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**McDONALD, Simon Gerard, Lord McDonald of Salford (born 9 March 1961)  
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# BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

## RECOLLECTIONS OF SIMON MCDONALD, LORD MCDONALD OF SALFORD KCMG KCVO

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY IAN HAY-CAMPBELL

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**IH-C:** This is Ian Hay-Campbell interviewing Simon McDonald, Lord McDonald of Salford, on Monday, 1 February 2021. Simon, what led you to joining the Foreign Office in the first place?

**SM:** I joined the Office in September 1982 having applied earlier that year. I was at Cambridge from '79 to '82 and in my final year, like all undergraduates contemplating not being undergraduates, I had to decide what I wanted to do with my life. The Foreign Office had always been of interest to me. I am a historian and Britain's place in the world was one thing of particular interest. One of the papers I did in my final year was "The West and the Rest", a history of Britain's process of decolonisation. So, there was a history angle; there was also a personal angle in that both my grandfathers travelled. One was a merchant seaman and the other had a company which organised pilgrimages, mostly for Roman Catholics, mostly to Lourdes and Rome. As a child I went to Lourdes and Rome and, as a child from Salford, the allure of overseas was very powerful. So, I decided above all things that I'd like to be in the Foreign Office and applied and got in.

**IH-C:** And you were assigned your first place in the Foreign Office looking after the Benelux countries?

**SM:** In those days induction was four days and on the first afternoon all the fast stream new entrants were told what their first desk job would be. Mine was Benelux Desk Officer. I went that afternoon to meet Nicholas Armour, who was the Head of Section, and Rob Young, the Assistant [Head of Department], and Andrew Wood, the Head of Western European Department. And on the Friday, I started work, in at the deep end. In those days the Office believed more than anything else in learning on the job and so it was a proper job but not the most exposed or high pressured. I was very lucky in what was supposed to be a very quiet

job to have, as a first thing to do, to help organise the State Visit of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. So that dominated the first few months of my time in the Foreign Office.

**IH-C:** It must have been a bit of a revelation to you to realise that these inward state visits are enormous affairs to organise even if you were only playing a fairly small part in it.

**SM:** It's true, and that was immediately apparent. Although I was the Desk Officer, of course there was Protocol Department, Security, the Embassy in The Hague and the rest of it – there was a huge team already engaged. So, I was well aware that I was a small cog. I had two things that were particularly my responsibility: one of those was guest lists; I had to compile guest lists for the State Banquet and for the Guildhall Banquet. And the second was a speech, a speech for The Queen because the Foreign Office provides the first draft of speeches for the monarch on these occasions and the desk officer holds the pen.

**IH-C:** You didn't have any fears that there might be a call from Buckingham Palace from The Queen saying: "No, I don't like this, Mr McDonald".

**SM:** No, I just got on with it. I should confess, Ian, that I had never written a speech before in my life. So, starting with The Queen was quite something but I worked out very quickly that the best guide was precedent. So, I looked at previous speeches Her Majesty had made; I had the Country Brief; I talked to the Assistant Head of Department; I am a historian and so I put all these things together and wrote a five-minute speech.

**IH-C:** And the visit passed off pretty much without incident?

**SM:** Oh, it was a great success. These things are always a great success. I don't think there has ever been an inward State Visit that wasn't called a success. But I think it really was and I was very happy with my element. The speech went down well and one thing I learned early on is that you have to take care with what you send up because there is a chance that what you send up will be the final product. My draft went almost unmolested to the Foreign Secretary, who at the time was Francis Pym. He remarked that it was clearly written by a historian but sent it off and The Queen delivered a speech which was substantially mine. My first ever feedback was from Philip Moore who was Private Secretary to The Queen and he phoned my boss to thank him so that was all very nice.

**IH-C:** You were still, of course, very junior at this stage, finding your way. Were there people around you who were of considerable help in terms of the way they approached their job and therefore you felt you could be doing your job better?

**SM:** The people around were the key and were of enormous help and I was very lucky. Of course, you don't realise at the time how lucky you are. But all the people around me and in the chain of command were exceptional. Nicholas [Armour] was a nice, immediate boss who taught me about getting things right, to fuss about the detail because the Desk Officer is really expected to know about the detail. And then going up the chain of command, I already mentioned Rob Young, who ended up as High Commissioner in Delhi, Andrew Wood who ended up as Ambassador in Moscow, Alan Goodison who ended up as Ambassador in Dublin and Julian Bullard who ended up as Ambassador in Germany – were the people I worked for. And all - in different, contrasting and complementary ways - helpful teachers.

**IH-C:** Can you tell us just a little more about Julian Bullard, in particular, and working with him?

**SM:** He was Political Director. He was our very first Political Director and his office was opposite mine in Downing Street West on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor. He looked a rather forbidding character, his face was almost mummified, I'm afraid, and very gaunt but his forbidding exterior belied the kindest nature. He was generous and curious and kind. He would always stop and talk, he seemed especially interested in the new entrants and I remember two early meetings when he just called me in and explained stuff that was important for me to know. One, which I don't think anybody knows intuitively, was about how to write the record of a meeting. He explained that you're not a stenographer, you're not trying to produce a verbatim record. You are trying to capture the salient points: "and that is it, Simon". With that guidance the draft went maybe once between us and then it was agreed. Then that was a model for evermore. The second thing was that he taught me how to write reported speech, indirect speech which, even though I had a Cambridge degree, I'd never had to do before. English education in the 1970s didn't really dwell on grammar, so he taught me that in 20 minutes and that also was useful to know for the next 38 years.

**IH-C:** And as Political Director of course, you saw him in operation in that capacity.

**SM:** I did. There are a couple of stories. He was already a very grand figure although it was the beginning of his time as Political Director. I remember people saying about him that he was very clever and in the middle of his career sort of suffered from being very clever. He was clearly more clever than some of the people he was working for and that doesn't always help a career. But in 1979 Lord Carrington became Foreign Secretary and the story went that after a few months he minuted the PUS saying: "I have now been here six months. I am very impressed with the people I work with but I am particularly impressed with Mr Julian Bullard. What are your plans for him?" So, clearly Lord Carrington knew what he was talking about.

Another story that went the rounds that made a very deep impression on me was about Julian and economy of words. Julian liked to arrive early at the office – maybe 5.00 or 5.30 in the morning. Even before mobile phones and emails we were pestered during the working day. Anyway, one day he arrived in his rather lovely office to discover a security guard asleep on his sofa. The security guard of course realised immediately he shouldn't be there and so scarpered but later that morning Julian sent a one-line minute to the Head of Security Department just saying: "This morning I arrived at my office at 5.30 to discover one of your guards asleep on my sofa". That was it. That's all he said, but that was all he needed to say for effective action to be taken.

**IH-C:** Wonderful! So, you had a relatively short time there as Benelux Desk Officer and then selected for language training?

**SM:** Yes, this was one of my more distressing experiences of the Foreign Office because in the early '80s you did much more what you were told than now. But there was a negotiation which you thought, or hoped, was a real negotiation about what you did next and the group of 18 was treated as one group and everybody knew everybody else's business and so I knew that people were in touch with POD, as it then was, about their hopes and even though I was just 21, I was very clear about it and reasonable, I felt. The two things that I told POD were that I would positively like to learn Russian; and I really did not want to learn Arabic. And they asked me why I did not want to learn Arabic and I told them. I said that I could not imagine being married to a woman who would be prepared to live in Saudi Arabia.

And so then it went off and people were told in the group what they were going to do next. It was all happening very quickly but I was aware that everyone else was hearing before I was and everyone else was getting good news. So, at the end of that week I got in touch with POD and they said: “Oh, it’s not good news, Simon. It’s not your first choice, it’s Arabic”. I said: “Dead right it’s not my first choice, it’s the only thing I said I didn’t want to do”. Nearly 40 years later I remember that clearly and I wasn’t happy doing it. I wasn’t an especially good student. I felt I could have been handled better.

**IH-C:** Was it well taught, as a matter of interest?

**SM:** No, no, no. It was terrible. As I get older I look back and think: good grief how did they think that this was a serious offer? The problem was that the Office had had Shemlan. So, they’d had an office in Lebanon where you were immersed in an Arabic-speaking environment and, of course, not everybody responded but it was a very, very good set up. But, because of the Lebanese Civil War at the end of the 70s, that operation closed. So, in the early ‘80s the Office was still trying to work out what to do and it was an unhappy hybrid of SOAS, where a very academic person would just read a page of a textbook, look at the class and say: “Well, that’s clear, isn’t it?” and move on. And a couple of refugees – native speakers – who weren’t really teachers. And so it was a miserable, amateur experience which also lit a spark that was significant to later decisions.

**IH-C:** There was no immersive element in an Arab country?

**SM:** Two weeks. Two weeks in Syria and two weeks in Jordan in a group of English speaking fellow students. I mean - useless!

**IH-C:** But at the end of it you were expected to pass what – Arabic Intermediate?

**SM:** Yes, and Higher. I did two and I failed so I had to re-take and passed at the second effort. There was also too little attention to how the language would be used. At that time also the Office fussed far too much about writing in Arabic which you were never required to do. So they turned out people whose conversation was like the front page of *Asharq al-Awsat* which is not what you need in the real world. So, as you can hear, I have crisp opinions

about the training we were given and only some of that was I brave enough to share at the time. But all of that was relevant as I was making decisions later.

**IH-C:** Underlying that disappointment, of course, would have been the prospect of knowing that having done your course in Arabic and got the qualifications needed, your first posting was going to be to an Arab country.

**SM:** Indeed, but I have always looked for the positive and of course we have nearly 20 posts in the Arabic-speaking world and I hoped to get a posting to a city or country that I would enjoy. Egypt was at the top of my list but I would very much have liked to go to Jordan or Syria – many places – but in the middle of the course I was rung up and told that it was Saudi Arabia. So I was not at all happy about that.

### **Jeddah, then Riyadh, 1985-88**

**IH-C:** So you found yourself going there. You were Third Secretary, of course, to start with. What was the process of adjustment like – arriving in the place where you were rather not expecting to go to and adjusting to life there?

**SM:** Well, it was very quick, Ian and the posting was wonderful. Another thing I learned is that you can have your personal prejudices and you can nurture them but they can dissolve in the face of reality very quickly. The country was fascinating and important to the United Kingdom; diplomats had a genuine old-fashioned diplomatic job to do (I'd like to come back to that). The work was fascinating and responsible for a Third Secretary and the colleagues were just terrific. Throughout my life I have found that the people around me make the biggest difference to enjoyment and fulfilment and the people around me in the Embassy first in Jeddah and then in Riyadh were fantastic. My first Ambassador was Patrick Wright, the Commercial Counsellor was Jeremy Greenstock, the Head of Chancery was Anthony Layden followed by Andrew Green - it was just a gold-plated professional set up.

**IH-C:** In the middle of your posting, the Embassy actually moved, didn't it?

**SM:** That is right. I arrived in Jeddah in May 1985 and the move was in September the same year. So one of the big things I had to do was to be part of the team moving the Embassy.

There was a lot of interesting work and when we were getting to the move itself, the new Head of Chancery, Andrew Green, decided I should be the person with him in Riyadh on Day One. That was great because for the transition period I was in the right place, I felt, and setting up an Embassy with all the problems – personnel, bureaucratic, infrastructure - were in my in-tray for me to sort out and I had a great time doing that.

**SM:** As you say, the logistics of that must have been enormous, including where you were going to be staying, to be living in Riyadh?

**IH-C:** Well, we built well. I think the project cost more than £20 million and for that we got the Embassy compound which included the chancery building and the residence with gardens and staff accommodation for about fifty people, I think. So, it was a big project and of course in those days we were more hierarchical than we are now so, as I was being promoted to Second Secretary that autumn, I got a very nice detached 3-bedroomed house which was way more than I needed but that was the ‘tariff’. Because people knew that I was in the ‘first wave’, my house was one of the first to be finished. So that was sorted pretty quickly.

**IH-C:** As this was your first post in particular, how did you find your contacts with the locals, with the Saudis themselves?

**SM:** They were very varied. The Saudis are not the most outgoing of people but they are very hospitable. So, you could get to a professional level – a level where you could do business quite quickly but I made very, very few Saudi friends and most of them had significant experience of the West, usually they’d been to university or even school in the UK or North America. But as I’ve already said, it was an old-fashioned diplomatic job in that we were the source of most information that London had about Saudi Arabia. There were no foreign correspondents in Saudi Arabia, the local press was pretty useless, the television stations were even worse. So, London trying to find out what was going on relied on the Embassy. Reading histories of our remote predecessors, I felt I had something strong in common and something which frankly most of my contemporaries didn’t have in their job descriptions, because the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*, or CNN or whatever, were providing basic political information.

**IH-C:** And of course that information was very vital for London to hear when you had, presumably, things like the Mecca incident in 1987?

**SM:** Absolutely. The world knew vaguely that something had happened but not what. And of course it was a time of tension between the Saudis and the Iranians and the first reports were that it was a clash between Sunni and Shia but we got weaving with our sources, our local staff were very important, our colleagues from Islamic countries were very important.....

**IH-C:** Can I just come in there and say could you remind us of the details of what actually happened?

**SM:** There were clashes between Sunni and the Shia but I think from memory they weren't very severe or important. But, in the confined area of Mecca, they triggered a stampede and in the stampede more than 400 people were killed. And so it was teasing apart what was deliberate and provocative and political from what was accidental and the consequence of a huge crowd in a panic. And from memory, we decided that the panicky aspect was the key. And so it was not Iran deliberately provoking Saudi Arabia. It was quite an important political judgement in the end and I think, from memory, it was the right one. It did not trigger a bigger conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

**IH-C:** Now, while you were there in Riyadh, I was in Middle East Department and the Saudi desk was run for much of my time there by Andrew Heath who was up to his ears with this enormous defence contract with the Saudis. That must have been something that came your way as well, at your end?

**SM:** Absolutely – Al Yamamah, named by King Fahd, was the biggest defence contract we had ever negotiated and came, as you know, in tranches. But we were there at the beginning and of course it was a government-to-government contract. The Saudis believed in government-to-government, not government to private sector. Even though BAE Systems was the key contractor, the government was there throughout the negotiations. The Ambassador, Patrick Wright and then Stephen Egerton, were key players and, in order to land it, the British Government used all the tools at its disposal. We had more than our fair share

of royal contacts and senior political contacts. And the Embassy, of course, organised all of them.

I was never involved in the detail, but I was aware of the contortions that my seniors were going through to avoid any appearance of corruption in this contract. The government did keep and needed to keep its hands clean. I'm sure, though, that what was happening in the background would be regarded by some as less than completely clean, but we had no part of that. But we were building the framework for the Saudis to feel confident in the relationship, because in the end, although they were getting defence materiel, they were getting 100 plus Tornados, more important to them was getting the international political commitment of the British Government. This meant we would stand by them in their difficulties and, as mentioned, they had particular worries across the Gulf with Iran but also to the north with Iraq and Syria and Israel. So, the politics were as important as the defence materiel.

The two highlights in that campaign were the State Visit of King Fahd and the visit to Saudi Arabia of the Prince and Princess of Wales, which was extraordinary. The Saudis were just delighted that the most famous couple in the world visited them.

**IH-C:** And you were involved in this, obviously?

**SM:** I was the main desk officer for the visit, putting together the programme and accompanying the royal couple throughout.

**IH-C:** By the time you finished and were going on to your next posting, you probably left with some regrets, did you?

**SM:** I was there for 3½ years, at that time it was the best 3½ years in my life. I felt I had learned an enormous amount about our profession and about life. I met my future wife in Saudi Arabia. It turned out that not only did I end up marrying a woman who was prepared to live in Saudi Arabia, she happily did live in Saudi Arabia.

**IH-C:** In fact, could one describe it as marrying the Boss's daughter?!

**SM:** Oh, absolutely! We met in the Ambassador's drawing room at Christmas 1985. So, I had a terrific time but it was also time to move on. And as I left I didn't really think of ever going back. It was great but that was then the rest of my life was going to be different.

### **Bonn, 1988-90**

**IH-C:** And it was what we call cross-posting, I assume - you were going straight from Riyadh to Germany?

**SM:** That is correct. I was the youngest person in my entry so, by the time I finished in Saudi Arabia, I was 27. Back then, you will recall, you became eligible for promotion to First Secretary, with your first posting after your 28½ birthday. I was short of that so they gave me a sort of 'filler' posting in Germany.

**IH-C:** Well, it might have been a filler posting but you were there at an enormously momentous time, weren't you?

**SM:** Amazing, absolutely amazing. The Embassy there, of course, was completely different from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia. It was very, very much bigger. 100 UK-based staff, 300 locally-engaged staff and covering every aspect of policy, whereas in Saudi Arabia we were pretty focussed on politics and defence relations. Commercial relations were very important, of course, but really seen through a defence prism. In Germany it was the whole gamut and I arrived in the autumn of 1988 and I remember it didn't seem particularly interesting in Germany. Things were happening further east but in Germany it was still relatively quiet. I remember my first meeting with Pauline Neville-Jones, the Minister at the Embassy in Bonn. I was sitting in her office in the old Embassy building and on the wall was a huge map of Germany, all of Germany. I remember asking her why the GDR was included on the map because the GDR was a different country but this map made it seem like one country. Pauline explained that even though that was true, West Berlin was felt to be very much FRG and you had to include the GDR in order to include Berlin on the map and of course there was an aspiration to bring the different parts together. As a callow youth in the autumn of 1988 that struck me as a novel idea. But of course 1989 was when everything happened.

**IH-C:** Just before that happened, in the lead up to that and you were there in Bonn – presumably you were going through to Berlin on visits to the British Sector?

**SM:** I never visited Berlin because my job was EU. So, I was anchored to the Economics Ministry, the International Development Ministry, the Foreign Ministry in Bonn. My job was not a very exciting job. It was interesting professionally but not relevant really to what was happening around us. But I was there and taking part in Embassy meetings and talking to those whose job it was, so I didn't feel completely on the sidelines.

**IH-C:** How did it feel as this started to develop? Was there a kind of sense of almost incredulity among people as to what was happening?

**SM:** Well, that was a fascinating aspect because the Embassy had various layers and Germany is a country we cared deeply about and so the more senior people – the higher layers were people who really knew the country and really knew the Cold War – Cold War warriors, you might call them. And because they had such long experience and such deep expectations, my observation was that they found it very difficult to cope with the speed and fundamental nature of the changes we were witnessing. As we both know, the Wall fell on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1989. I don't claim that I knew immediately that the whole world had changed but in the next two months it became clear that the whole world had changed and they were speeding helter-skelter towards unification and it was just a matter of the detail, including the detailed timing.

**IH-C:** And how far had that process of unification gone by the time you left Germany?

**SM:** I left at the beginning of September 1990 so the date of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October was in the diary, it was all over bar the shouting but I left to take up the job of speechwriter to the Foreign Secretary. As I've already said, my job wasn't central to the unification effort so there was no constraint because I was needed to finish a particular task in Bonn. The constraint was the birth of my first son. Olivia had Felix in August and after consulting, I think, Judy Hurd, Douglas Hurd decided that I could move with my young family three weeks later. And that's what I did.

## **Speechwriter to the Foreign Secretary (Douglas Hurd), FCO, 1990-93**

**IH-C:** So, back to London for this speechwriting job. That must have been very helpful on the domestic side of things but also a rather exciting job at the same time?

**SM:** It was. Again, a terrific learning job, and learning about all aspects of policy because I had to write about all aspects of policy. I remember in particular producing the digests of our information about the Lockerbie bombing. Hilary Synott was the relevant Head of Department and he appealed to Robert Cooper who was my Head of Department saying: “we have information in so many different places, we don’t have a five-page summary bringing everything together. Do you have anybody who can do that?” So, I did that and it was fascinating and that piece of paper was much used later. But as I’ve already said, I had to write speeches and articles about all aspects of policy and I had to do it for somebody who was a writer, indeed, a published novelist and someone who had been a speechwriter himself. So, it was a daunting task but he was so nice about it and he explained to me that in the end a good speech maker delivers his own speech but as Foreign Secretary he was expected to speak about all sorts of things that he wasn’t really on top of. So, my task was to give him the gobbets of text that he could draw on, look at in advance and then use when delivering his remarks. But he said very rarely would he stand up and deliver a speech as written because in his experience they were not the most effective speeches.

**IH-C:** And you were speechwriting not only for him but you were drafting for the Prime Minister as well, I think?

**SM:** That is right. At some point – I can’t remember precisely when – John Major delivered a clarion call about the UK and the European Union and in this speech he used the phrase: ‘Britain at the heart of Europe’ which is something I put in the draft way back at the beginning. I mean, it wasn’t original to me. I’d read all the material we’d had and plucked it out of one of the White Papers, I think. But that was the phrase that was then picked up by the media and used as a reference point for many years later. But John Major had had the ambition of putting the United Kingdom ‘at the heart of Europe’. That was an interesting speech in many ways because a lot of trouble was taken over it. Chris Patten was the person who was supervising this speech for the Prime Minister so I saw him, I saw the Foreign Secretary, and they told me what they wanted. But one person has to write a speech so I went

away and produced a draft which was then pulled about in all sorts of different ways but for Patten and Hurd it was important that there should be one pen at the beginning, because otherwise it would be a mess.

**IH-C:** Who was it being delivered to?

**SM:** John Major made the speech, in March 1991, to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

**IH-C:** At that time, there was an assessment going on – as there always is, I suppose - as to what Britain's status is, if you like, in the rest of the world. Does it still aspire to be a major player, or a minor player or whatever? There were aspects of that you were involved in, weren't there?

**SM:** Indeed. George Bush Senior and James Baker, talked about a new world order. The Cold War was over and everybody was wondering what next? Fukuyama had announced 'the end of history'. Remember – nobody at the time particularly believed that but the fact that it was said is still remembered. You are right – people asked me: where does the UK fit in? And a phrase associated with Douglas Hurd was that the UK is a power that 'punched above its weight'. Again, this is one of those phrases that lingers and is still quoted. He asked me to find when he had first used the phrase and we looked and we looked and couldn't really pin down the first use. Even at the time, we couldn't be sure why it was so closely associated with him. He rather objected to it because he thought it was too glib. But it's one of those things. It's a phrase that will forever be associated with Douglas Hurd.

**IH-C:** You're not the first person, by the way, to give me the impression that Douglas Hurd was really an exceptional character to work for and inspired a great deal of loyalty, I think?

**SM:** Oh, he was. And he knew the business of the Office better than any other foreign secretary I worked for. Of course, he was a diplomat for, I think, 14 years. It was a job that he clearly wanted and it was a job that he clearly saw as the summit of his ambition. I know that he competed to be leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister but I think his friends urged him to do that. I don't think that was ever part of his personal ambition. He was uniquely well qualified having been in the Diplomatic Service, having been a junior minister in the Foreign Office and he was passionate about the Office – about the office of

Foreign Secretary and about the Foreign Office. And he was there for a long time. So, all of these things together meant that he was set fair. But he was also the most gentlemanly, kindly, avuncular character. Frankly, a little bit forbidding. He's a big man as you know and that office doesn't put any visitor immediately at their ease. But he seemed not aware of that and certainly didn't exploit that and repeated contact just made his kind personality more apparent. So, yes, I think that of all the foreign secretaries I have worked for, Douglas is at the top. There have been other great men, I think very capable foreign secretaries but, if forced to choose, I would put him first.

**IH-C:** Now, while you were still in that job you were also dealing with the subject of relations with bilateral embassies and EU member states, weren't you? And Brussels, the relationship between them.

**SM:** This was really something I really felt more in Bonn rather than in Policy Planning Staff. For the period of our EU membership the balance between bilateral embassies and the representation in Brussels shifted decisively towards Brussels. When I was in Bonn, my job with the EU was lobbying the German line ministries but I was aware that I was often asked to go in to bat when everything in Brussels had been tried and had failed. The reason why they had failed in Brussels was because the German representation in Brussels already had its very clear instructions from the Capital and so was not going to budge very late in the day because of the representations of a bilateral embassy. So, in the relationship with the EU and with the Brussels institutions, I felt that the Office was behind the game. Some thought that we could do more in bilateral capitals than was the case – really, the action was decisively in Brussels.

**IH-C:** So, there was perhaps a lack of quite grasping to what extent that balance was shifting towards Brussels.

**SM:** I felt that in the late 1980s. I think one reason why we didn't acknowledge that was that we were unhappy about that and, of course, we all know where our unhappiness took us in the end.

**Private Secretary to Permanent Under-Secretary of State, FCO, 1993–95**

**IH-C:** Indeed. And so at the end of that time in Policy Planning Department, you then took on a private secretary job.

**SM:** I did. I became Private Secretary to the PUS who was David Gillmore. Of course, I had come across him as speechwriter because I used to write speeches for him too and it was a very gentle interview. I've been interviewed many times. I've very rarely felt that the interview was the decisive part of the process. I certainly didn't feel it was the decisive part of the process on that occasion.

**IH-C:** You mean someone had made up their minds already?

**SM:** He'd already decided! Anyway, he was a wonderful boss and a wonderful man. For two years it was a privilege and a delight to work for David Gillmore.

**IH-C:** While you were there it gave you an insight, if you like, into these relationships between the PUS, with Ministers and, indeed, with the Cabinet Secretary.

**SM:** Indeed. Throughout my career and in our profession personal relations are absolutely key. When we are overseas we know that. When building our contacts we are very conscious of that but the same really applies at home. When the top team are in sympathy with each other – that's different from always agreeing with each other – but when they are in sympathy with each other, things work better. David Gillmore and Robin Butler were very close; many times, particularly on appointments but also handling the prime minister, details of Europe policy, David and Robin would pick up the phone. Usually, I would say, their private secretaries were allowed to listen so that they would know what was going on. Very little was allowed to be written down and I completely understand why – because they were sorting stuff out and they were able to do that because they trusted each other. I dwell on that because it might strike you as an obvious point but it doesn't always apply. And when it doesn't apply, things get scratchy, inefficient and unsuccessful pretty rapidly.

**IH-C:** There is, of course, the wider question as to the extent in which Number Ten sees itself as immersed in foreign policy and the Foreign Office isn't always helpful. But that's perhaps a rather wider question.

**SM:** As with most current problems, encountering it for the first time, people are inclined to think it more novel than it really is. This was a feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The relations between Eden and Churchill were not always smooth. People think: "Oh my goodness, this is particularly difficult right now" when all they're saying is: "I'm experiencing it myself for the first time".

**IH-C:** Fair enough. Now, at the end of that time you were off abroad again, weren't you?

### **First Secretary, Washington, 1995–98**

**SM:** Yes, I went to Washington as First Secretary doing the domestic political job. I succeeded Jonathan Powell. This is one of the most prestigious, most plugged in jobs in the Embassy in Washington. The 'apostolic succession' was made clear to me as I went - I had big shoes to fill. Now Jonathan, as you may recall, resigned from the Service at that point to become Tony Blair's Chief of Staff. One of the least risky departures from the Service I think that I can remember but I very clearly remember hearing in Washington: "Oh, he's taken a very, very big chance. He was doing so well in the Foreign Office and now he's gone into politics. Oh, my goodness – it's probably going to go wrong". But, of course, Tony Blair was the new leader of the Labour Party, already the Government was in trouble because its victory in 1992 had taken everybody by surprise. It felt to me that becoming Chief of Staff to the man most likely to be Prime Minister in three or four years' time was not a big risk.

Anyway, Jonathan was my immediate predecessor. Before him there was Sherard [Cowper-Coles] and Nigel Sheinwald and Stephen Wall and Pauline Neville-Jones. It was a good job and the core of the job was getting alongside the Presidential campaign because, as you know, in the United States a new Administration tends to draw its staff from people who have been alongside the president as he campaigns. Diplomacy being personal, if you know those characters, you have the jump on the competition when they enter into office. A very fine theory. When there is a change of administration it can work out brilliantly well both for an

individual and for the British system and that absolutely happened to Jonathan who was alongside the Clinton campaign throughout the election in 1992. Sadly, from my point of view, I had the election of '96 when Bob Dole took on Bill Clinton. Not even Mrs Dole thought he was going to win but I had a great time getting to know his team and, indeed, some of them have resurfaced in very senior positions later but there was no immediate payback for the Embassy because there was no significant change of administration at the beginning of '97.

**IH-C:** To get a fuller understanding of American politics you must have done a huge amount of travelling in the States when you were there.

**SM:** Absolutely. I went to the 48 contiguous states over 3½ years. Outside Washington you learn that America is very different and senior America outside Washington is very interested in the First Secretary from the British Embassy so I would see governors and senators and enjoyed very good access on my travels.

**IH-C:** And those people you were talking to – many would have been extraordinarily caught up – not personally – in seeing the rather strange developments in the Clinton Administration including the Monica Lewinski scandal.

**SM:** That was the single biggest political story - extraordinary – and of course it reverberated for years later. I am sure that one reason that Hillary Clinton did not become President of the United States was how a certain slice of America remembered her handling of the Lewinski scandal. But, of course, it was a huge issue for the President's relations with everybody, including foreign leaders. Tony Blair was new in office and he took a conscious decision to stand by the President. He looked at the total package, about what Clinton was trying to do on the world stage, about his domestic priorities and he decided that his interest was in building the relationship and he spotted – correctly – that building the relationship during a time of personal political stress would impress the President. It would mean that the President was even more open to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. I remember Blair's first visit was in one of those peak moments in Lewinski and Clinton, I think, was grateful that Blair put that aside – decided it wasn't a resignation issue or even a centrally important issue politically, and stood with him and on the back of that they built a strikingly close relationship.

**IH-C:** Was that also important as far as Northern Ireland was concerned and the prospects of the Good Friday Agreement?

**SM:** Absolutely. In many ways what Blair most needed from Clinton and the Clinton Administration was support on Northern Ireland, that the Americans were the only third party who could be trusted by all parts of Ireland, North and South. The links between Ireland and the US are legendarily close, they like senior American attention and the fact that the President was so closely involved was an incentive for all parties to engage with the really knottiest issues. Of course, it wasn't just Clinton. Clinton chose George Mitchell to be his point man on Northern Ireland. Mitchell, of course, had been Senate Majority Leader – so a very big figure in US politics – although his background was more Lebanese than Irish! But that didn't matter. He was a very senior American, very close to the President and a very able politician. Senator Mitchell galvanised things and made things happen which would not have happened so quickly, even if they might have happened in the end.

**IH-C:** But of course, there must have been in the States, in certain quarters, this feeling of Britain – if you like – as the imperial power, that it colonised Ireland and therefore there was simply opposition as opposed to working for a settlement that was going to help both sides?

**SM:** That is absolutely true and one of the tasks of the Embassy, and the other big plank of my job, was Ireland policy and particularly getting the Unionists access and a voice. Although I've already said the links between Ireland and the US are legendarily close, really it's southern and Catholic Ireland and the United States. So, you think of Boston, you think of the Kennedy clan, you think even of Joe Biden, it's Catholic Ireland rather than the Unionists. The Unionists in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were more likely to stay home than migrate to North America. The Embassy worked hard to get the leading Unionists a platform and attention, particularly on Capitol Hill and in the Administration and I think we had some success. George Mitchell immediately saw the point of needing equally close relations with David Trimble, with the DUP, the UUP as with the SDLP and Sinn Fein. His ability to connect completely, honestly with all strands of opinion was key to his success.

**IH-C:** Perhaps a final point on your time in the States, you were a member of an enormous Embassy – maybe the largest that we have.

**SM:** If you include the British defence staff, I think 'yes'. But I think in Islamabad they argue differently these days!

**IH-C:** May well be! But were you, perhaps almost inevitably, a smallish cog in a very large machine in an embassy like that?

**SM:** In a way, but as I've already been saying, certain jobs in the middle connected up and so the person who did the First Secretary Political job always had access to the Ambassador and the Minister. So, I never felt that was a problem. A lot of the discussions, a lot of the commissioning was direct from the Ambassador. Hierarchy is one thing but expectations of certain slots within the hierarchy are somewhat different.

#### **Counsellor, Deputy Head of Mission and Consul-General, Riyadh, 1998-2001**

**IH-C:** Fair enough. You spoke earlier about your disappointment at having to go off and learn Arabic so I'm just wondering whether your next posting didn't produce slightly conflicted feelings?

**SM:** Well, it could have done but as I've already said, having been hostile to the idea, I very quickly recognised that the reality of working in the British Embassy in Saudi Arabia was different and terrific. In the late 1990s – a different era – I was looking for promotion. And in that different era there was no such thing as an ADC [Assessment and Development Centre]. So, you had to look for a job in the next grade up where you would be a plausible candidate. And the No 2 job in Riyadh was and remains Counsellor rank, SMS1, and I knew it was falling vacant, and I knew the Ambassador well because it was Andrew Green who had been my Head of Chancery the first time around. I had a grown up conversation with Olivia, my wife, and we thought – yes, in order to get the promotion, then it was worth considering Riyadh. And it worked.

**IHC:** Now while you were there, what was your main preoccupation in terms of events happening in Saudi Arabia at that time?

**SM:** It was the first time I was a DHM so that combined the old Head of Chancery job with deputising for the Ambassador, so the first thing was running the joint. That took a lot of time, I really didn't travel very much as DHM. As the Second Secretary I went all over Saudi Arabia. I visited all 14 provinces in my 3½ years. The only places I went, I think as DHM were Jeddah and Al Khobar. But that was it. It was a Riyadh-bound job and running the place was a full-time job. I remember, Ian, on my first morning sitting at my new desk and my secretary coming in and saying: "Hello, Simon, nice to meet you. Mr 'X' is outside. He beat up his wife last night and he needs to see you." So that was my first task as DHM!

My second memory of the posting is substituting for the Ambassador a lot because Andrew Green fell ill and so I had to be Chargé for an unusually long time. And with that set of responsibilities there came a lot of making sure we got the money owed to us under the Al Yamamah Project. The Saudis had a habit of falling into arrears and it was my job to go and ask the Finance Minister to cough up. Once he did cough up to me in person to the tune of a billion pounds which I thought was quite cool at the time! That was another big preoccupation.

But the posting was really stamped by the beginning of domestic terrorism in Saudi Arabia and the Saudis' conviction that British expatriates were responsible for these terrorist incidents. That was the worst thing I have had to deal with in my career personally because the Saudis decided I was a key mastermind in this process. I was accused of conspiracy to murder.

**IH-C:** Good grief! How had they come to this conclusion? Was there some speech you made or action you took that could have planted such a thing in their minds?

**SM:** Conspiracy theories require weird developments. They constructed a narrative which I believe they put to the imprisoned Brits and the imprisoned Brits confirmed this narrative. Now, a couple of these characters – William Sampson and Sandy Mitchell - have written books since they were released; it seared me to my heart, when one of them said: "Yes, I claimed all these things had happened and I said it because I thought that the British system would work out that this was complete rubbish. So, you're asking yourself what was going on?" Which I think is a fair enough observation, because that's exactly what I thought! It

was a traumatic time because the British system wasn't quite sure what to do and I was caught in that hesitation.

**IH-C:** Did it get to the point where there were serious doubts as to whether you could carry on with your job in the face of this?

**SM:** Well, weirdly, Ian, no. There are a couple of reasons. One is that, of course, this involved the PUS, John Kerr, who was across all the detail and his support was absolute from the beginning. That was extremely helpful. The second was that this was reaching a crescendo towards the end of my posting and I had already got the job of Principal Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary before this story got critical and so I already had a flight path out of Riyadh and to a very good job. The support at the top and the fact that I wasn't going to be staying for much longer meant that nobody was saying: "Well, does Simon have to go early?"

But then we did engage with this. Even 20 years later I feel this very deeply. I don't know that we handled it properly but we decided that the Metropolitan Police should investigate the allegations. The Saudis saw that as us taking it seriously as in us believing their story. Of course, we presented it as trying to get to the bottom of this and we engaged because we were confident that such an investigation would exonerate me. So I sat and was interviewed at length by the Metropolitan Police and, indeed, the story was a complete nonsense and the investigation said that. But the Saudis said: "That's what the Metropolitan Police say; we think we should be able to conduct an investigation. We're sure we would get a different conclusion". At this point the British system decided to say 'no'.

**IH-C:** Did the police come out to see you?

**SM:** The interview took place in the basement of Old Admiralty Building. The reason why they [the Saudis] needed to see a senior British diplomat involved was because the Saudis needed to explain how this group of not-very-clued-up, illegal-alcohol-brewing Brits had got access to explosives. It wasn't at all obvious that such people could have access to explosives so their story was that the British Embassy had facilitated them and that the explosives had arrived in the diplomatic bag and Simon McDonald, as DHM, was of sufficient seniority that he'd been able to facilitate that improper use of the diplomatic bag.

**IH-C:** This story had passed me by, I must admit.

**SM:** It didn't make much of a splash even at the time. A short while later *The Guardian* did do a big piece but this was before everything had gone online and so internet searches don't really tap into that and the second thing is throughout their reporting they misspelled my name and so again, if you're looking for Simon McDonald's involvement, you won't find it because they called me 'Simon MacDonald' throughout.

### **Principal Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 2001–03**

**IH-C:** So you then became Principal Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary to the Foreign Secretary. Was it Jack Straw at that stage?

**SM:** In the end it was Jack Straw but when the job was advertised it was Robin Cook. Robin Cook had a famously scratchy relationship with John Kerr. One way that John indicated to Robin that he, John, had confidence in Robin's political longevity was suggesting to Robin Cook early in 2001 that he should select his new Principal Private Secretary, to succeed Sherard Cowper-Coles immediately after the General Election, because, of course, Robin Cook would be returning to the Foreign Office. So, in February 2001 I went through the process, was interviewed by Robin Cook and was offered the job, accepted it, was very happy; arranged to leave Saudi Arabia in order to start in May 2001 because everybody assumed that the election would be at the beginning of May. Then the UK was hit by foot-and-mouth disease and so the General Election was postponed. I still left Saudi Arabia on time and was cooling my heels for the month of May in London.

When the election eventually took place, there was a dramatic 24 hours on the Friday as Prime Minister Blair put together his new cabinet and, much to nearly everybody's surprise, Cook was moved out and Jack Straw was moved in. I saw that with everybody else on the 10 o'clock news that Friday night, spoke to Sherard and agreed that I should just rock up in the Foreign Office first thing on Saturday morning to see if the new Foreign Secretary wanted to maintain his predecessor's choice. Sherard already had a job to go to, he was going to be Ambassador in Israel, so he was keen to maintain the existing plan. So, that Saturday morning I had a nerve-racking hour waiting for Jack Straw to see me. I remember I spent it

with Michael Williams who had been Robin Cook's Special Adviser and he too wondered what his future was because his specialty was foreign relations: he wasn't interested in following Robin Cook when Cook became Leader of the House of Commons. Anyway, in the end I saw Jack Straw, we had a very nice chat and he said 'yes' the job is yours and to start on Monday. Very much later he revealed to me that he had been so tired and hung over that Saturday morning that all that was required of me was to be an English-speaking humanoid and the job was mine. So, you know, you put yourself through the wringer and later you realise there was no need! So, I started in June 2001 with Jack Straw.

A couple of points about the beginning. One was that Jack really had no idea he was going to be Foreign Secretary. He'd prepared, assiduously, to become the Transport Secretary because that's what Tony Blair had told him at the beginning of the year was his plan. He had even worked out in detail his plan for Heathrow to get its third runway. He'd gone into the detail of Transport policy work. At no notice at all he'd gone in to see the Prime Minister on the Friday evening and the Prime Minister had said: "you're going to be Foreign Secretary". I've seen this happen repeatedly in the British system, that the person occupying the top job in a ministry has almost no time to prepare for responsibilities that hit them completely, in an instant. Jack had hoped to be Foreign Secretary one day; he thought it would be something for the third term with Tony Blair. It took him some time to find his feet because he had zero preparation time. That was an early memory from the beginning.

The second is that our policy obsession in the summer of 2001 was Macedonia. This was a crisis in the Balkans and we were deeply involved, the Ministry of Defence was deeply involved and at the time, of course, this felt like a very major issue. But then on 11<sup>th</sup> September the world changed, and changed completely and changed in an instant. That was one of the most memorable days in my whole career. It really didn't get going until the middle of the day, until lunchtime. In the Private Secretaries' office there were four of us, with a television on a shelf in the corner. The Diary Secretary had the best line of sight of this television and at some point she said: "Something's happening in New York". We all looked up, the picture was grainy but it quickly became clear that something had flown into one of the Twin Towers. Quite dramatic, still getting more information, wasn't sure if it was deliberate, wasn't sure how big it was, was it a missile, a light plane, was it a big plane? When we were convinced that there was something to report, I went in to see the Foreign Secretary and said: "Drama in New York. Still getting information but one of the Twin

Towers has been hit by something”. He looked at me and said: “What do we do?” I said we should continue the day with the diary as was but we would monitor this closely.

The next meeting in his diary was with the Defence Secretary about Macedonia. So, Geoff Hoon came in. We were all in the Foreign Secretary’s office talking about Macedonia and at some point one of the Private Secretaries burst into the office. It was Mark Sedwill, later to be Cabinet Secretary, who burst into the office and said: “The second tower has been hit”. And in an instant, everybody knew that this was deliberate and this was huge. The meeting broke up quickly because Geoff Hoon wanted to go back to the MoD to find out from military sources as much information as possible. So then the day snowballed: I remember at one point, just a pause on the staircase, when Jack said: “This changes everything”. I’ll never forget that time. We knew it was going to be a roller-coaster for a long time. But I’ll never forget that this was the moment that everything changed.

At the beginning we were trying to find out information and then, almost as quickly, trying to decide how to react. The two things I remember most clearly, nearly 20 years later, are the COBRA meeting which the Prime Minister chaired later that afternoon which was in the Cabinet Office and absolutely packed. The things that were on people’s minds were things like: “Is this incident over?” There were reports coming in of other planes that were missing and other dramatic events that might be part of the story. I’m not entirely clear but I think it was during that meeting that we heard of the crash in a field in Pennsylvania which turned out to be related later when the passengers brought down the plane when overwhelming the terrorists.

And the second was how directly it affected the United Kingdom. I remember one of the military people saying that he feared that up to two thousand Brits might have been killed because up to 50,000 people worked in those two towers. And from what we knew about Brits working in New York, someone estimated that up to 4% of the people in the building might be British. Of course, even in the moment that seemed exaggerated and later we learned that the true figure was 67. But the sense of drama, of everything changing, of us feeling our way through the dark was very strong that afternoon.

One small thing that we did was to half mast our flags everywhere. Of course we had to get permission from Buckingham Palace to do that but these small things that someone has to

think about happened that afternoon. And of course one of the things that people remember all these years later is that the next day, at the changing of the guard, Her Majesty had asked for American music and that made a deep impression in the United States that the UK was showing itself as properly solid with the United States at the moment of greatest need. Funny little things percolate through and make a difference. So yes, our whole professional world changed.

The first policy to feel that change was our policy towards Afghanistan because Bin Laden was very quickly fingered as the mastermind. He was holed up in Bora Bora in the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan and so ramping up our involvement in Afghanistan became top priority. Of course, the deployment in Afghanistan has turned out to be the longest element of the 'long war' as the US call it. What interests me all these years later is that, for the public, it is still the least controversial thing that we did because it was the most clearly linked to what had happened on 9/11. Even though we have lost more than 450 troops in Afghanistan, the fact that it was so clearly linked to the terror attacks that day I think provided solid justification for the British people. But very quickly Iraq came onto the Foreign Secretary's radar and the Iraqi programmes – weapons of mass destruction and for most of my time working for Jack Straw, we were working on Iraq and the build up to the war in 2003.

**IH-C:** Obviously in very close collaboration with the Americans. You presumably had your fellow private secretary equivalent in the Secretary of State's office in the United States?

**SM:** The relationship really was direct. One of the most striking things working for Jack Straw was how quickly he built up his personal networks with foreign minister colleagues and the best working relationship he had was with Colin Powell. They got to know each other very well. They were in touch constantly, they trusted each other, I would say they became friends. And so the relationship between the offices was really run by the principals. But because someone was always on the line – the record keeping was meticulous, if someone wasn't on the line then Jack Straw himself would take a record but he preferred someone else doing that for him – because the private secretaries were involved, we got to know Colin Powell as well. One of the most memorable things I did was to accompany Jack Straw to Long Island in August 2002 in the run up to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 and in the key meeting there were just three people – Colin Powell, Jack

Straw and myself. And Colin Powell said: “I’m perfectly happy with that. Simon can produce the record for both sides”. So at the end of this process I had produced a record which went into the US system as well; it was an agreed record of action. And the key action that the two Secretaries of State agreed that day was that there needed to be a UN route. That the endorsement of the plan by the Security Council was key to its legitimacy so Colin Powell and Jack Straw turned to their bosses after this meeting and said: “Without this, we’re not playing”. So, many things contributed but for me that meeting was when they decided that the UN could not be sidestepped.

**IH-C:** To get what Britain and the US needed from the Security Council, you needed to continue going down the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ route which must have been a constant theme during this time. You’ve referred to it earlier.

**SM:** Absolutely, and Jack Straw took a very close personal interest. I remember his meetings with Hans Blix [Head of the International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA]. One particularly memorable meeting was when Jack Straw was talking in detail about the most recent report issued by Blix’s team and it became clear in the subsequent conversation that Blix had not read that report! A chill settled on the meeting and the British Foreign Secretary wasn’t at all impressed that the Chief Weapons Inspector was not familiar with his team’s material.

**IH-C:** Things continued at the UN and then the decision was taken to go into Iraq.

**SM:** Yes, the negotiation was really tortuous. But the key memory was that the key requirement for the Brits and the Americans was: one resolution should be enough. This is why it went on and on and on because, although the President and the Prime Minister had agreed that the Security Council could not be sidestepped, they didn’t want to be hog tied by the Security Council - the Security Council had to have all its say in one resolution. That being the case, it was a very tortuous negotiation. Of course later, it was very hotly disputed whether a second resolution was still required. But I remember at the time Jeremy Greenstock saying: “No, if we’d agreed that a second resolution was required, then the first one would have been negotiated in 24 hours. It would have been the simplest thing in the world”. It was in order to load that first resolution with all the significance it required that we took so long. That was a seminal moment because at that point in the minds of President

Bush and Prime Minister Blair they had done all they needed with the United Nations Security Council. Of course, there were six more months to play out but they felt that they had all the backing they needed from the Security Council.

**IH-C:** Perhaps moving over those six months, as it were, then comes the invasion itself and – again – you’re in a key position to be observing what is going on at that point.

**SM:** March 2003 was the culmination – so that probably means it was four months later rather than six months later – and my main memories from that time were the President of France saying in turn that he was never going to sign off, more or less no matter how much time was given to the Iraqis to show that they were compliant. And that was a breaking moment. The French and with them the Germans were not ever going to play. Then why wait longer?

The second key memory was the resignation of Robin Cook in the key debates which I think were about the 17<sup>th</sup> March and I was in the House of Commons that evening, in the Foreign Secretary’s office, and watching the proceedings of the House and at the time and later it seemed to me that Cook’s speech was one of the most brilliant and, I thought, persuasive I’d ever heard. But when the Foreign Secretary came out and saw his team – I asked him: “Surely, this makes a difference?” And he brushed it aside: “Not all, Simon. The Opposition is with the Prime Minister so all that you saw was a side show”. I was struck by that, because 18 years later it still seems to me that Cook’s arguments were very strong that evening.

The third thing was Jack Straw trying everything to avoid the armed conflict. He had a very close relationship with Tony Blair, he absolutely agreed that we didn’t need a second resolution. He was furious with Chirac for announcing that no matter what happens we’re never going to be with you. But my observation of Jack Straw was that we hadn’t run out of negotiating room and so he tried very hard to keep the diplomacy in play. And I think Colin Powell was trying equally hard but the momentum of events turned out to be unstoppable. So, on 20<sup>th</sup> March the campaign began.

**IH-C:** So, the invasion takes place. What about the immediate aftermath of that?

**SM:** Well, the policymakers in Washington and London had some time to plan, certainly some time to think, and the assumption was that the invasion would succeed quickly. The Powell doctrine was one of overwhelming force so by the time the invasion started in March 2003 everybody was confident of military victory and pretty swift military victory. So, at the end of 2002 into 2003 Jack Straw and Colin Powell were thinking: “What next?” But it was very clear that the key player in the American system was not State Department, it was more the Pentagon, Rumsfeld’s Pentagon. Both Straw and Powell were disconcerted by the lack of planning about ‘what next?’. I remember accompanying Jack Straw to Iraq very soon after the end of military operations and Jack being completely horrified by the lack of a plan, the lack of personnel and the lack of empowerment for people on the ground. There was a very nice guy called General Garner who was formally in charge but he had no power. He was not able to do anything without referring back to Washington. He had no budget that was under his control so very quickly after the end of military operations, it was clear to Jack Straw that the plan was woefully inadequate and something which had started with an overwhelming military success was very quickly running into trouble.

**IH-C:** But what could be done about that? Jack Straw must have been looking to see what improvement could be made as much as was in his power. Perhaps it wasn’t?

**SM:** We tried. We had had an SMS 1 official embedded with the Americans – Dominick Chilcott had been trying hard. But in Washington the circle of command was very, very tight and the two key players were Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney. And, as time went on, it became clear to me that this pair was much too much under the influence of Ahmed Chalabi, who was certainly an oppositionist in Iraq but of very dodgy legitimacy. As I look back I think that the key people in Washington were listening to the wrong people in Baghdad.

**IH-C:** Passing on for a moment – you obviously had other concerns in your time there because India/Pakistan raised its head as a problem, did it not?

**SM:** Absolutely. This started, really, with the attack on the Parliament building in New Delhi on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2001 and very rapidly escalated. The Indians decided that Pakistan was behind this attack – groups supported by Pakistan. The first half of 2002 was punctuated by international efforts to lower the temperature between New Delhi and Islamabad. The UK is, of course, one of the few countries with strong relations with both Pakistan and India.

This was the second big policy area where Jack Straw and Colin Powell worked very closely together.

My learning was that senior attention made a strategic difference. The fact that Musharraf and Vajpayee knew that the very top of the international system was monitoring what was happening between India and Pakistan on a daily basis, made a difference to their calculations. Also, the top of the international community coordinated quite closely in influencing the Indians and the Pakistanis. President Bush was involved, Prime Minister Blair was involved, President Chirac was involved and their foreign ministers. With Rich Armitage in the lead - the Deputy Secretary in Washington - a plan of engagement was informally sketched out so that somebody senior was in Islamabad or New Delhi, or both, every ten days or so. So they never were given the chance of saying: “attention is moving elsewhere”.

One of the most memorable meetings for me was when Jack Straw saw Vajpayee in the spring of 2002. Again, the personal nature of diplomacy and the key role of individuals was apparent. You had an immense amount of preparation for this meeting between the British Foreign Secretary and the Indian Prime Minister but when it came down to it, it was two men having a conversation. They were having a conversation that was trying to avert a nuclear exchange, trying to avert nuclear war between two of the world’s eight nuclear powers. Each man was learning the other, as a man, as an individual, as well as talking about the most important policy you could discuss. As I say, it was down to Jack. He had to figure out this man and influence him all within one hour and all by himself. It was very apparent that Vajpayee was old and somewhat infirm and really was receiving information from very narrow channels. He was getting a very particular narrative from his briefing system. Jack was trying to broaden the Indian Prime Minister’s appreciation without being an apologist for Musharraf and Pakistan, to make the case that they were seriously engaged, that they were seriously trying to de-escalate. I think over that meeting, Jack using humour, using anecdotes, using the bilateral personal ties – he managed to get through to Vajpayee. I think that contact played a material part in keeping the temperature low enough to avoid a nuclear conflict.

## Ambassador to Israel, 2003–06

**IH-C:** You then moved on to your first ambassadorial post. How did that come about?

**SM:** It was Israel and it came about at very short notice. I had never imagined being posted to Israel. I'd learned Arabic, I'd served twice in Saudi Arabia. So Tel Aviv didn't seem to be an obvious fit. But in the spring of 2003 Sherard Cowper-Coles had been cross posted from Tel Aviv to Riyadh. He was leaving Israel unexpectedly early: he only served 18 months in Israel, so this wasn't one of the jobs that was on the forward look. It came up unexpectedly because Sherard was promoted to do one of our most sensitive jobs – indeed, our top job in the Middle East. So, it came up out of the blue and, I think David Manning, who had previously been Ambassador in Israel, asked me if I was interested in the job. It kind of snowballed in March and April 2003 and I think I was with David and the Prime Minister at some international meeting in April when I heard that I'd got the job. I then had to get out of Private Office pretty quickly. Of course, the first duty is to make sure that you have a good successor and that the successor can start on time so that there is no gap. We achieved that. Geoffrey Adams succeeded me in the Private Office and I got to Tel Aviv in August of 2003. I think I had about two weeks preparation for my first ambassadorial job.

**IH-C:** Coming as you had with your diplomatic experience and exposure in Arab countries, how were you received in Tel Aviv?

**SM:** Warmly. I had thought that this would be an issue, even a problem, but the Israelis were very interested in somebody who knew the Arab world. Not only the Arab world but the most important country in the Arab world from their point of view. So, over my three years we warmed up various aspects of the relationship.

**IH-C:** While you were there was also the withdrawal from Gaza, I think?

**SM:** That is right, Ian. For most of my time in Israel Ariel Sharon was Prime Minister, one of the key architects of Israel's victory in the Six Day War, the man who turned things around in the Yom Kippur War, a soldier and a patriot through and through. And he was the man that suggested the withdrawal from Gaza so, coming from an absolutely authoritative source, a source that the whole of Israel had to pay attention to. The international community

was very wary because Sharon did have this history and so didn't believe that he was serious. One of the things I thought we had to do in the Embassy was to persuade our government to take this initiative seriously. We had as an international community been asking Israel to withdraw from occupied territory since 1967, if not since 1948, and here was Israel doing that. Not totally – it wasn't the end of the story, it wasn't a cause for complete celebration but it was still a significant step. We did persuade Prime Minister Blair to react and to react positively and one reason why Tony Blair is still involved in the Middle East, and still somebody who Israelis pay very close attention to, was that he was the first European leader to understand and talk publicly about the importance of the withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank.

**IH-C:** Of course, this brings up the question of you as Head of Mission – clearly it was important to maintain effective relations with the Israeli Government but also to have an understanding of the Palestinians within the Israeli state and their aspirations and the difficulties that they faced.

**SM:** Of course. Arab Israelis - I choose to call them that rather than Palestinians because for me, Palestinians are the people who live in the Occupied Territories rather than who live in metropolitan Israel – they are a key component of Israeli society. Citizenship was offered in '48 to everybody within the borders and it is about 20% I think who are Arab Israeli. So yes, we had close ties with the Arab Israeli community. Of course they have representation in the Knesset and like any diplomatic mission we had good links with all political parties in the Knesset.

Some of them of course were more difficult than others and in my time more right wing parties began to appear and that was a debate with NENAD about how far we should engage with people like Yvette Lieberman whose views we disagreed with. Contact does not, for me, imply approval. But contact surely increases knowledge and surely allows us a channel to convey our thinking, our messages. So, I always tried to keep contacts open with the full political spectrum.

**IH-C:** But as far as the Arabs were concerned, presumably a further complication arose in the shape of the Lebanese War?

**SM:** That completely dominated the end of my time in Israel. By then Olmert had become Prime Minister. Sharon suffered a devastating stroke – two devastating strokes. The second put him on a life support for the rest of his life but he was succeeded by Ehud Olmert who was, frankly, a figure of less authority within the Knesset, within the Government, and within Israel as a whole. He felt he needed to react to missile attacks from the north. I don't think he was the first prime minister in some domestic political difficulty who had decided that a military response would help his position internally. Of course it didn't work out that way.

**IH-C:** We're approaching the end of your time in Israel but just on a more personal note – your first posting as a Head of Mission, as Ambassador – a satisfying time, I imagine, to be finally in charge of your own Mission?

**SM:** Absolutely. We had a great team and I learned things that were useful for the rest of my career. One was the central importance of our local colleagues. The Embassy, as with all embassies, was smaller than it had been a generation earlier. Many key jobs were done by locally-engaged and they performed superbly. They were bilingual, by definition, they were very well plugged in, by definition. They worked very loyally for the United Kingdom but we, as their employer, always respected the fact that they were citizens of another state. So we didn't ask them do anything which would have caused them a crisis of loyalty.

The other thing I learned was the key importance of working with other missions in the region. Of course, you know, Ian, that traditionally relations between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were scratchy if not downright dreadful. But before I arrived and John Jenkins arrived in Jerusalem our predecessors, Sherard Cowper-Coles and Geoffrey Adams, had decided this needed to change. The first baby steps were taken, the first joint telegram issued and John and I took that forward and very quickly learned that if the Embassy and the Consulate General were saying the same thing and advising the same thing, it was very compelling in London. So, the way for us to have maximum effect was to work together.

That was also really important and it was my first real contact in the field with 10 Downing Street and seeing the role of the Prime Minister up close. Of course, he had a special envoy in Lord Levy who we saw regularly in Israel and you had to use these unconventional channels. There's no point in pointing out that this is novel or not the way things had

previously been done. You had to incorporate this extra asset and Lord Levy certainly had direct access to the British Prime Minister and that was very useful for our overall effort.

### **Director, Iraq, FCO, 2006–07**

**IH-C:** So, back to the UK, and you became Director Iraq for the FCO.

**SM:** That is right. Various things were in the air as I was coming towards the end of my posting in Tel Aviv and the one that landed was to become Iraq Director with a view also to becoming Middle East Director because by 2006 Iraq was a mature problem and so planning ahead in 2007, that was thought to be the moment to reincorporate Middle East and Iraq. So, I started as Iraq Director with a view also to becoming Middle East Director. But already, contacts from my time in Israel showed themselves important to what would happen later. In Israel I had met Gordon Brown and I had worked quite closely with Ed Balls. As I returned to take on the Iraq job, Gordon Brown's team was surprisingly quickly in touch about other possibilities. All the world knew that Tony Blair would stand down in 2007 and quite a time before he stood down, Ed Balls was in touch with me about the possibility of succeeding Nigel Sheinwald as the Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Adviser. So, the personal links made during Israel were very important to what happened next in my career in London.

**IH-C:** But before coming to that you were confronted as Director Iraq with mounting problems of withdrawal – or rather the occupation in Iraq.

**SM:** It's true. As I've already said the problem in Iraq was a mature problem. After my initial visit to Basra and Baghdad, it was clear to me that continued occupation was not going to achieve very much more. The law of diminishing returns had kicked in hard so we were in the business of managing our exit. I wrote a long minute after my first long trip and as a new Director, I was surprised that this was not only seen, read by but commented in detail by the Prime Minister who disagreed because he thought there were all sorts of signs that things were getting better as a consequence of our being there. I disagreed, and as taking over as Foreign Policy Adviser in the middle of 2007, I was in a better position, with the complete agreement and support of the new Prime Minister, to begin an orderly withdrawal from Iraq. Of course, the United States is important in all our foreign policy but having their understanding and support for what we were doing in Iraq was vital. We could not leave Iraq

and have the US unhappy about that. So that was an overwhelming preoccupation for two years but in 2009 we pretty much achieved our military withdrawal.

**Foreign Policy Adviser to Prime Minister and Head, Overseas and Defence Secretariat, Cabinet Office, 2007–10**

**IH-C:** Can I just clarify? With the Foreign Policy Adviser job you are still a member of the Foreign Office but you are on secondment from it? How does it work?

**SM:** I was seconded to the Cabinet Office. The detailed structures have changed – and changed again – but in the middle of 2007 as Gordon Brown came in, he had three senior civil service advisers each of whom headed a secretariat within the Cabinet Office. I did Overseas & Defence, Jon Cunliffe did Economic, and Jeremy Heywood did Domestic. We were all called Advisers to the Prime Minister and all headed a Cabinet Office secretariat.

**IH-C:** You've already mentioned the start of the withdrawal process from Iraq. What about other issues while you were in that job?

**SM:** I have to say that was overwhelmingly the biggest but of course in achieving that withdrawal the bilateral relationship on which I spent most time was with the United States. The relations with the Bush White House could not have been closer. This was a legacy of the support the UK had given the United States in the Iraq War. Bush and Blair were very, very close and the new Administration benefited from that – inherited that. Prime Minister Brown and his team started in the best possible place with President Bush and his Administration. The two official Cabinet members in Washington that I got to know best were my opposite number, National Security Adviser Steve Hadley and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. One of the privileges of that good relationship was that more or less every time I visited Washington and Secretary Rice was in town, she gave a dinner for me, just for three people: me, Steve Hadley and herself. We did the full gamut of foreign policy. You think your first experiences are completely typical but looking back, it was extraordinarily privileged access. As I was saying, it was not because they thought S. McDonald was great: it was because the Blair and Bush teams had been as close as possible.

To illustrate that, in September 2008 the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown found himself in New York on a visit which had been long arranged. It had become a tradition for the Prime Minister to attend ‘Ministerial Week’ of the UN General Assembly to give the British national statement. That September there was also a meeting to discuss progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDCs). All as expected. But the Prime Minister then realised that New York was the wrong city in the United States to be in because that autumn was the beginning of the global financial crisis and, however laudable a discussion about the MDCs, what the Prime Minister really needed was a conversation with the President of the United States. So, on the afternoon of Thursday, 25 September Gordon Brown decided he needed to meet George Bush the next day and looked at his team and said: “Fix this”. His political team looked at me because I was the link to Steve Hadley, the National Security Adviser. I had Steve’s direct mobile number on my phone and I remember phoning Steve from just outside the General Assembly Hall in New York and I put the proposition to him - that with no notice and no organisation, our two bosses needed to meet the next day. This is not the usual way business is done but Steve immediately understood the Prime Minister’s motivation and the urgency of such a meeting. Within 90 minutes Steve Hadley phoned back – this was about 6 o’clock in the evening – and we heard that the President of the United States would make himself available in the Oval Office the next morning at 12 o’clock. The point of the story is that those personal links deliver things which matter very much to the boss. When they really matter, things that might otherwise appear unreasonable, a personal relationship can make them sound reasonable and they happen. Gordon had that meeting and it was part of the preparations for the summits later that year and in 2009, the G20 summits, which were the top of the international community getting to grips with the financial crisis.

On 15 February 2009 a very senior delegation came to see me from the Ministry of Defence from the Royal Navy. They told me that one of their nuclear submarines on patrol in the North Atlantic, a part of the CASD [Continuous At Sea Deterrent], the *Vanguard*, had hit its French equivalent the previous week. The reason they came to see me on the 15<sup>th</sup> and not on the 4<sup>th</sup> when they knew something had gone wrong was because they didn’t know precisely what had gone wrong. All they knew was that their boat was safe, there had been no breach of the hull, there had been no leak of radiation and so they felt they could investigate what had gone wrong. Anyway, the reason for coming to see me on the 15<sup>th</sup> was that between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup>, the French ship, the *Triomphe* had limped back into its harbour in Brittany. When news surfaced that the French sub had sustained damage, people in London worked out

what had happened and then decided they needed to tell the top political level. But of course this was all extraordinarily sensitive. So, the delegation came in person, they stressed that this was top secret information. The compartment with any knowledge was a handful of people. I immediately got the point and told them that we had to brief the Prime Minister. And so on 15<sup>th</sup> February I briefed the Prime Minister in the early afternoon, stressing that information was still coming in and an investigation had just started. The next morning, the 16<sup>th</sup> February, *The Sun* newspaper led on its front page the news that a British nuclear submarine had hit a French submarine the previous week. So, something which one day was top secret codeword, the next day was declassified to the point where it was in the newspapers. I do not know to this day how it got to the newspapers. All I will say is that the number of people who knew was very, very small. I can see no motive for the Royal Navy leaking this story. And the only other fact I can give is that there were no repercussions for whoever did leak it. You can make up your own mind.

Later, in the spring of 2009 the Prime Minister's main preoccupation was global financial crisis and the G20 Summit he was hosting in London on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> of April. As part of the preparation for that Summit he flew to the United States and on to Brazil about ten days before the Summit. When we were in the United States and there was a great gaggle of people around the Prime Minister, he was putting the finishing touches to a global plan. Everybody was going to contribute to the \$1 trillion rescue package that he wanted and as he was going through all his calculations he suddenly thought: "Saudi Arabia is missing". Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah needs to pony up. So, we're sitting in New York and he said: "well somebody's got to go to Riyadh and see King Abdullah – now". As Foreign Policy Adviser I was fingered for this task and the Prime Minister and Jeremy Heywood said: "Off you go".

So, instead of flying on to Brazil, I flew back to London with the task of seeing the King of Saudi Arabia in the next three or four days and extracting from him \$10 billion. The first challenge was getting a meeting with the King of Saudi Arabia who is not somebody who responds to anybody because they require a response. Because I had been posted in Riyadh and I knew the Chief of Royal Protocol, I got in touch with Mohamed Tobaishi direct. I explained the situation and asked his help in organising a face to face meeting with His Majesty within the next three or four days and, by the way, could I also have a visa? Through that personal link a meeting was set up and I flew to Riyadh and in the margins of the King Faisal awards ceremony of 2009, I had half an hour with King Abdullah to discuss

the global financial crisis. I had practised my presentation repeatedly in order to get the key facts and the key 'ask' which was for \$10 billion.

His Majesty looked perplexed at the scale of the request. I remember his first question was: "How much is the United Kingdom doing?", to which I replied: "At least \$17 billion, Your Majesty, because that is our proportion of the \$100 billion that the EU has committed". I did not have that in my brief. I think that was a legitimate bit of freelancing and wasn't far from the truth but of course the Saudi King needed to know that whoever was making the request was going to provide even more help himself. His Majesty wouldn't give an immediate answer and so I dealt with the Saudi Finance Minister every day for the following week and of course as time went by and we got closer to the start of the Summit, I knew that this meant the King was not going to play. He waited until the reception in Buckingham Palace - after the formal gathering of leaders - before telling his Finance Minister to give me the news that Saudi Arabia wouldn't contribute. It was interesting to me for a number of reasons. First of all, it was a diplomatic achievement to get to see the King at all because Saudi Arabia is not a system that likes to be bounced. The King of Saudi Arabia looks on the wealth of Saudi Arabia as his personal charge and \$10 billion is an awful lot of money; his conservative instincts kicked in and he decided not to help. And the final factor – the King waiting so late to give the news meant that there was time for everyone else to have revealed their contributions and so by the evening of the 1<sup>st</sup> April Prime Minister Brown knew he had enough from everybody else. In the end, the absence of Saudi Arabia was not too severe.

The Summit was a remarkable event with the whole world gathering in London. Every G20 leader turned up, nobody sent a deputy because people felt what was at stake. Success really depended on one person being the master of all the detail and that one person in the British system was Jon Cunliffe who was the Prime Minister's Economic and Europe Adviser. Although there were multiple other players, he was the guiding intelligence and to me it showed the value of having an empowered, single point of coordination. At the end of the Summit on 2<sup>nd</sup> April we got the communiqué, the communiqué that Prime Minister Brown wanted, which showed that everybody recognised the size of the problem and everybody was acting to solve it, and he got his \$1 trillion of assistance. It was at the very highest end of expectations with all the markets responding as we had hoped. Of course, when everybody leaves, there's a moment of euphoria but also a moment of brutal decompression. At that moment, the whole team was in the Prime Minister's open plan office which at that stage was

in No 12 Downing Street and I remember the moment when Jon Cunliffe walked into the room and everybody was there and everybody stood up and, led by the Prime Minister, cheered the man who had done most to make it happen.

**IH-C:** Fantastic! Now, as far as Afghanistan was concerned, that was still a preoccupation too?

**SM:** Well curiously, Ian, that was a rising preoccupation. As we built down in Iraq, we were building up again in Afghanistan. One thing which I have never done but which I would be interested to see done is to look at the total of British forces deployed overseas in 2001-2015. The total number we could deploy is about 10,000. The feeling in my bones is if you look over that period we had gusting up to 10,000 at any one time. What shifted was the balance between Iraq and Afghanistan. Frankly, as we withdrew from Iraq we built up quite rapidly in Afghanistan.

**IH-C:** In addition to that there was the revival of Quad?

**SM:** Indeed, this was the key forum during the Cold War. In dealing with Berlin issues, the United States, Germany, France and the United Kingdom got used to dealing with each other all the time. Under Chirac it went into abeyance. The different line that Chirac and Schröder took over the Iraq War of course was majorly responsible but when President Sarkozy came in and Jean-David Levitte as his Foreign Policy Adviser, all four were interested again in working together. The group that I knew best was Hadley in the United States, Levitte in Paris and Heusgen in Berlin. All the big issues of the day but particularly Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran were handled in that forum, amongst others, but that was particularly close.

**IH-C:** And looking specifically at France, there was the question of nuclear cooperation.

**SM:** In Paris and in London we were confronted by a common challenge – that nuclear weaponry is extraordinarily expensive. Looking at the support for these programmes, nuclear powers could look at helping each other, doing elements of a programme together. One thing everybody knows, everybody knew then was that the British programme was particularly close to the American programme. Indeed, you could say was dependent on the American programme. As Foreign Policy Adviser that dependence became crystal clear to

me. One thing I learned as Foreign Policy Adviser was that the French also had a close relationship with the United States on nuclear matters although this closeness was much less publicly advertised. So, when we were looking at the issue of replacing our deterrent, upgrading it, it made sense to do it in company. We had to do it with the United States but we established through Steve Hadley that there was no objection in the United States also to working closely with France. Given the sensitivity and the history, this took quite a long time to reach fruition but this was something that I started with Jean-David Levitte and something which came to fruition in the early months of David Cameron's Prime Ministership with the Lancaster House treaties at the end of 2010.

### **Ambassador to Germany, 2010–15**

**IH-C:** Around that time you were then being fingered, if I may put it that way, for your next job which was Ambassador in Berlin?

**SM:** Absolutely. As we've already discussed my second posting was to Bonn. So the Office had properly taught me German, back then. I had a little bit more notice than I had had in going to Israel so I was able to revive my German. I still didn't have very much time in a classroom – almost no time in a classroom - but still I did the Higher exam before I left for Berlin in October 2010 and passed it. I did five years ...

**IH-C:** It sounds as though it was rather better taught than the Arabic had been!

**SM:** It was! It absolutely was, and of course the teaching material had improved in 20 odd years. One thing that I especially enjoyed were the podcasts and German radio and with digital radio and podcasts on iTunes you can be completely up to date with what is happening in Germany.

**IH-C:** And your main preoccupation while you were there?

**SM:** Well, the relationship with Europe was already clearly problematic at the end of 2010 but one thing that struck me was the importance of Germany in European policy had been understood by the European continent for a very long time. But even as late as 2010 the

United Kingdom was still looking principally towards Paris. It felt to me that, starting at the top with the Prime Minister, we needed to rebalance things.

**IH-C:** Simon, why do you think there was that shift? I mean, Germany has always been historically for the last period very, very central to our affairs. Why France over Germany?

**SM:** You're right, but the relationship was completely coloured by the Second World War and the aftermath. A lot of the relationship was a military relationship where the UK clearly was in a more senior position and you had the British Army of the Rhine, when you had tens of thousands of British troops posted in the territory of another country, whether they like it or not, the pecking order seems clear. But lots of things had shifted in the last 70 years. I was there for unification, saw the unhappiness of Prime Minister Thatcher with unification and on the back of that and the rows between Thatcher and Kohl, some of the machinery fell into disuse. So, in the 1980s there were summits between the British and German governments. In the 1990s they disappeared and they have never been revived. Whereas we've always had summits with the French. It's one of the few countries where that is an annual fixture, or if it's not an annual fixture it's in the diary and has had to be postponed for various reasons. We've always tended politically and diplomatically to support the French ahead of the Germans. Of course this is reinforced by our membership of the Security Council which forms a very big part of our diplomacy and the French, with us, are permanent members and the Germans are not.

I wanted to boost the relationship at the top and Prime Minister Cameron agreed. Prime Minister Cameron was also aware of his rather rocky personal relationship with Angela Merkel. One of the first things which Cameron had done in order to become leader of the Conservative Party was to take the Conservative Party out of the European People's Party Group in Strasbourg. That had been a forum where Conservatives and CDU/CSU met regularly. Merkel was very, very unhappy that Cameron took the Conservatives out and she blamed Cameron explicitly while he was leader of the Opposition and she had almost no contact with him because she didn't need to have contact and she didn't want contact. Cameron as Prime Minister, of course, was in a new category but it required quite a lot of work to get that relationship started. Prime Minister Cameron worked very hard and very effectively to do that and I believe the Embassy helped.

**IH-C:** Having aimed for that rebalancing of relations, with respect to France and Germany, maybe the culminating event in that process was The Queen's State Visit to Germany?

**SM:** I agree. Prime Minister Cameron invested a lot of time in his relationship with Chancellor Merkel but he was as keen for the overall relationship to improve and for the Chancellor and her Cabinet to see that Germany, as a whole, values the relationship with the United Kingdom as a whole. The best way to demonstrate that was, in my judgement, another State Visit. The Queen in her reign has paid multiple State Visits to very few countries. But at the top of the list are France and Germany to both of which countries she has paid five State Visits. They seem always to have been paired with the State Visit to France going first and the one to Germany following within the next 18 months and that is what happened in 2015. The State Visit to France had been the previous year.

The response from Germany as a whole was extraordinary. One demonstration was the coverage in *Bild* newspaper, the highest circulation newspaper in Europe, a tabloid in broadsheet form and on the first full day of the State Visit the first six pages in the newspaper were devoted to The Queen's State Visit. A second demonstration: the main public broadcaster broadcast every minute of the State Visit so Germans could (and many of them did) stop everything to follow Her Majesty every step of the way. What happened was extraordinary, everything worked, everything was happy, everything was impactful. Her Majesty arrived the evening before the formal start. Of course, at this point she is 89 years old and the Duke of Edinburgh 94, so it was felt that if they had an evening to rest and acclimatise that would help. But of course everybody knew that they were arriving the evening before even though it wasn't the formal part of the visit and there were huge crowds. When The Queen and the Duke were driven from Tegel Airport to the Adlon Hotel where they were staying, along the whole route the traffic was stationary but in a good humour. The drivers and passengers were in good humour, many of them standing on the roof of their cars to wave and cheer as The Queen went by. The German hosts had never seen a response like that from the people of Berlin and that set the tone for the following three days.

The Queen was very warmly received in Berlin, in Frankfurt, a city she'd never previously visited, and most strikingly and most movingly in Lower Saxony and in Bergen-Belsen, the concentration camp liberated by British troops in 1945 which was the last element of the State Visit. So, as we looked back we felt that we'd achieved all our objectives. Also in the

margins of the visit the Prime Minister came. It is a standard part of any State Visit that there is an accompanying Minister. Usually that is the Foreign Secretary and, indeed, Philip Hammond was there throughout. But for this visit Prime Minister Cameron also accompanied Her Majesty on the first full day and of course that meant that he could have detailed talks with Chancellor Merkel at the Chancellery and could be present at the State Banquet given by President Gauck at the Bellevue Palace. So, everything we wanted was there and within the context of the State Visit achieved everything we could have hoped for.

**IH-C:** Just before we leave your time in Germany, a quick word about the Embassy building itself? It was still new, relatively, when you moved in as Ambassador. How was it?

**SM:** Well, it was a notorious public private partnership. This was a very fashionable way of financing infrastructure in the early days of Tony Blair's government. A couple of points. First, it gave us a wonderful building. The contract required our landlord to maintain a technically quite complicated building to a very high standard. That they did. They fulfilled the terms of the contract so that when I arrived in October 2010, the place looked just as good as it had when it was opened ten years earlier. So, that was the up side. The down side was that the contract was more than a thousand pages long, very, very complicated. We had only one person on the staff that really understood it all. And second, although at the beginning you get your piece of infrastructure without paying for it up front, over time it is an extraordinarily expensive way to fund infrastructure. So, we were paying through the nose every year for a building that, if we'd been renting on the open market in Berlin, we'd have had at a fraction of that annual cost. I was not a fan of PFI.

**Permanent Under-Secretary of State, FCO and Head of the Diplomatic Service, 2015–20**

**IH-C:** At what stage in your time in Berlin did you learn about your next and final Foreign Office job?

**SM:** Simon Fraser became PUS just after the General Election in 2010. During his time as PUS the new model of contracts for permanent secretaries was rolled out which gives permanent secretaries five years. So, everyone in the Service could work out that he was likely to leave in the summer of 2015. As it happened, Simon visited Berlin around Easter

2015 and gave me notice that he was going to announce his retirement before the General Election; we discussed the possibility of my being a candidate to succeed him. When the competition was launched, and it was an open competition, the particulars were published, I had to provide a manifesto, a CV, a formal written application, which of course did not use to be the case for PUS competitions. The competition only got going in June 2015, once the new government was up and running. Once it started, the competition ran pretty quickly. I was interviewed, I think, at the beginning of July. I then heard I was one of three candidates the panel had placed above the line [and so considered appointable]. I had another interview with the Foreign Secretary and, I think, it was on 23<sup>rd</sup> July I heard that I'd got the job. I left Germany on 30<sup>th</sup> August and started as PUS on 1<sup>st</sup> September. So, it wasn't ideal from the point of view of pre-posting training or pre-posting recuperation but it was the most exciting job, a job I very much wanted to do and so I was just fine with that.

One point to note about the competition, Ian. In the end there were just five people who applied and they were the five knighted ambassadors eligible to run; so it was quite old fashioned and un-diverse. One of my motives in going for the job was to increase diversity at the top of the Foreign Office. For many years we have been much better in our intake but over time it was provable that talented women and people from ethnic minority communities were not making progress through the Foreign Office, not getting to the upper ranks. So, one of the things I wanted and one of the things which I think characterised my five years as PUS was greater diversity at the top.

When I became PUS one of my priorities was also to stress again expertise. The Foreign Office's reputation for excellence in languages, excellence in knotty policy areas had diminished and one stat I was told early on was that the target language attainment of our Heads of Mission in 2015 was 40%, meaning that only four out of ten Ambassadors posted to language posts overseas were able to do business in that language. By the time I left that figure had gone up to 77%. So, nearly eight out of ten and still heading in the right direction. So we rediscovered, I hope, the importance to us and to our reputation and to our success, of deep expertise.

**IH-C:** In general terms, what is the PUS's role? I'm not talking about specific initiatives that you've just been referring to now. Perhaps [this is] a naïve sounding question but what does the PUS do and who is he/she responsible to?

**SM:** The role is a double role which is encapsulated in the two titles. The person is Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs – now Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Affairs - and in that role, is the Foreign Secretary's Principal Foreign Policy Adviser. In that role I was a member of the National Security Council - the only PUS who was a member of the National Security Council - and dealing with the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and other members of the NSC about all the biggest policy issues of the day. Not exclusively, of course, but the apex of the policy making system. In recent decades that role was increasingly shared with the Political Director, the role created in 1982 with Julian Bullard, but with the creation of the National Security Council in 2010, the pendulum swung a little bit back towards the PUS because the PUS is a member of that Council and the Political Director is not. That is 50% of the role.

Then you are also Head of Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service and in that role, you are running the global operation. The FCO/FCDO network is about 280 posts in about 160 different countries plus nine big delegations to international organisations. And ten overseas territories have postings from London. The PUS is the leader of that global network. You see it in posting senior figures to all those places, you see it in decisions taken about resources, where to spend, how much to spend, on what to spend. All of these things are considered by the Board chaired by the PUS. As Head of the Service, one of the things I believe any PUS has to do is connect with that organisation and I tried to do that in two principal ways. One – I blogged every week so that there was a message written by the PUS three weeks out of four because there was a guest slot every fourth week but the readership could tell that this was the authentic words of me and I got a lot of feedback about the blog over the five years. The second thing I did was to visit because although Zoom is quite good and reliable, although the written word is helpful, when you see something for yourself you understand more thoroughly, I think, than when you are reading about it. In my time as PUS I visited 147 posts in 122 countries plus 5 overseas territories.

**IH-C:** And one of your principal lieutenants, as I understand it, is the Chief Clerk.

**SM:** Ah, Ian, you are showing your vintage! That is now the Chief Operating Officer (COO). I had three different COOs in my time: I started with Deb Bronnert and then I had Karen Pierce and then, for more than three years, Peter Jones.

**IH-C:** Right! Let's pass on then to some of those events during your time as PUS and of course one of the most dramatic was the EU Referendum, the result of which no doubt took the Foreign Office by surprise as much as anyone else.

**SM:** Indeed! A demonstration as much as anything else, Ian, that you can plan as much as you like, but events will always surprise you. In the process of becoming PUS the thing most on people's minds was domestic austerity and the need for further cuts in the Public Service. Indeed, the exercise I was given in my interview before the panel was: 'model a 25% cut in your basic budget' because that was the mindset of the Conservative Government as it began its mandate in 2015. Of course, one of the things they promised in their election manifesto was a referendum on EU membership. That became the focus of our work in the first half of 2016 and when the country voted to leave the European Union, the consequences of that was the main preoccupation for the rest of my time as PUS. Very quickly, the Government worked out that to deliver Brexit, they would need the Public Service and so we got more resources, we were not cut and the Board anticipated the arrival of these extra resources so we were able to react quickly to the new task.

**IH-C:** Were you conscious, to any extent, of any possible scepticism in some quarters outside the Foreign Office about the Foreign Office's commitment to this process going forward? Perhaps I'm being

**SM:** No, no, no .... absolutely! The Foreign Office is full of people who believe in the country's international and European destiny. People who had worked hard to make our membership of the EU work over the last 40-odd years. I never asked any colleagues for detailed views; I never asked a colleague how she or he had voted in the referendum but the feel of the organisation was absolutely committed to the European project even if not delighted by the detail. When the results came in, the shock in King Charles Street was palpable. Not everybody in the Foreign Office voted to stay in Europe and it's very important to remember that a large complement – 14,000 people all around the world – was not monolithic in its view of Europe. Those that voted to leave the European Union could get quite narked with the assumption that we were all pro-Europe. Even though there were people who voted against membership of Europe, the feeling was that the majority was pro EU. So on that day, on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2016, I had to talk to the Service and I decided that I would

reveal how I had voted because it was the widespread assumption, certainly at the political level, I thought: ‘this I will embrace, this is different from revealing how I voted in the General Election and, to be honest, is key to being credible’.

Having revealed how I voted, I stressed three messages which remained my three key messages for the following four years. The first was that the result was definitive. Everybody knew the rules about the referendum and, having voted to leave, we were going to leave and everybody needed to get their head around that fact. And in those early hours and days I think that was a very important message because sometimes grief is so overwhelming that you hope that the inevitable will not happen. That was my first message. My second message was that this would be our main business. Even though there were many other things going on, even though there were many other things we had to do and deliver, the Foreign Office would be a core part of the Government’s Brexit negotiation and Brexit team. Everybody should think about their job in that context including the thought that, given the overwhelming priority of Brexit, did certain work continue to need to be done? Could there be a resource freed up for Brexit? Again, I think that this was an important point to get across early on. And third, that the United Kingdom would survive this, that even though this was dramatic, even though this was unwelcome to many people, we as a country would cope with it and flourish on the other side. There had to be optimism and I think we were correct to be optimistic and so that was my third message.

**IH-C:** But of course in the aftermath of the referendum, there was the internal situation to deal with but you were also meeting colleagues in Europe who were also having to adjust to the surprise of what had come out of the UK.

**SM:** Absolutely. And one of my key messages to the Service and key messages to colleagues overseas was that I and we are public servants so no matter our personal feelings, we knew what we had to do. No matter how people felt, their duty was clear. After the referendum results, delivering a Brexit that defended and promoted British interests was our core task. And with colleagues overseas, I wouldn’t have a sackcloth and ashes conversation and mourn because – what’s the point? That’s not relevant. What they had to understand was that my job and the job of all British public servants was to deliver Brexit.

**IH-C:** Shall we pass on? Early in your tenure a new situation was developing in America with the presidential election.

**SM:** Indeed, it was an extraordinary campaign. Mr Trump as a candidate was unique. Not unique in that he was an outsider – there have been many outsider candidates over the decades – but unique in cutting through and becoming the leading candidate and eventually the nominee. Never in US history has anybody with a purely business background become the nominee of one of the main parties. We knew from the nominating convention in August that this was unprecedented. Sadly, we also knew that we would have certain difficulties in establishing a relationship with nominee Trump, in particular because the Government had decided certain things at the very most senior level early on in the campaign which meant that Trump had reason to be unhappy with the United Kingdom. In particular, the Prime Minister said that the Ambassador and his team should have no contact with Donald Trump; in the Spring that didn't seem to be all that problematic but by the autumn it was problematic. And of course people have long memories about those who slight them.

**IH-C:** So the campaign continues, you come to the election and Donald Trump becomes the President of the United States. How did those contacts continue at that stage?

**SM:** We had an excellent Embassy, of course, even though they had no official contact with the Trump campaign, of course there were multiple informal means of keeping in touch. We were also helped by the change in Prime Minister, that the line taken in the Spring was taken by Prime Minister Cameron. By the time Donald Trump was elected we had Prime Minister May. This is the single most important relationship we have in the world so we had the motivation and means to start afresh. Looking at President-elect Trump, it was clear that he would be the single most important person in his Administration, that he was not going to devolve anything significant to anybody else, that he meant what he had said during the campaign so we had to take his campaign pledges seriously, and that if we wanted to have influence, we had to have a direct relationship with him.

That was the reason why the British Government made a direct and unapologetic play for the President himself in his early days in office. Prime Minister May was the first world leader to make it to Washington for face to face talks. The President had a very high profile visit to the UK in the summer of 2018 including a meeting with Her Majesty at Windsor and a

splendid dinner at Blenheim Palace and of course, very unusually, President Trump had a full State Visit to the United Kingdom in his first term, coming in June 2019. Now that he's left office, people wonder why we overdid it. I think the explanation is clear: the United States is our key partner and in the Trump Administration, the man at the top was the vital player and the person we needed to get alongside.

**IH-C:** Despite the State Visit, despite the efforts being made, it was a bumpy relationship, wasn't it?

**SM:** Yes, and that was demonstrated the month after the State Visit which was a triumph. A triumph, of course, for The Queen and the Royal Family. The President was absolutely delighted with how he was treated but the President had his own way of operating and disliked any criticism so that when cables, letters from the Ambassador were leaked to the British press in July, he reacted immediately and sharply and, in the view of Kim Darroch our Ambassador, irrevocably. It was Kim's judgement that the President having said what he said repeatedly, was not going to change his mind and that therefore his position as British Ambassador was untenable. I think that was 10<sup>th</sup> July 2019 when I was pulled out of a meeting of the NSC(O) to talk to Kim who'd been agonising about what to do overnight and he had come to the conclusion that he should resign. Reluctantly, I accepted. He wrote to me as Head of the Service; I replied on behalf of the Service. The whole system was informed within minutes. I had my conversations with Kim before 9 o'clock in the morning and by 12 o'clock, three hours later, when the Prime Minister rose at Prime Minister's Questions, she was able to pay tribute to Kim for his work.

**IH-C:** A very difficult time for him but also for you in managing that very fraught situation.

**SM:** Yes, we had an all-staff meeting that afternoon which I think was the best attended in my whole time as PUS. The only other to get close was on 24<sup>th</sup> June immediately after the referendum. The room was packed, the spill over room was packed and there were hundreds of lines open around the world. People were in shock. I explained the facts. I explained that Kim would be looked after because we look after our own when they are traduced and the relationship would and had to continue. The relationship was bigger than one spat. And I think all of those things were proved in the following months.

**IH-C:** Another foreign concern was China and its attitudes impacting very much on what you were concerned about?

**SM:** At the beginning of my time as PUS we had the State Visit of President Xi. I think, looking back, that was the high point in relations between Beijing and London. He enjoyed the visit, it achieved its policy objectives. The President of China talked in terms of a ‘Golden Era’ – his phrase – between China and the United Kingdom. In many ways this was the culmination of the Cameron/Osborne China policy. My take is that the then Prime Minister and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer saw the rise of China as an inevitable fact and saw the national interest as embracing that and becoming China’s best friend in Europe. And the State Visit was the proof of that analysis and that way of behaving.

Over the years since, we have had an increasingly scratchy relationship with Beijing. One cause of that has been a changed Beijing policy towards Hong Kong. Since the Joint Declaration of December 1984, the United Kingdom has had particular responsibility towards Hong Kong, acknowledged by the government in Beijing. So, we voiced our feelings, our unhappiness, with the new security laws. The Chinese Government was not happy about that but we did not back down. More than that, we developed as a government the offer towards British Nationals Overseas in Hong Kong of longer residency in the United Kingdom with opening a perspective towards citizenship in the United Kingdom. This was a big squabble between London and Beijing but with the United Kingdom standing by its duty towards the people of Hong Kong.

**IH-C:** The United States was concerned in its own way over China, particularly over trade. But there was a certain identity of interest between Britain and the US here.

**SM:** I think that’s a fair comment. There are quite a few big players on the international stage that have seen their relationship with China become more difficult over the last five years. In the United States it interests me very much that one part of the Trump reorientation which was widely supported, including by Democrats, was a more sceptical relationship, a more questioning relationship with China. The feeling grew that Clinton and Bush and particularly Obama had been too lenient towards the Chinese, had allowed the Chinese to progress with insufficient American challenge. That is a policy started by Trump which I see the Biden Administration continuing. But also the Australians have a much more difficult

relationship these days, the Canadians too and the Japanese and the Indians. So, quite significant parts of the international community are reassessing their relationship with China in the light of Chinese behaviour.

**IH-C:** Some of these leaders - you've mentioned Australia and India in particular - would have come together for the Commonwealth Summit, again an opportunity to exchange views.

**SM:** Yes, we had the biggest ever CHOGM in London in April 2018. There are now 53 member states and more than 40 heads of state and government came to London so it was the best attended, ever. What I saw was the usefulness of a common language and common institutions so this group of leaders had a hinterland in common which meant it was easier for them to do business. One thing that we, the British, announced was our re-opening in a slew of Commonwealth countries in the South Pacific in particular, but also in Africa and the Caribbean. One reason why we did that was that our Australian and New Zealand friends had made the case to us that with the absence of the United Kingdom, the choices for the governments in the South Pacific were becoming narrower, that China was becoming the default option in Tonga and in Samoa and in Vanuatu and so we decided we needed to show solidarity with the Australians and New Zealanders and to support with a physical presence the Western alternative, the Western option for these countries.

A lot of useful work was done and I think one of the key agenda items was climate change and the work initiated in 2018 at CHOGM will come to fruition at the COP26 meeting, the Conference of the Parties dealing with climate change in Glasgow in November 2021.

**IH-C:** Now, terrorism raised its head in your time as well, in particular the question of the Skripals and what happened in Salisbury. That came as a shock to everybody including, no doubt, yourself?

**SM:** Well, it was so brazen. I remember hearing one Cabinet Minister remark: "If all they wanted to do was rub out a disagreeable opponent, the option of shooting him down from the back of a moped would have been a whole lot more straightforward than choosing this particularly vile and unstable nerve agent which imperilled not only the target but the whole town of Salisbury". It was a shock, you are right. But the scientists and the investigators were incredibly impressive. Very quickly they were able to tell the National Security

Council and the Prime Minister what had happened and who was responsible. The Cabinet within days of the attack on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018, knew that it was a nerve agent, knew that it was Novichok, knew that it had been made in Russia and knew that these two particular Russians had delivered the Novichok to Salisbury.

Then we had a huge diplomatic effort. And the diplomatic effort delivered two very big achievements for the United Kingdom. First of all there was a coordinated expulsion of Russian diplomats, i.e. agents across the world. Thirty countries and international organisations took part in that; 150 Russians were expelled because of that. And second, we led the effort to beef up the OPCW, the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons in The Hague. One of our problems immediately after the attack was that the key international organisation was not allowed by its statutes to ascribe responsibility. We led an effort to change the rules and we succeeded in changing the rules so that now when there is an attack, the experts can say more than just: ‘chemical weapons were present’. They can say: ‘and all evidence points to ... X being the perpetrator’. So, these were two substantial diplomatic achievements in the wake of the Salisbury poisonings.

**IH-C:** But of course dealing with Putin’s Russia is a challenge also in general terms, quite apart from these specific acts?

**SM:** It is true. I was present in Heiligendamm in 2007 when the G8 still existed and when Putin explained to Prime Minister Blair right at the end of his time as Prime Minister that he, Putin, and Russia as a whole had had enough of the Western approach to Russia after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Since that time Russia has been more aggressive and more problematic. We’ve seen the war against Georgia, we’ve seen the annexation of Crimea, we’ve seen the poisoning of Litvinenko. So, the challenges and the problems have been mounting. But I would note that Russia remains one of the P5 powers, we are two of the three big European powers who are not members of the European Union (the third being Turkey), we have a lot of work to do with Russia so although the relationship is scratchy, although the relationship has been poor for the last dozen years or more, the elements and the incentives are there for us to reassess and have another go.

**IH-C:** Let’s pass on to foreign aid development and of course the merger of DFID with the Foreign Office. There’s a long history to that – of it being a part and not part of the main

Foreign Office. I recall that myself. The discussions of this decision – how did they go and with what result do you think?

**SM:** This is a conversation I began with Boris Johnson when he was Foreign Secretary. Of course, he became Foreign Secretary on the back of the EU referendum result and I made the point that, standing alone on the international stage, the United Kingdom needed one international policy. That having our overseas effort splintered, hobbled that effort and made it less effective over all. So, I made the case for unifying the overseas effort under the Foreign Secretary. As the Permanent Under Secretary in the Foreign Office, I don't think anybody would be surprised that I would see that as the natural place to draw things together. And as Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson listened to that. As Prime Minister, of course, he was in a position to do something about that. So, I was part of the discussions, part of the sustained work which led up to the announcement in June 2020 that FCO and DFID would merge. How this was done was a big part of the preliminary conversations and it was the Prime Minister's decision that merger rather than take over was the way to go, that this would be a new ministry and that it would be complete integration of these two arms of overseas policy. And that is now what my successor is doing in the FCDO.

**IH-C:** In the face of the – at least temporary – reduction in the size of the overseas aid budget.

**SM:** Indeed. I cannot offhand think of a worse moment to announce such a reduction when you've just combined ministries and people in half of the new ministry are fearful that their way of doing things is losing and disappearing. I advocate instead that we should maintain the 0.7 – or go back to the 0.7 as quickly as possible – that we should take more risks, show more imagination about the proper use of that 0.7. Most governments in developing countries worry most about security and the rule of law in their countries and yet this is an area of development policy which traditionally has been very difficult to square with the DAC rules. So I think we should maintain the level of spend but use it to spend on wider priorities.

**IH-C:** You mentioned the National Security Council before. I recall the Joint Intelligence Committee that used to meet. The way these things have been reorganised is perhaps slightly confusing to the outsider. Some of the reorganisation took place on your watch?

**SM:** The JIC is fundamentally different. Its remit is much narrower and it is a committee of officials. The National Security Council is much more like the traditional Cabinet sub-committee dealing with foreign affairs. Indeed, it is that committee with a new name but with more structure round it, more permanence around it. Cabinet committees change their names as prime ministers change. This is something that is a permanent part of the architecture. I think it is a useful innovation. It has the Prime Minister in the chair, it brings all the other players into one room. The Foreign Secretary is clearly the senior amongst those players – that seniority is underlined at the moment by the addition of the title: ‘First Secretary of State’ to Dom Raab’s Foreign Secretary title. I think that it is an understandable innovation. It aligns us more to practice elsewhere, particularly at the United States. Looking how it operates, I would advocate a sharper focus on the top priorities. The NSC really doesn’t need to do everything. The Foreign Office is there to do everything overseas. The NSC needs to focus on the top two or three, maybe four issues that are properly cross cutting across government.

**IH-C:** Right towards the end of your time as PUS we, of course, had the pandemic developing. This must have been a preoccupation in your last few months in the job.

**SM:** Absolutely. We’re talking (today) on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 2021. This day last year, we knew that Covid-19 existed. It was not called Covid-19 yet, it was just known as a coronavirus and it had not reached the United Kingdom as far as we knew. Twelve months later we see that this pandemic has overwhelmed our economy and overwhelmed our public services. Everything changed very quickly. Two things about which I am very proud in the Foreign Office reaction are first: that we were able inside of one week to turn ourselves from an organisation which was used to meeting face to face and doing most of its business in the United Kingdom in King Charles Street, with up to 3,000 people working in that building every day, we changed from an office-bound organisation into a remote-working organisation overnight. And we were able to do that because of our investment in technology. We are used to dealing with each other in small groups and in wider groups on-line. The tech overhaul programme allowed all of that to happen by rolling out 20,000 devices worldwide over the last three years. That’s Number One.

Number Two was that the Foreign Office was given lead responsibility for repatriating Britons from overseas. In the early days we didn't know what impact Covid would have on the economies and health care systems around the world so there was a visceral instinct to get people home - and we did that. By the middle of last year, we helped the repatriation of about 1.3 million British citizens. Most of those came on commercial flights which was the better option for the taxpayer. We facilitated that by keeping airlines flying, keeping air corridors open. A lot of negotiating had to be done with certain governments that wanted to slow things down. In the final stages of the repatriation effort we did that by charter flight and so we had charter flights coming from all over the world bringing the rump of British communities home which had been unable to come home by commercial means. So, when the Cabinet Office did its initial assessment of different aspects of crisis handling, the Foreign Office repatriation effort in August last year was marked in the highest category. Indeed, it was the only part of the overall effort in that highest category.

**IH-C:** Now that you've retired, Simon, looking back at the Foreign Office, there's a perception in some quarters that it doesn't quite have the dominant position in Whitehall that it used to. I'm sure there are other views about that. So, thinking of that, and thinking of it as a career for a person, what are your feelings today about it?

**SM:** Well, I think, Ian, that that's flat wrong. I think that the merger with DFID is a first proof that the Foreign Office is reasserting its coordinating function at the heart of British overseas policy and I think of that as a step. DIT was set up for a specific short-term purpose. I hope that, before the next General Election, DIT will be folded into the FCDO so that we will have a single, united overseas effort. So, I think the facts are rather against the thesis that you are ventriloquising. The Foreign Office is clearly central and clearly still somewhat different because we are still the Diplomatic Service and there have been many efforts to fold us completely into the Home Civil Service but the overseas effort is distinct, and distinct enough to need its own service. That has been defended and I think that in the next phase it will even expand.

**IH-C:** And it has given you a good career.

**SM:** A fantastic career. I hope that has been obvious over our conversations for variety and importance. The feeling that you are engaged in issues which really matter – which really

matter not only for our country but for the world as a whole. The Foreign Office is very difficult to beat.

**IH-C:** Simon McDonald, thank you very much indeed.