a strong research arm based on information from member states which produced reports and projections. Within the actual discussions there was a policy sub-committee of the IEA which was just diplomats and guys who were actually engaged in the broader politics which I attended. I had quite a lot of fun there because I didn't have a Department of Energy minder sitting next to me.

JJ: Did Mrs Thatcher, who was then Prime Minister, as a scientist – did she take a keen interest in this?

PL: No.

JJ: She had Peter Walker of course who was one of her favourites.

PL: She didn't have to intervene because it was a market-based policy relating to how we developed the North Sea oil.

JJ: So you did this quite happily until 1987?

PL: It was an interesting period. When I joined North Sea crude (Brent) was about 30 dollars a barrel, which doesn't seem much today, but it was considered very high in 1984, and when I left it had dropped down to about 9 or 10. The debate, particularly in the International Energy Agency, changed from "Shouldn't the UK be producing more oil to get prices down" to a point where they said we were losing the incentive to invest in energy conservation and shouldn't we do something to get prices up?" In both of these debates I was the one who said "No, we don't want to do anything. We just want to keep pumping happily away and selling the stuff to the market": it wasn't well-received, but our partners rarely looked at the sustainability argument. It was what gave the companies the confidence to invest in increasingly marginal fields and

the longer-than-expected life of UKCS reserves from which we are currently benefiting derives directly from the policies of that period.

JJ: The government is now encouraging more exploration with financial inducement to some of the companies in the North Sea? So that was Energy Department. After that you were posted abroad again in 1987 to be Counsellor in Copenhagen. Were you a Commercial Counsellor?

Counsellor in the British Embassy, Copenhagen, 1987-91

PL: I was called the Economic and Commercial Counsellor, and I supervised the quite big Commercial Section. There was only one officer responsible for economic reporting. It was a strange situation for me after Bulgaria because total trade between Britain and Denmark was something like £3 billion a year, a thousand times more than the £3 million figure for Bulgaria. There was a theological argument at the time about the FCO's role in export promotion. One line was "The Danes speak English. Business integrity is generally high. We are long-established trading partners, both members of the EU so what exactly is it that our exporters need from the Embassy?" Frankly you 'phone a Dane from London, ask him a question, and he's quite likely to tell you the truth. In other parts of the world you may well need some advice from the embassy on local variations of the truth. So what's the point? The response was that in a country where you're only selling goods worth £3 million a year, a lot of help is needed for a marginal increase. In Denmark, if you can get Embassy help for a marginal increase on £3 billion, that's a lot of money.

My commercial staff just got on with it and I really had to think out strategies to make my own job relevant and to make Britain an even more relevant economic partner for the Danes. We were already an important market: a principal market for their bacon and dairy produce, and they bought a lot from us. But they weren't up to speed with what was happening to British business in the late 1980s. For them Britain was still a country of bowler hats and our exports were Burberry raincoats and potted marmalade. What they didn't realise was the extraordinary dynamic of British economic thinking during the second half of the 1980s, both in terms of the

technology we used and produced, and also the pole position we were taking in financial services. They were left behind.

JJ: Let's stay in Denmark for the moment. Perhaps you would say how Denmark saw its relationship with the European Union at that time in the late 1980s?

PL: Danes are seriously nationalistic and there are 5 million of them. They suspend the reality of globalisation to take a pride in being small and notionally independent. They have a language which they keep to themselves. Even though it's a dialect of the broader Scandinavian languages, not many of their neighbours find it easy to speak or understand Danish. They regard themselves as an integral unit, they don't like outside interference, and they like to say what they think in terms which quite regularly give offence to outsiders.

Against that there is a pragmatic recognition that as a country of 5 millions situated between mainland Europe and the bigger Scandinavian countries, and with a huge market dependency on the United Kingdom, which is a member of the EU, they can't do without the EU. But they work very hard on getting as much as they can out of the Union in exchange for a low level of commitment.

The trick for the politicians is to achieve what they can in partnership with their EU colleagues while persuading their electorate that Danish nationality is not being diluted. Unlike their brothers in the UK, the Danes can stay on board with the EU whilst saying no in a long series of referenda.

JJ: That's true. They voted against the Maastricht Treaty – this was after you'd come back from Copenhagen in 1992 and they opted out of four areas including the common currency of course, and defence policy and so on. The former British Ambassador described Denmark as: 'The Danes, not a nation but a tribe.' I don't know whether that is something you'd subscribe to, but they are, I think, still a bit of the awkward squad. Perhaps not quite so awkward as we are, but there we are.

PL: What the Danes can achieve in being awkward is the same as any other nation in the EU, big or small. I think describing the Danes as a tribe may possibly sound

condescending from a British Ambassador, but if you were to put it to a Dane, he or she would almost certainly agree with you. They are seriously independently minded and coming to terms with integration on a broader continental scale is difficult for them to encompass, even after so long as members, but on the other hand you've got good, solid, independent thinking people with great experience in a whole number of skills which the EU really requires. It is a great trading nation with an eye on the open seas and a liberal outlook while at home the empowerment of small businesses and entrepreneurship as a vehicle for growth is second nature.

Posting to South Korea as Deputy Head of Mission, 1991-94

JJ: Thank you for that. So after Copenhagen you went much further east to South Korea from 1991 until 1994. That must have been an enormous contrast with the sort of life that you'd led in European countries. What was it like being there? Describe the impact of being in a country with a language perhaps you didn't know?

PL: Going from three consecutive, four if you count London, European postings, to Korea was a huge leap. Also you've got to remember that although colleagues who were skilled at working in China and Japan had had maybe two years learning the culture and the language, I went there straight from Copenhagen with not a great deal of preparation. Korea is unique in its culture and language. It's not easy to go straight there and assimilate, and new arrivals had to work very hard to get the feel of the place. First of all to understand how things worked. More importantly to understand how you related yourselves to Korean people and how you gained their confidence and trust. I think it's to do with history. The Koreans have had a bad time from foreigners, whether it was from the Chinese or the Japanese. The Koreans have not actually had a good time with visiting foreigners over the past, because the visitors have usually trampled on them with big boots, and so it's extremely difficult to start talking to Koreans about a mutuality of interests between them and a foreign country, particularly a country that is as far away as the UK. So, ideally someone who goes to Korea ought to spend a bit of time talking to Koreans first; talking about society; talking about the culture and having just a little bit of indoctrination, because to get straight off a 'plane and start working puts you on the back foot. However, it is possible to achieve early successes in dealing with Korean people if you take on board

the fact that you are at a very low point on the learning curve, and seeking their advice will almost certainly achieve points, because you will be giving them the status of people who will be your tutors and mentors. Difficult, if you have to combine that with telling them unpleasant truths about their unreasonable impositions on the British business and financial sectors and, at that point, their outrageous protectionist devices aimed at keeping foreigners out of local business.

JJ: On the trade side though – you were there as the Counsellor looking after economic matters I believe. But on the trade side, was there any history of relationships at all, or was it something that you or the embassy and perhaps visiting Brits had to develop at that time?

PL: Well there were certain realities that one had to confront. First of all there was the neighbour Japan. Koreans actually dislike the Japanese a lot because of the long period of Japanese occupation and the ruin of the Koreans. Japan was the nearest superpower in economic terms, and the Koreans relied quite considerably on Japanese companies, and joint ventures with them in getting hold of technologies to put into new products. The second economic fact of life we had to face was that following the Korean War it was the Americans who poured money into Korea, which helped them rebuild the basic structure of their economy. So you were going into a place where the principal foreign influences were America and Japan, with a very strong grip on the available market.

JJ: And geographically much better placed.

PL: We had a number of advantages over our other competitors. We were never going to be in a position to compete with the Japanese and the Americans, but we were certainly in a position to compete with the Germans and the French and others. One was that we had been an important ally of the South Koreans in the Korean War and there was a sense of loyalty and affinity with the United Kingdom. Secondly, the Brits did seem to be able to insert themselves into Korean society in a way that was more acceptable to the Koreans than maybe some other countries. I don't know why this should be, but the Korean word for a Briton and Englishman is literally translated as "English gentleman". Whatever English gentleman it was that actually got this

word put into the language, I don't know, but it was one of those things. If you were a Brit you had a start because the language actually granted you a cultural and, if you like, a protocol advantage over other people. I think that the other thing was that we spent a great deal of our time on the trade promotion side tutoring visiting British business people on how it was you did business with Koreans, and the important thing for all of them to remember was that you didn't just walk into the country, get a contract, and walk out. But before you even started talking business, you had to demonstrate your good will, your credentials, and you had to talk to people in general terms, even in personal terms about your family and what you like doing, and actually spend time with people, say playing a game of golf. Certainly there was a great deal of drinking whisky in various parts of Seoul after dark, which a great many members of British trade delegations found quite difficult to cope with. All of this was not just Koreans being pernicious. It was Koreans trying to identify where the person came from and where they fitted in to their ideal concept of a business partner, and usually you would only get down to the real nitty-gritty after a couple of meetings. It doesn't mean to say that if you did the right thing at golf, or in a restaurant over a bottle of Johnny Walker, you'd get the contract, because they were still interested in quality and price, and terms, and all those usual things. But it was important to get accepted as the sort of person they felt comfortable doing business with. And I think we achieved quite a lot then, to the degree that we attracted a number of Korean companies to the United Kingdom as significant investors, because that was another part of the business. One part of the business was introducing British manufacturers and traders into the Korean market. Another was persuading Korean companies, who were then expanding rapidly and looking for a way into new markets, that an investment, particularly a manufacturing investment in the United Kingdom, would help them penetrate wider Europe. And we were very successful with big corporations like Samsung, Hyundai and so forth. There was also the difficult aspect to the business job, which I referred to earlier, the Korean determination to protect important sectors of the market, and this was to do with the tight institutional and personal relationships linking politics and business, and the residual influence of the military following the Korean War. The country was more or less carved up on an agreed pattern. One company did the ships; another did the cars; another did the IT and so forth. A number of banks were allowed cheap credit to perform their business. The sudden arrival of foreign companies in the financial services sector saying "We

want to compete” came as a shock and posed a threat to the cosy arrangements the Koreans had established for themselves. Take insurance. It was very hard to get into the insurance market. You had a great number of British merchant banks coming in and you had a big demand for equities from British stockbrokers saying “Give us a slice of the action on the Korean stock exchange”. They were being prevented from achieving their potential, not for reasons of competition or market forces, but by the sheer reluctance of the Korean authorities to allow these people in. So that was the source of quite difficult discussions, and I spent an awful amount of my time in Korean ministries, particularly the Ministry of Finance, talking about regulations, about the percentage of share holding that British stock broking firms could deal in and the position British banks could take in the market and so forth. A whole different aspect related to British luxury goods. There was a time when I thought I worked not for the Queen and the Foreign Office, but for the Scotch Whisky Association because I spent so much time talking about the protectionist attitudes of the Koreans against imported alcohol. Life was a struggle. It was constant tough negotiating with tough guys. On the other hand there was a great deal of pleasure from being in Korea and from being introduced into Korean culture by Koreans, which was something we enjoyed. Christina had a close friendship with a Korean actress who introduced us to a wide range of cultural contacts that improved our quality of life. Our social relationships weren’t limited to officials and bankers and bureaucrats, but extended into theatre, media and cultural life - writers and dress designers and so on. It may sound frivolous, this did actually help us do the job, because it helps your business ties if you can demonstrate that you have a wider view of Korea than your competitors.

It was also stimulating as No 2, to be in charge of the embassy during periods of three or four months here, a couple of weeks there, and so on. This had happened in Bulgaria, but the range of work at Korea was much wider. For example at one particular period – I think it was in 1993 - things looked extremely dangerous in terms of the North/South relationship - North Korea said they would turn Seoul into a sea of flame. For a couple of weeks, those of us who were in a position to know what was going on, almost believed it, so there was that degree of tension, and those discussions amongst the allies and the Americans with the Korean Foreign Minister, I found extremely rewarding, although a bit unnerving from time to time.

JJ: All of this suggests that Koreans wanting to develop their international relationships had good enough English, at least to be able to converse? That must have been a big advantage?

PL: At the top end of the business spectrum, and amongst the young up and coming people, there was a good knowledge of English, but the Korean language is very difficult. I did take lessons in Korean and to some degree progressed in terms of being able to say “hello” and “goodbye” and “would you like a drink” and “isn’t it a nice day”. It was not nearly enough to allow me to discuss matters of substance politically or economically. At that stage, there weren’t all that many people in the Service who’d gone through the kind of intensive Korean courses that their equivalents dealing with Japanese, Russian, Chinese and so on would have experienced. I was fortunate that during my period there, there were two successive Heads of Chancery who had experience and were fluent in Korean and that was an important benefit to the embassy. Now I guess that as time goes on, people who’ve been going through that process will be more senior in the Office and will stand a chance of becoming No 2 or Ambassador in Seoul with a gift of the language, and that will certainly put Britain in an advantageous position.

JJ: In all that you have indicated so far in sort of trade relations, business relations, you suggest that we really need to be quite serious – when I say we, I mean British business – in developing, spending time on social, cultural matters which are important to Koreans before they will really accept us. In so many countries that I’ve seen, the Brits want to go in, do a deal, make a profit in a year and get out again. It’s not like that.

PL: I’m not sure that’s unique to Korea. I think that wherever you go, whether it’s Africa or Asia or anywhere else, you will get better treatment if people think that you have a commitment to the market which goes beyond a quick deal. I also think that over the years since I was in Korea, that the significant changes in the structure in the Korean economy have been accompanied, or even driven by social developments, certainly after the eastern economic crisis of the mid-1990s. There’s been a shake-up there, and people with contemporary attitudes have taken the lead from the old guard.

You can see it in Korean products. When I was there, Korean products, while they might have been manufactured by Koreans, consisted principally of Japanese or American technology. Today the Koreans have become world leaders using their own technology. You only have to look at the electronic stuff that Samsung is putting out. Korea is putting out a car that is a Korean car, rather than an American and Japanese car stuck together. The Korean manufacturing sector and the Korean economy has gone through quite a leap since I left there in 1994 and no doubt attitudes in Korea towards the outside world may well have loosened up. But I think it's very difficult for any British business person to assume that you can conduct yourself in a foreign country in much the same way as you can conduct yourself at home, and achieve the same results. You need to do some homework. Even if you go to Germany or Denmark you have to be aware of the things that motivate local people and certainly the things that upset and offend local people.

JJ: You mentioned North Korea. Did we have any military attachés in the embassy?

PL: We had two, a Defence Attaché who was an army brigadier and a Naval Attaché as his assistant. The DA was also the British representative at the Panmunjon Peace Talks. I suspect that these are going on today. On a regular basis, the allies of South Korea would sit at a table with the North Koreans on the borderline between North and South Korea and talk about moving commas and text and really having rather pointless discussions. These are the on-going peace negotiations from the time of the truce in the War. I haven't been keeping up with things as much as I should, but to some degree there is still a state of tension. I think the war may be over, but the tension is still obviously there. When I was there, there were quite considerable difficulties with North Korea, much of it, as today, down to the way they were approaching nuclear research, nuclear power and so forth. There were other issues that affected the South Koreans considerably, like the reunification of families and incidents on the border and various armed confrontations between boats in the Sea of Korea and so on. What worried the international community was the degree to which nuclear research in North Korea was producing enriched plutonium with a view to making a bomb. They were also playing around with rockets and so forth.

So the United Nations observers even then, 1991-94, were talking about trying to get in there. And there was one particular period when we really did think that we were at risk, because the North Koreans refused to accept certain ultimatums on their activities relating to enrichment and threatened that they would attack South Korea. They would turn Seoul, as I said earlier, into a sea of flame. A rational person would say they're not going to do this because it's a small country and if they do commit aggression in this regard, they will be defeated and will suffer all kinds of serious difficulties and pain and so forth, but it's important to remember that in those days we could regard North Korea not so much as a political entity but as a cult – it was almost like Waco. There was no real indication that the consequences of the actions they threatened to take were actually of any relevance to their strategising. And the other thing people who don't have any experience of Korea need to realise is that North Korea starts about 40 miles north of Seoul and there are 13,000 big artillery barrels dug into the edge of the cliffs just north of that border and that they could quite effectively take out the capital city of South Korea. It was all right if you lived near the south circular, but unfortunately we were all on the north side of the river. The bridges were all mined. Our evacuation plans seemed impractical, requiring us to assemble at the American base which was quite clearly the first place that would be blitzed. The Defence Attaché took great delight in his briefings in saying that we should go to the basement embassy bar, urinate on our sweaters and stick them into the grills to prevent poison gas coming through. He seemed to be the only happy person during that period. So I'm not saying that we lived in constant fear or threat, but during my time there, there came a point where we did think that things could go quite seriously wrong. One of the exciting things about being in Korea at that stage was that you had the feeling that change was taking place. Since the Korean War it had been dominated by the, if you like, pretty totalitarian leaders drawn from the military. We still had, while I was there, an ex-military man as President. He was a civilian at the time, and there was the beginning of a mood for political change and a mood in the electorate which suggested that this monolithic thing was changing, so there was some excitement there.

I felt quite privileged that I was on reasonably friendly terms with Kim De Jung whom some have since called the Nelson Mandela of Korea, having spent some time in exile as an opponent of the regime. Dragged back, put into prison, he re-emerged

into politics and was elected President. I was quite glad to know him. Whether or not he deserved his peace prize, he was quite a character. I well remember him in an unseemly jostle with the Speaker of the Parliament to be the first to be presented to the Prince and Princess of Wales at the Ambassador's Residence and his inviting us to a characteristic Korean family lunch at his home in Seoul, disdaining politics and swearing to Christina that he had no intention of ever running for President. Cyril Ramaphosa told her the same thing in Johannesburg some years later but unfortunately he seems to have been telling the truth.

The biggest bilateral event when I was in Seoul was the visit by the Prince and Princess of Wales. It was billed as hugely significant for UK/ Korea relations, but the politics had moved well into the background by the time they arrived, since the personal rift was common knowledge and the focus of massive media interest. I wasn't privy to the planning of the event, but I know that at one point it looked as though it might be cancelled altogether and the ambassador obliged to make an embarrassed call at the Foreign Ministry. In the event, the visit took place and, as expected, turned out to be a media circus from the very first programme item – a visit to a memorial for the dead of the Korean War. The photograph of the couple looking sad and solemn set the whole media theme for the visit – “The Glums” – nobody took any account that it was shot in the middle of a one-minute silence for war dead, hardly an occasion for holding hands and smiling at the cameras. There seemed to be difficulties between the main parties through the visit and the programme seemed designed to keep them separate on as many occasions as possible.

So much has been written about the Princess that there is little left to be said, except that she left a very good impression with Christina, who is usually an accurate judge, with her courteous apology for keeping us waiting at an official function and generally friendly demeanour.

I saw rather more of her and had to show her around a more than usually boring British store promotion at which we had to confront, not only the media, but the turf-wars of the owners of the high-prestige store. When she discovered that I was the Economic and Commercial Counsellor, the Princess gave me a grim account of the struggle which she had to keep a convertible Mercedes which had been her one true

love (sic) in the face of protests from the UK car lobby – she lost. I did get a feel for her sense of humour when she asked if I could get her away from the promotion and show her around the rest of the department store. I took her into a dead-end in the shape of a mother of pearl grotto where even the mobile telephones on display were made from mother of pearl. When asked by the president of the store who by then had caught us up if she wanted it, she said – immediately after the “Squidgy tapes” saga – “No President Kim. If you read the British press you would know that a new mobile phone is the last thing I need just now.” Nice sense of irony, I thought. It was the last overseas visit they made together.

Posting to Johannesburg as Consul-General and Director of UK Trade Promotion and Investment for South Africa, 1994

JJ: After Seoul you were posted to Johannesburg in 1994 as Consul-General, but perhaps more importantly you held the title and the portfolio of Director of UK Trade Promotions and Investment for South Africa. Did that mean that the minor part of your work was consular or chancery work or perhaps that went somewhere else?

PL: I had pressed hard to get the Johannesburg posting. It was clear that the period 1994-98 was going to be a seminal one for South Africa and probably the continent as its biggest economy emerged from fortress mode and politics normalised. At the same time, it was by no means certain that things would normalise and there was much talk of an impending bloodbath as the black population went for pay-back. So whatever happened, it was going to be a big posting for me.

As we all know the bloodbath wasn't going to happen. I reached that conclusion earlier than most when I saw the foreign correspondents pack up and leave town in search of more promising wars. There is no doubt that most of this was down to Mandela and there is no point in repeating the eulogies here. But he did have charisma and he did lead by example. He was a flawed saint, though. He could be authoritarian with his Ministers and a bit tedious in his homilies. He didn't tackle AIDS as effectively as he might have done and he didn't take the necessary steps to cut violent crime in the bud. Curiously getting tough on crime was not without

controversy in the ANC. People in the townships had been afflicted by violent crime throughout the Apartheid years and it was only with the abolition of the pass laws that the bad boys from Soweto and Alexandra could look for profit in the exclusive white suburbs. Cracking down on them now was interpreted by some as unnecessarily protecting the whites who ought to know what real life was like. Despite all this, I really liked Mandela whom I met once or twice. He was blessed with real personal charm and, above all, a good sense of humour.

To answer your question about the office, I arrived when there was a very large establishment at Johannesburg. Traditionally it had been the British Government's contact point with the ANC, which is now of course the ruling party of South Africa, and had been highly political. But I got there shortly after the elections that brought Mandela into power and many of the old structures changed as the ANC moved the focus of their work to the national political centres of Pretoria and Cape Town where the High Commission had offices. The political content of my work inevitably declined. This was balanced by coping with the huge international interest in what the new democratic South Africa would actually do with its economy and what the business opportunities might be from the anticipated development of its resource base, its tourism, its manufacturing capability and the capacity of its large population. Suddenly we had to cope with a succession of trade missions and high-level visits. Apart from looking after some aspects of the State visit soon after my arrival and arranging a Johannesburg business-oriented programme for the Queen, Prince Charles came by.

Other visitors included the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ken Clarke, the Minister of Agriculture, Jack Cunningham, the Minister for Trade, Richard Needham and the Lord Mayor of London. I organised a special reception in the garden for the Lord Mayor. I exposed the visitors and local bigwigs to a play acted out by the Market Theatre Workshop on AIDS, child abuse and other horrors in front of invited busloads of schoolchildren from the townships. For once there were serious discussions among guests rather than the usual cocktail chit-chat. I did one dinner party for the then Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd at which the guests were leading South African women and their partners. Felicia Mabuza-Suttle, the Oprah Winfrey of South African TV, brought along a charming guy who turned

out to be a retired Soweto gangster and I was glad the media didn't get hold of the story. We also did a big event at the Residence for Richard Branson who was launching the Virgin Atlantic service to Johannesburg. To the puzzlement of the Johannesburg business community (and the shock of the Dutch Reform Church) he arrived at the function after doing a launch party for Virgin Vodka at "The Ranch", an upmarket nearby brothel, but he charmed his way out of it. In a city where people were choosy about accepting invitations he had great pulling power and our guests ranged from Peggy-Sue Khumalo, the reigning Miss South Africa to Julian Ogilvie-Thompson, the patrician Chair of Anglo America.

I guess my favourite visitors were the Spice Girls whom we got to sing at a charity concert at the time of Prince Charles's visit. They would only come if they could be introduced to Mandela and all of this was fixed, resulting in the great shot of the girls kissing the great hero and Nobel Laureate while the Prince of Wales looked bemusedly on.

All of this meant heavy pressure on the Commercial Section to get things right. They did very well. No complaints, not even from the notoriously hard-to-please Needham. Johannesburg attracted celebrities like bees to a honey-pot. It was definitely the place to be at that time.

Since Johannesburg was the principal business city, the Inspectors decided to re-cast my job description by moving consular work to Pretoria, reducing the political requirement to around 15% instead of 40% and building up my commercial, investment promotion and economic functions. I was happy with this because the work of our big consular section took up a disproportionate amount of my time, although many people wondered why we were moving our consulate from a big and very dangerous city to a location that was smaller and safer. As a result of the reshuffle, I was instructed to turn the consulate into an interactive business centre. We would promote British trade, look at investment both ways, and interact with potential business partners in South Africa. My residual Chancery work was important because, although all the big guys went to their offices in Pretoria, Johannesburg was where their homes, roots and culture remained and between Thursday night and Monday morning I had access to members of the cabinet and

senior members of the ANC who were week-ending in Johannesburg, many of them at Mamma's Shebeen on Saturday nights.

Mamma, real name Charmaine, had been something of a star in Soweto in the old days (there was a running argument between her and Felicia Mabuza-Suttle over who had been the first black model to appear on a bill-board) and on her return from exile in the USA she discovered that the rich black guys who had moved to the Northern Suburbs after Apartheid were homesick for Soweto but didn't much want to spend time there. So she opened an upmarket shebeen (illegal drinking place) in a prosperous suburb round the corner from the Residence and Christina and I started looking in out of curiosity, sometimes to find half the Cabinet already installed, all of them good buddies with Charmaine who was happy to do the introductions. We became good friends of Charmaine and later when she was taken to court she proclaimed to the press that the British Consul-General and his wife were regulars, so it *couldn't* be illegal. Another story we were glad didn't go too far.

The job was to consider where Britain could develop its place as a business player in the new South Africa. I was initially daunted by this because Britain's unbroken relations with Apartheid South Africa, our approach to sanctions, and so on, were controversial during the Apartheid period and much criticised by, not just the wild radicals, but by serious people, including those now in Government, who just couldn't understand why we took such a morally questionable position. I thought that I was moving to Jo'burg to spend four years supervising the decline of Britain's market share in South Africa. Not a great career position. Needless to say, the competition poured in. France was particularly aggressive since at that time they were trying to develop their relations with Anglophone Africa following the rapid deterioration of the former French colonies. I was also worried about competition from the good guys – the Scandinavians, Canadians etc who were just moving in.

So it was a nice surprise to find that, not only did we maintain our market share, but we increased it. And we were constantly in dialogue with members of the new government about the most effective way that South Africa could re-engage with the world, how they could manage globalisation and how they could get out of what was a functioning, but wholly inefficient economy set up under the previous regime, as a

fortress. We actually enjoyed very good relations with South African business and South African politicians and our views were being sought. We made a major effort to make a good contribution. We got people in from the UK to talk about public-private sector partnerships, and the ups and downs of privatisation. We also discussed Britain's own experiences of privatisation: some had come out right and some had gone wrong. We shared these case studies with the South Africans. We worked very hard on bringing in British trade missions, on introducing major British corporations to the new realities of life in multi-racial South Africa. They couldn't come in and sell off so many million pounds worth of jet engines just like that, but they also had to put investment into the community; support job creation and they had to look at corporate social responsibility in a way that hadn't mattered much before. It was really a very interesting position to be in.

In many ways it took me back to being a hack journalist again. All bets were off and it was a completely new country, to all intents and purposes. Nobody knew who was going where. There were new players in town. There were people who'd been nothing and were suddenly powerful. People who had been powerful were on the way out. The job involved a lot of talent spotting. Who's in; who's out; who's up; who's down; who's sexy; who's not sexy. It was a period where there was a fair amount of traditional diplomatic activity, but so much of it was devoted to creating databases for your successors. It was very dynamic and a very ...

JJ: Very exciting.

PL: I would say it was very exciting and probably the best fun I ever had.

JJ: There was so much basic infrastructure to be put in place really wasn't there? Because where there's developing business and manufacturing ...

PL: South Africa was fortunate in having a functioning infrastructure. It had a road network, airports, ports and harbours, but they weren't all that good and needed to be developed. Its problem was that it had been a fortress economy and remained highly protectionist. It was being called on to make a lot of very rapid changes in the way it looked at its imports and exports and its investments, and how it opened up its

markets. But at the same time the population – or we should say the influential population - changed completely, because the previous regime didn't actually care how many people were out of work in Soweto or in the townships of Cape Town. Their grip on security meant they didn't need to heed public opinion. But the new government were under pressure to meet the people's expectations. That's why they stalled outside demands to open up sectors like automobile manufacturing. The politics of economic change are tricky that way.

One interesting aspect of all this was the deep unpopularity of South Africa with other Southern African states. That was very much the case in Zimbabwe where I was posted later and other special reasons were at play, but it applied across the region. These countries saw arrogance in the new South Africa and huge market aggression. I used to compare their attitude to the end of Apartheid to Mrs Thatcher's attitude to the reunification of Germany: they had always wanted it to happen, but when it did, they didn't much like what they saw.

JJ: To develop industry and trade and so on there must have been also a great need to develop and educate appropriately the labour force?

PL: When I first got to South Africa I spent a lot of time in the townships because that was a sort of hangover from the days when the Consulate had its own small aid programme. Typical projects might include putting a roof on some school. Or you might give a lathe to some beehive workshop. I'm not denigrating it. It was very helpful to the people involved. It was quite separate from our big overseas development effort. But yes, you had to go into these places and look at people who really had not been educated to any degree. The boycott of education had been an important part of the struggle. Children didn't go to school, and when you got to a point when you needed to upgrade your economy and your business practices, there were very few black people to provide the basic work in the lower job echelons. There were people who were not only not educated, but they weren't really aware of what the process of education meant in terms of learning the skills that bring employment. A big empowerment issue was the snatching up of the educated back elite by the big white corporations to give them an air of respectability within the new dispensation. But while there might be six black guys on a board, it was extremely

difficult to find black middle managers. I liked some of the black elite and I heartily disliked others who were taking what they could out of the new system with the justification that it was “our turn now”. With so many new pockets to be filled, corruption went on unchecked. The ordinary black people didn’t like the elite – not even the good guys. People like Cyril Ramaphosa. They called them the “coconuts” – brown outside, white inside.

Everything was up for discussion and for grabs. I would say it was an extraordinary period historically, and I had the great luxury of supervising the consuls in Cape Town and Durban, so I was able to make a lot of trips in the country and down south.

JJ: They had to play their part in this development?

PL: They were both in their different ways very important to the job. Cape Town was the traditional financial sector and some very old corporations were down there and also if you like, it had the ambition to become the California of South Africa. The information technology industries were going there; tourism was happening; there were the makings of a movie industry. Durban was important for political reasons as well as commercial ones. It was an important port and centre of commerce, but because it was on the edge of Zululand, the Consul also had to watch the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party. Its attitudes and its approach to the coalition it had with the ANC were quite difficult and very sensitive, so our successive consuls in Durban spent a fair amount of time doing Chancery work with the Zulus up to King Goodwill. This was a very interesting and active area of work, and inspiring in many respects. Although Cape Town was more beautiful and elegant, we preferred our trips to Durban where we seemed to have a lot more fun. The heat and humidity, smells of spices and large Asian population reminded us that we were on the Indian Ocean and able to take a distant view. It was also where I met Jacob Zuma who was then Premier of the Province of Kwazulu-Natal and now in a very high national position. He has been immersed in controversy over his public propriety (a big corruption scandal) and his private life – wives, girlfriends and un-protected sex – but he was a good operator and, a Zulu himself, he kept Inkatha cornered in their own territory. He could also charm the birds from the trees. Many are worried about his ascendancy, but I am pretty confident that, given his constituency among the poor and suffering,

he will have the credentials to accept reforms of the economy which might initially impact badly on the unemployed and working classes.

JJ: To what extent did you have to liaise with what was going on in Pretoria on the political side, if you like?

PL: I fed in stuff from Johannesburg from my contacts who used Jo'burg as their personal base, also from the townships and the big business people who were working to develop their influence with the new dispensation. I spent a lot of time with the parastatal organisations, the power company, the transport people, the aviation people, and the like. All of them were political activists in their own right, and with a political position and a political stake. You couldn't be involved with the top echelons of business without seeing party factions at work.

JJ: To what extent did the IMF or the World Bank get involved in these early days?

PL: I wasn't involved in that. My job was to deal with bilateral interaction and watch the direction things were taking. We were particularly interested in how the big parastatals were broken up. The degree to which technology was required – where was technology going? We were also involved in a whole range of social issues. John Major, as Prime Minister, visited in 1994, and as a great sports enthusiast he created a Prime Minister's sports initiative. He wasn't just talking about sport to keep kids off street corners. He took the view that bringing young people into team sports was actually a preparation for collaborative activity in the workshops. It was quite important preparation for working. I do remember we opened a pavilion at the Alexandra Oval cricket ground. Alexandra was probably the most dangerous township in South Africa. The cricket ground there bore very little resemblance to the place in south London. We brought in people who would train football coaches, and athletics coaches. We were engaged in a whole range of capacity-development to address social needs as well as business needs. Frankly, it was a lot of fun because it exposed you to a big range of society, and certainly to life in the townships. They were fascinating places for first-time visitors with their own sense of history and individual social structures. But it was also a period of great danger for a lot of people. Very criminal.

JJ: It still is, I'm afraid.

PL: When I arrived our offices were in the Central Business District, which was a hotspot for violent mugging and just plain murder. Members of staff would occasionally come back from lunch with their necks bleeding because attackers had torn off necklaces. I'd walk downtown for lunch a couple of times a week out of solidarity. You felt the tension and you had to watch your step, hide your wristwatch, look out for potential trouble two street corners ahead and maybe cross the road a couple of times. It was a strange way of life and it was only when you were in some secure place that you realised how tense you had become. Many of my colleagues have had similar and greater challenges and I don't want to make too much of it, but before I went to Jo'burg I'd never got to know anyone who was subsequently murdered. After four years there I knew four people who had been murdered. An average of one murdered person a year is a spooky statistic I think. Anyway, the upshot of this was that we moved out of the CBD for the northern suburb of Illovo where we were able to design our offices from scratch on an empty plot. I had been instructed to create an interactive office, but increasingly nobody wanted to risk interacting with us in the middle of the city. Inevitably crime moved north and you have to watch your step in Illovo these days.

JJ: There's also the major problem of AIDS, isn't there, which – I don't know whether that had come up to the surface, so to speak, while you were there?

PL: It was already there and people were aware of it, and it was obvious, certainly to major employers like Anglo-American and so on, that their work force was being hit by this and it was having an economic impact. I wasn't there for the controversy over President M'Beki's AIDS-attitude which created a big debate, and great doubts about his grip on the reality of the situation.

JJ: Mandela was very critical of him, wasn't he, at that stage? Having promoted his presidency when he retired, it was hard to understand. M'Beki got an economics degree from a British University –

PL: It was Sussex.

JJ: Sussex. And it absorbed some of the modern ways of looking at ...

PL: We always found it interesting in South Africa that there was a tendency for those who had been imprisoned on Robben Island and the other activists who had stayed at home during the struggle to have a more liberal and reconciliatory approach than those who had been in exile like M'Beki and Tito M'Bweni. A more reconciliatory approach precisely by the people who it seemed had suffered the most under Apartheid than the ones who'd been abroad looking in from the outside. There was some surprise that Mandela chose M'Beki as his successor. Most people thought that it would go to Cyril Ramaphosa, the General Secretary of the ANC. He'd led the South African Labour Movement. He was one of the co-drafters of the new South African Constitution, respected and popular at home and well accepted internationally. But there were forces that needed balancing between the coalition of interests that made up the coalition of the ANC, the trade unions, the Pan-African Congress and the Communists. There is a strong mood in an influential sector of South African society that things are not going far enough fast enough and that certainly the white guys had been allowed to get away with an awful lot during the period when democracy was being restored and the majority should be taking its true role. So I think Mandela said: "Okay it's my job to do the transition, and make sure we get through four years without bloodshed and trouble. Mbeki is the best person to sustain the unity of the ANC after I'm gone." I doubt if he made the right choice.

JJ: He was Vice President, wasn't he – M'Beki?

PL: Yes.

JJ: I don't know quite how he got the job, but there we are. You talked about reconciliation – this amazing truth and reconciliation process which went on for about three years, I think – that was a brilliant idea, wasn't it?

PL: I think it was. It was very controversial.

JJ: It was a new approach to the development of human rights in one sense.

PL: There is very strong feeling saying “Oh well let’s just draw the line and forget it, and start again” realistic. It was a question of how these two groups of people could live in harmony after inflicting such terrible things on each other, and I think the peace and reconciliation process had its risks – to bring in these guys and get them to go into detail over the awful things they did. You would think this would be much more likely to inflame tempers than otherwise. But it turned out to be a healing process. People are now suggesting that it should be replicated in Zimbabwe. It was a great innovation and I don’t think Desmond Tutu got his Nobel Prize for nothing. He was a very, very strong moral influence.

JJ: It was in a sense a religious approach to ...

PL: Spiritual.

JJ: All right spiritual.

PL: When you’re in Africa you don’t forget the spirits. One of the things that I found difficult when I got there in October 1994 was to comprehend how different things had been just a short time before and how rapidly they had changed on the surface. Black and white people were using the same toilets and shared the same trains and doing things which would have been inconceivable under Apartheid. This appeared to be happening without too much trouble. But in reality the imposed speed of the transition had left everybody high and dry. Not many knew how to cope with it. I think if anybody during that period felt the real wind, it was the whites in blue-collar jobs. They were the ones who saw themselves in the front line of transition. The managerial classes were going to keep their jobs because most blacks hadn’t been able to acquire the necessary skills. But many workers in lower-level jobs were there as a result of deliberate overstaffing in state enterprises to keep the poor whites happy, the inefficiency cost being balanced by the cheap labour afforded by blacks in other economic sectors. Jobs in the railways, ports, and so on was effectively a pay-off for the white proletariat which could be sustained in a command economy, but not an

open one. There was a strong feeling among blue-collar workers their jobs were as redundant as Apartheid. I suspect that's probably the case.

Posting as High Commissioner in Harare, Zimbabwe, 1998-2001

PL: Going to Zimbabwe was a big shift from a country moving rapidly forward to a country in decline, but it didn't look like that at the time. When we got to Harare in the spring of 1998 Zimbabwe was looking deceptively good. We were coming from a place where murder was commonplace, the police were ineffective and the economy was still in transition. There had been no impact on mass unemployment during Mandela's first four years. Harare was more relaxed: the place looked cleaner and more orderly than Johannesburg. It was certainly a lower-risk city: you could walk on your own through the middle of town and be well-received by the locals, able to stop and chat. Meanwhile policemen caught criminals who went through due process. After 20 years of independence, the black middle and managerial class was more developed than in South Africa and in the main towns, society seemed more equitably structured, although it was a different story in the high-density townships and rural areas. And even if the economy had embarked on its long decline, the core industries of agriculture, mining and tourism were functioning well.

But it didn't take long to realise that all this was flawed by a huge financial drain from the pay-out in lump sums and pensions which Mugabe had felt obliged make to the Veterans' Association, allegedly under the threat of assassination from their leader Hitler Hunzwi. The knock-on effects, exacerbated by bad economic management, cronyism and disregard for principles of good governance led to inflation and food shortages. Mugabe's opportunistic pledge to balance the economy through compulsory farm nationalisation undermined international confidence leading to the rapid decline of the Zimbabwean Dollar.

This happened at speed and before one's eyes: when I arrived in 1998, Zimbabwe was the second biggest economy in southern Africa with a growth rate of 6 – 7 per cent. When I left in 2001, it was minus 12 and falling. It takes real talent to achieve that single-handed. That was the scene Christina and I watched as it happened. In dismay.

JJ: And helplessness really? Very little the British Government could do?

PL: The Labour Government had just come in and were still in opposition mode after so many years out of power. I don't think Ministers paid too much attention to the foreign policy issues at the bottom end of their in-tray. The big issues of Europe, post-Soviet Russia, the Middle East etc took a necessary priority, but there seemed little interest in less obvious places where trouble could flare up.

This was very much the case in most of Africa. Heads of Mission were given to understand that Ministers rarely got to the submissions on African countries outside the big issues and that in order to get business done, officials were making decisions for them based on their judgements of what Ministers would actually have done if they got round to it. At one point we were told that it had worked so far, but one day someone was going to fly into a wall. I guess this came to pass with the Sandline Affair in Sierra Leone when Ministers discovered that UK arms supplies were going into the country against a United Nations sanction. The outcome was an unseemly allocation of blame in which a House of Commons Committee eventually let Ministers off the hook and Ministers pardoned officials. I hope someone is doing Sandline in some depth, because it was a seminal event for the conduct of FCO policy in Africa. It impacted on careers and was also bruising for the officials who had been involved. Long after it was over Sandline hung like a cloud over relations between ministers and officials and, I suspect, on the quality of the advice that went up the submission chain.

Another factor which made life difficult for posts in the developing world was the obviously difficult personal relationship between the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, and the Secretary of State for DFID, Claire Short. It was said, and that's how it came across to officials at Post, that they were scarcely on speaking terms and that relations weren't much better between their respective senior officials. The problem was that Cook was responsible for foreign policy but was frugally funded whereas Short had a huge budget and followed her own objectives, often in a manner not helpful to foreign policy interests. It was immediately perceptible at post where DFID colleagues,

although personally amenable, operated as though they worked for a different government from the High Commission's.

Claire Short had personally set the scenario for my tenure in Harare when she wrote a letter to Mugabe which he found deeply offensive. The letter concerned land reform, and in it she said in so many words that as the descendant of Irish peasants she didn't need any lessons from him on the matter. It was a constant subject of complaint and he referred to it regularly in his conversations with me

There were numerous other issues. There was a verbatim leak to the Guardian of an analysis I had written on the state of the Zimbabwean armed forces which was widely and accurately quoted in the British and African press. My suspicions that this had been the work of senior levels at DFID were confirmed to me recently at a Guardian function. They took issue to my mentioning that our imposition of an arms embargo on Zimbabwe had reduced our access to and influence among senior officers, which was, of course a statement of fact. However, the UK press, presumably inspired, said it reflected an FCO and DTI line far removed from DFID's moral stand and I had to take some stick for that. Of more concern to me, though, was the fact that I had included a number of disobliging comments about the upper echelons in the armed forces and their profits from the system. In particular I mentioned that every officer above one-star rank had been given land by the Government as an important sweetener. I had a panicky time reflecting on that comment when jammed in a lift at a Bulawayo hotel with five mountainous brigadiers who obviously recognised me. It was a relief to get a friendly remark – they were having a good time in town on a jolly organised by the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) and weren't inclined to bear grudges.

I suppose I have to thank the invasion of Iraq for the departures of Cook and Short from Cabinet and their replacement respectively by Jack Straw and Baroness Amos, who were a lot easier to work for. I am very pleased when I call at the FCO and DFID these days to find a completely different approach. There seems to be good dialogue and collaboration, both in London and at posts.

PL: From the outset, Mugabe blamed the British Government for the economic crisis. He said Britain had reneged on its commitment at the Lancaster House independence negotiations to fund land reform in Zimbabwe and, by holding back on its promise had brought about Zimbabwe's decline. In reality the UK had provided £40 million for farm reform, of which £3 million was under-spent, and the outcomes of the funds which had been disbursed were disappointing. In addition, most of the farms bought with the British money had gone to senior governing party members.

In consequence, the new Labour Government decided not to give the Zimbabwean authorities any more cash for farm purchase, but to allocate funding for agriculture through the development assistance budget for projects which met DFID's poverty-elimination objectives. This did not go down well with Mugabe who told me that Britain's obligation deriving from Lancaster House had nothing to do with development assistance. His actual words were: "This isn't aid. You owe us!"
Deadlock.

In addition to this there was a strong antipathy towards Mugabe among Labour Ministers who had demonstrated for him on the streets of London in the days of UDI. They felt badly let down and said so publicly, encouraging Mugabe's belief that Tony Blair and New Labour had it in for him personally. This was confirmed for him nicely by Claire Short's inflammatory letter.

While there was plenty the British Government could have done in policy terms to calm the relationship they estimated that there would be little in return from Mugabe except maybe some peace and quiet while in substance he would continue to pursue his narrow and selfish interests, inevitably in conflict with HMG's policies on human rights and good governance. Ministers decided that since nothing was going to change Mugabe, they should try to keep the UK out of the front line and not give him the pretext to claim that as the former colonial power we had residual responsibilities. It didn't stop him, though, I think that the tragedy of Zimbabwe was unstoppable once he felt under threat from a domestic political movement.

Things got much worse, both for relations between Mugabe and British Ministers and, more importantly in human terms for the people of Zimbabwe when the country's democratic system began to pose a threat to his grip on power.

As the economy deteriorated, shortages kicked in and there were food riots, robustly put down by the security forces. Individual Zimbabweans encountered greater hardship than at any time since independence and even black Zimbabweans could be heard to say things had been better under Ian Smith's illegal whites-only government. As a consequence, Morgan Tsvangirai, the General Secretary of the Zimbabwean Trades Union Congress, who had been taking a tough stand against an increasingly threatening government, took what turned out to be a fateful decision to confront Mugabe head-to-head politically and created the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to challenge the ruling ZANU-PF at the next elections. His first opportunity to demonstrate the strength of opposition to Mugabe came in a referendum in February 2000 on a new draft constitution for Zimbabwe. Everyone was taken aback when Mugabe was defeated with a resounding majority for Tsvangirai and his supporters, to which the President responded angrily, creating a new and dangerous situation for dissenters, commercial farmers and UK-Zimbabwe relations.

Up to that moment, Zimbabwe had a semblance of democracy in the reality of which opposing political parties got nowhere or, if they posed a real challenge like ZAPU in the earlier days of independence, were firmly dealt with. It was a democracy which suited Mugabe well, since there was a legal and tolerated opposition which gave him a semblance of international respectability, but in fact allowed him virtually absolute power. When, against all the odds, he was defeated and humiliated in a national poll by a party which had existed only for a few weeks, he saw democracy not just as an inconvenience, but an impertinence. Losing a referendum on amendments to the Constitution with a general election coming up three months later implied an unacceptable threat and he let the dogs loose.

White-owned commercial farms were invaded, and taken over, people were brutalised and killed. There was huge intimidation of the general population in the run-up to the general elections of March 2000. Meanwhile the President had turned on the hitherto independent judiciary and forced them into his pocket. The security forces were

complicit in the violence and the shocking tortures and killings. Most people in the West who thought the population didn't show enough bottle haven't been invited to strip and sit on a red hot stove.

Despite all this, the MDC came within a whisker of securing a majority and Mugabe stepped up his campaign of attrition to make sure the result wasn't so tight when he re-ran for President in October 2001.

The MDC's success in the February 2000 referendum also started a new and more hostile phase in Mugabe's attacks against the UK. It was inconceivable to him that a movement to bring him down, the father of Zimbabwe and great liberator, could be drawn from a broad spectrum of true Zimbabweans and he immediately accused the UK of funding the MDC to destabilise his Government. From that point we were depicted as the creators of political dissent to keep white farmers rich and regain Britain's control of Zimbabwe through local puppets.

Things got very nasty and very personal, not just in public attacks on Tony Blair and his Ministers, but with allegations against the High Commission. I was meant to be funding the opposition party, and mobilising underground campaigns to subvert the population. The lead story in the Government newspaper that greeted me one breakfast time was that I was diverting oil tankers in the Indian Ocean with cargoes designated for Zimbabwe in order to destabilise the country. I wish I'd had the resources.

JJ: Seen from here at the time the impression of the white farmers or the white farms if you like; nationalisation, compensation, seemed to be a major factor in what eventually happened, that the country was in general forced into starvation? But there was supposed to be a deal done with the British Government over all this.

PL: I mentioned the friction between Mugabe and British Ministers over our alleged renegeing on the Lancaster House Agreement. The reality on the ground at that time was that while everyone acknowledged that the white commercial farmers occupied most of the fertile land, they were also paying their dues to the local barons, feeding the country and making a huge contribution to Zimbabwe's foreign currency earnings.

Most people, including Mugabe, had been happy to let things drift on but it seemed to me at the time that the white farmers had been extraordinary complacent in assuming that this was sustainable. There was a very large level of indigenous poverty in the rural areas. Locals never got a crack at agriculture for themselves. The situation would need to be resolved sometime. After things had got bad and the farm invasions were at their height, I asked a former President of the Commercial farmers Union why he hadn't seen this coming – he replied that he had held meetings with Mugabe at least once a month over a long period and the President had never so much as mentioned that anything was amiss. In retrospect, though, it seems clear that a futurologist would have said the land issue had to blow once Mugabe came under pressure – and so it did.

Mugabe himself did not make land the big issue until he came under threat domestically. He had no viable platform because the majority blamed him directly for the collapse of the economy and their own distress. So in true political fashion he attempted to shift the blame to the evil Brits and the vindictiveness of Tony Blair who was, he said, determined to destabilise Zimbabwe. He actually talked nonsense and the early successes of the MDC demonstrated that everyone knew it.

The British played a straight bat and said they would include empowerment of the rural areas in the aid budget, support capacity-generation programmes to educate potential small farmers in agricultural techniques, find them places where they could develop their own homesteads and so on. But what Mugabe wanted was not an empowerment programme, but hard cash to fund his deficit and distribute among party power-brokers and others who posed a political threat. So it became an issue.

The British Government's quite reasonable criteria for putting money into land redistribution were: it must be legal; distribution was done on merit (not party standing) and that there was a sane approach to land tenure to underpin sustainable development. The people should feel they had a real stake in the process.

JJ: Why is it that President M'Beki of South Africa, and indeed large numbers of the black population, appeared to support Mugabe's actions so strongly in this regard?

PL: Mbeki was Mugabe's greatest asset. I believe that Mbeki was hostile to whites and that he was never comfortable with Nelson Mandela's reconciliation policies after Apartheid. Secondly, Mbeki, like Mugabe, was an Africanist who had difficulty coping with the concept of globalisation. For both of these reasons, he was sympathetic to what many saw as Mugabe's principled stand against white ambitions in Africa. He took Mugabe's line that Britain and the USA were working with Zimbabwe's white population to develop their economic dominance in the country to strengthening their political influence through local puppets. It reflected his own resentment that whites continued to dominate the South African economy. Probably most important for Mbeki and many of his fellow heads of government in Southern Africa, Morgan Tsvangirai had challenged the comfortable consensus that only individuals or parties who had participated in the liberation struggle were entitled to lead an African nation. For that reason, Mbeki, like Mugabe, found it difficult to believe that there could ever be a truly grass roots political movement which challenged one of the legendary leaders of the struggle and his administration. It could only come as a result of outside subversion.

Mbeki's over-riding concern was for the future of the ANC: if Africans now felt able to challenge the legitimacy to govern of a great liberation movement like Mugabe's ZANU-PF, what would happen to his own ANC? Subsequent events in South Africa have demonstrated that he was right to be concerned and that Southern Africa is now firmly in the post-independence period.

At the time, British Government made it a lot easier than they needed to for Mugabe to sell the line that his crisis was down to the vindictiveness of the Brits. Our efforts to formulate policy towards Zimbabwe have been overshadowed by its being as much a domestic as a foreign policy issue for successive British Governments. Ministers enjoyed bad-mouthing Mugabe in sound bites which sounded in the House of Commons and pleased the British right-wing press, but went down badly with Africans.

It was odd to sit in Africa and watch a Labour Government give every sign of being driven by the Rhodesia kith-and-kin lobby. I was urged by well-placed Zimbabweans to persuade UK Ministers to tone down their remarks – or at least to make them in

such a way as they referred to the Zimbabwean Government and not to Mugabe personally, since they were only succeeding in influencing his actions for the worse. My African colleagues in the Diplomatic Corps also cautioned me that the war of words was working against the UK with their Governments who felt obliged to take the African side. In the end I sent a telegram advising that the personal attacks on Mugabe were seen in Zimbabwe as part of the problem, rather than the solution, but received no reply. Eventually the then Zimbabwe desk officer at the FCO told my Second Secretary that the message had been badly received by Ministers – not really the way a Head of Mission expects to get a response to his recommendations, even if they are unwelcome.

One of the crassest examples of muddled thinking at that time was the handling of the Tatchell affair. Peter Tatchell was the leader of the UK Gay Liberation movement and took exception to Mugabe's regular denunciations of gay people in Zimbabwe in which he likened them to pigs and dogs. On one of Mugabe's many private visits to London Tatchell and some associates grabbed Mugabe as he was entering his car and tried to make a citizen's arrest. Harare billboards screamed "Queers Jump on Mugabe". Mugabe was incandescent.

I was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and barked at by the Minister. Mugabe was convinced that the whole thing had been organised by the British Government. He refused to accept that this was fantasy born of paranoia, nor could he be budged by assurances. An apology was demanded, but none came. I advised that this could be a real watershed in an already tricky relationship and an apology might be a nice idea, given that a visiting head of state had been assaulted on the streets of London. I was told that since the British Government had no hand in the matter, an apology was not appropriate.

Meanwhile I had a difficult conversation with Mugabe under strangely comic circumstances. Coincidence brought us to the same platform at a seminar on the empowerment of women entrepreneurs, not a subject close to Mugabe's heart, but he got a lot of support from Zimbabwean women of the liberation generation and he took great pains to nurture it.

At the end of the meeting, I got up to speak to him about the Tatchell incident, but he saw me coming and moved quickly away, I followed him starting a virtual chase down a corridor with Mugabe rushing off in the lead, me second and his security men in third place. When I eventually caught up with him, he said the Tatchell “outrage” was a deliberate act by the British Government to humiliate him in the eyes of the world. “That’s the way they want Mugabe to look”. After the best part of a week, Peter Hain, Minister of State for Africa phoned the Zimbabwean Foreign Minister and expressed regret. The newspapers splashed: “Britain Apologises” and I was instructed to make it clear that it had not been an apology but an expression of regret – which created even more confusion and aggravation. I think it was a defining moment for UK/ Zimbabwe relations and was all the more regrettable since the evening before Tatchell made his move, Peter Hain had called on Mugabe at his hotel and seemed to make some progress towards re-establishing a working relationship. The Foreign Minister told me that Mugabe had been left believing that a new start had been made, but the following day Tatchell demonstrated the reality of Britain’s strategy.

Another extraordinary incident which added to fuel to the bilateral fire was the incident of the Diplomatic Bag. In retrospect and given the tension in relations at the time, I guess it seems crazy that the office decided to send a three-ton (might have been two) diplomatic bag to Harare and expect it to go through as a matter of routine. On the other hand, we had been used in Cold war days to having as Diplomatic Bags container lorries motoring across Europe with a small lead seal on the back door.

In any case, the Customs would not let the bag (several of them actually on a number of trolleys) through and we entered several days of discussions with the various authorities while High Commission staff took it in shifts to sit on a rickety office chair in the Customs Hall and make sure the bag wasn’t tampered with. I tried for days to get through to a Minister or senior officials to get things sorted out, but they weren’t in a mood to take calls. In reality, the bags contained electronic masking equipment to protect our communications from eavesdropping. They contained plaster-board, insulating board, hammers I think, but the press were suggesting that they were carrying anything from automatic weapons for white farmers to propaganda material for the opposition party.

The upshot was that the Government decided to violate the Vienna Convention and open the bags in the presence of TV cameras and the media – another first for Zimbabwe and I was summoned back to London for consultations. I was sorry to miss the coverage of the opening of the bags. I understand there were some sheepish and angry faces around when building material fell out instead of AK-47s.

When I got back to London, nobody knew what to do with me. Being recalled for consultations is a very high level of protest, but Ministers didn't want me to stay away for too long since the situation back in Harare needed watching. On a Thursday, I was told to return on the following Monday night. When I asked if I could return with Christina who had reasons to be in Harare on the Sunday, I was told that it was much too short an absence to constitute a protest so I had to wait an extra day to demonstrate the wrath of the British Government.

The issue didn't do me much good with the office, since David Blair the Daily Telegraph correspondent in Harare did a piece on our style of diplomacy, which involved a lot of hanging out with locals at jazz clubs and fashionable restaurants. He was kind enough to say that I was robust with the press and stood knee-to-knee with Mugabe and all that, but I was nevertheless warned by the Director for Africa to act with more decorum. I was quite popular with taxi drivers, though.

All of this made Mugabe less approachable and enabled him to use what he saw as British sniping to demonstrate to M'beki that the crisis derived from a personal vendetta against him. He also used it to persuade his African counterparts that the British public attacks against him indicated a more general hostility to African aspirations. Ministers did not welcome advice that their statements were part of the problem and not the solution.

At one point, my South African colleague in Harare said that his most difficult problem was persuading Pretoria to take the MDC seriously as a political party, because Mugabe consistently told M'Beki that the MDC was funded by the British, and a fraudulent front.

But I think that there has been a change in the relationship between M'Beki and Mugabe because misrule and brutality in Zimbabwe have become too extreme to ignore and many of the other African leaders are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with defending Mugabe in their discussions with foreign Governments. I think a tipping point was Mugabe's campaign to demolish all the houses in the townships, imposing homelessness on the urban poor and obliging many of them to return to the rural areas where they could be more effectively controlled by the authorities. This brought great negative publicity through Africa as a whole. M'Beki has been saying: "Well, we're not going to bale you out any more, or give you big loans unless you accept the fundamental principles of the IMF and so on".

JJ: Because he has been baling them out, hasn't he?

PL: Yes. But now he's beginning to put conditions against which Mugabe has protested. But I think the reality of the situation in Zimbabwe is that the opposition has broken down because they have stuck to the democratic path. Democracy doesn't work in conditions where the authorities are able to intimidate the electorate and manipulate the vote. And the alternative of any kind of armed revolt is not practical because they just don't have weapons or training – nor probably the inclination to move in that direction. So everybody is just sitting around waiting for Mugabe to disappear. And after that who knows what will happen.

JJ: Did you have much to do with Mugabe personally?

PL: In my first 18 months I had a number of conversations with Mugabe. At one point we sat together for two hours watching a cricket match. We spoke about his successful campaign to have the Congo accepted as a member of SADC ("It is important that they get sufficient African support not to become an American satellite like Uganda"). I asked what his vision was for Zimbabwe ("Zimbabwe must become African again and shun globalisation. We should return to our rural strengths and keep the West out of our lives"). Above all, he could not understand what the Labour Government had against him. Very often when he had passed through London in earlier days. Mrs Thatcher and subsequently John Major would ask him round to Number 10 for tea.

He thought Labour Ministers had decided up-front to take an adversarial line with him personally which they pursued with great discourtesy. At my farewell call, after the situation in Zimbabwe had become chronically bad, he made this point at length, with bitterness and much shouting. He believed that Tony Blair and Peter Hain were personally responsible for what had happened. When I suggested that he would be viewed similarly by a Conservative Government, since Labour had come to power in the UK at about the same time as his policies had begun to move backwards, he responded badly.

For all that we had a reasonably good relationship until bilateral relations went irreversibly down the tube and I was occasionally, but wrongly, accused of being too pally with him. It was no help that he regularly refused to let go of my hand after shaking it and on occasions would walk me hand-in-hand. It is, of course, unremarkable in Africa that men walk together in this way when talking, but it's a bit unusual for a Head of State and an allegedly hostile High Commissioner to do it too often. He once led me by the hand to the tote window at a race meeting and told the cashier to make sure I paid him in Sterling. I often wondered whether this was just part of his personality or a deliberate ploy to put me on the spot. He often took the opportunity to bring the media in on the game ensuring that embarrassingly cosy photographs appeared here and there. There was regular sniping by anti-Mugabe journalists and papers, but it's quite difficult to say "unhand me" to a man like Mugabe.

It was interesting to see the effect he had on visitors from the UK, including Ministers who were determined to talk robustly and put him right. Without exception they were taken aback by his urbanity, politeness and tailoring. They found it difficult to get to the point of criticising his actions and were shocked by the violence of his response when they eventually did so. It was impossible to ignore his charisma, nor to get some idea of the strong hold he had over his supporters and fellow African leaders. But he was ruthless, cruel and hugely successful in achieving his personal objectives of staying in power, putting down criticism and disrespect and maintaining the dominant position of his tribe and clan for more than 20 years.

JJ: And Tsvangirai?

PL: I got to know and admire Tsvangirai. Although critics say he is not equipped to govern a country, they ignore the distance which the MDC has come under his leadership despite splits and internal quarrels. He has got this far through tenacity and extraordinary personal courage. When I first met him it was shortly after four hit-men had tried to throw him out of an upper window (5th or 6th floor). Most people will subsequently have seen him on TV emerging from a police station with a fractured skull and a head like a balloon as the result of beating. He has a downside: he doesn't communicate well, doesn't take to criticism and has strong autocratic tendencies. But with the right team, he can govern Zimbabwe and use his own credentials as one who has suffered badly in the new struggle to sustain popular support. I saw a lot of him before he emerged as a political, rather than a trade union leader, but eventually it became unwise for the British High Commissioner to be seen spending too much time with him. It reinforced the propaganda that the Brits were funding and plotting with him. Increasingly direct contact was made at a more junior level. I suppose that as a former newspaper industrial correspondent I recognised and liked his toughness and direct approach and respected his continuing struggle to keep the protest about Mugabe going on a social and political level. He was like the old-style trade union general-secretary who will do everything to avoid a strike while achieving his objectives. Tsvangirai had no desire to see his people cut down on the streets, which would have been inevitable given Mugabe's absolute grip on all the organs of state security. Yet this is one of the areas in which he has been most criticised.

JJ: Very sad. Thank you for a very interesting interview and I'm very grateful. You have obviously had a very interesting and demanding career.

PL: I'm not sure about demanding. I think that the last years were a bit ...

JJ: Would you choose to do it again?

PL: Yes. There are ups and downs in the Foreign Service - the ups are all good. The downs are largely family related – children's education and well-being, property at home, things like that. You know, these are the things that await you when you get

back from your foreign postings. I can't think of any other kind of life, which would have given me the range of experiences I've described. I just don't know what other job would have provided it.

JJ: It's true what you say about the difficulties, which people outside don't realise. The difficulties engendered by having to change where you live, the country you live, the house you live in, every three or four years.

PL: I think the other thing to say is something people always throw in somewhere in their valedictory dispatches: and finally a word for my wife. I think there is a very serious point to be made about spouses. Throughout all this Christina and I have been two people working for one salary because the life wouldn't have been possible without her participation, whether in the conventional role of hostess or otherwise. In terms of client relationships, she's been a very important factor, and also in the general support that she has given to the Service. She has also been inspirational to the junior staff in difficult posts and also to me. There is also a bottom line: without the likes of Christina and her sisters in the service, the cost of running a decent operation abroad would be far greater. The office knows it, ministers know it, the Treasury knows it and there's no money for it.

JJ: But at least wives are being paid for the extra duties they do arranging cooking, hosting etc?

PL: Yes, a few bob, paid into the partner's salary and taxable. It is risible. It is a structural issue that needs to be addressed in a serious way. Other countries manage it.

Transcribed by Evie Jamieson

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