

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

James Mellon (born 25 January 1929)

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Sir James Mellon KCMG

Monday 14 April 2003 in London

Interviewer: Malcolm McBain

Place: Charlemagne Capital (UK) Ltd), 39 St James's Street, London SW1A 1JD

Sir James Mellon, you were educated at Glasgow University - but where did you go to school?

In St Aloysius's College which is a Jesuit college in Glasgow.

And what were your parents?

Father was a school teacher, mother left school at 14 when her mother died and she had to look after the family and I don't think her education progressed after that.

So you did not really have a privileged background.....

I had marvellous parents, and a father who was exceedingly bright. And I have a son who is exceedingly rich now. He and I have no doubt that we are not as bright as my father. He walked out of a slum every day with his school blazer under his arm. I went to the same school - he had been given a scholarship there, and scholarship was a polite word. He just was not charged. The Jesuits were there to set up a Catholic middle class in Glasgow. Without education you just could not get a job in Glasgow unless it was as a navvy. There were only two areas where you could make your way. One was as a publican, the other was as a bookie. And the Jesuits set up the school to try to deal with this. My father became a schoolteacher. The 1918 Education Act set up state Catholic schools. My father was at university for four years and got a degree and went into teaching.

When you finished at Glasgow University, you went into the Department of Agriculture for Scotland?

No, I went to Aarhus University first. Largely because I had visited Denmark once as my best man - when I was married for the second time - was a student I met in Switzerland - we were both working on Swiss farms - and he was a Dane and I'd visited him and he'd visited me and I had seen Aarhus. After I had finished my second degree in Glasgow I saw two adverts on a notice board. One was for a scholarship in Brazil and one was for a scholarship in Denmark and I could not think of anything to study in Brazil so I applied for Aarhus. And unfortunately after three months there I got a telegram from my father saying that I had passed the Civil Service exam, which I had not thought, was anything other than a way of getting me down to London. So he said: come back and start work and that was the first mistake I made. I did my National Service and then went back and I applied for the Department of Agriculture for Scotland because I had never done any agricultural economics. But it turned out to be one of the best choices I could have made. The Scottish Office is a very tight little office. It has always had - and this is not just spinning a line - it has always had an ability to attract - a higher standard is the wrong word - a more uniformly high standard of civil servant than you get down in London. Because life in Edinburgh is a lot easier - for families and for schools and all the rest and you don't have the hassle.

And you have the same standard of living - would you have the same salary as in Whitehall?

You don't have the London allowances but that does not make any difference. What you did have was the ability to deal with everything by sending the Assistant Principals, as the juniors were called in those days, round with a piece of paper to talk to everybody and then come back with the answer, instead of spending three days in Whitehall committees. Now that is not a joke. That is the way it was done. The result was that the Assistant Principals came out of training very much more skilled in a large number of subjects. And there were only 30 administrative grade officers in that Department and they met every day for coffee.

30 administrative officers of principal rank?

Assistant Principal and Principal, and above, and they met for coffee and everybody knew each other and did business and the result was that you started at nine and finished at five.

And achieved a highly efficient degree of administration.

And frankly did quite well. A very good administration. I utterly approve of the time I spent there. I go around saying to people in my view that the FCO is a Rolls Royce organisation and you miss it terribly when you are outside. And I have to say the Scottish Office was a mini Bentley; it was just brilliant in Edinburgh. And it still is I am afraid. I know that they are having problems in relation to the difficulties of an Assembly and also a Cabinet down south that still controls the purse strings. I still keep in touch with them and there is no question in my mind that their problem is a surplus of highly qualified, highly brained people.

A surplus - astonishing situation really.

They don't have the problem that is appearing in Whitehall I think (and I have been dealing with what used to be the Department of Environment for five years now on social housing). The Department of the Environment's inability to understand things - you may laugh at this - is just not fathomable, not recognizable, by somebody who has been in the Foreign Office. I tell people outside - for example, a young man I met in Edinburgh from St Aloysius who wanted to join the Foreign Service - the great thing about the Foreign Office is that when we put out a telegram saying 'Iran is now our friend' everybody in the Foreign Office knows not just that that is the fact but knows the implications for them and operates on that basis the next day. You don't find that in Whitehall Departments now.

Well I hope you find it in the Foreign Office

I do. I wrote to John Kerr when he retired - I go back so far with John - he was in fact Michael Palliser's Private Secretary and dealt with me on a number of things.

While you were Head of TRED?

While I was Head of TRED, he was most put out and amused by the fact that when we had a case where one of our Embassies had sent a telegram in - you want the facts on it?

Yes.

British High Commission in Lagos had sent a telegram saying that a named British businessman, representative of a big company, had told him he had to bribe somebody. The Head of West Africa Department sent that along immediately without consulting me to the ...

PUS?

No, to the Attorney General. And I heard of this. And this is where it shows up that if you are all right as the Head of Department your underlings will tell you that they have heard a rumour - if you are not you won't be told it -- and I was told immediately and I got on to it and found out what had happened, put a handwritten note that night into the PUS and at half past eight the next morning I was in with the Foreign Secretary and I said to him if this goes through you will never have a British businessman inside any of your embassies in future. It was withdrawn. I don't know how they did it. Immediately, then I was instructed to write to every Head of Mission telling him that on no account should anybody ever deal with any question of bribing. That was fine. John was rather amused when I also wrote a personal and private piece - a "Destroy as soon as you've read" letter to every Commercial Counsellor saying "I know quite well that if someone walks through your door and says how do I this, you have to point him in the direction of the agent who will do it, so go on, carry on" - and John understood all this.

Reality.

Reality. And he was also the person who when I was first sent out to Ghana and I was absolutely consumed with guilt at leaving my terminally ill mother, my brother and my sister, both doctors, said to me: Mum can last three months or six months but off you go. She died within two weeks and I came back for the funeral. And John was the one who saw me in a sense - the PUS had written a little letter but he was out when I passed by his office - and John was exceedingly kind and nice. He is a decent man. So when he retired, I wrote him a letter to say "John, I have been into the Office several times recently and each time I have been dealing with a different subject and each time I have met people who seem to me to be very respectful of the way which you inspire this Office". I am an ex member of the Node - you know the Node course?

No.

Oh you must get on to this. Shall we come back to this later?

Yes

At one of the Node reunions one of the ex-permanent secretaries from a Whitehall department was saying how terrible it was nowadays that no one had any concept of public service and I said to John 'I do not get this message from the FCO. It gives me a strong feeling that they know that they are all there for the purpose of public service and they are inspired by you to do it'. And John wrote back to me thanking me. "That was very nice. I will just tell you: when we issued - at short notice a request for people to go to Kabul to set up a British Embassy and to operate in a mess - in both senses, though we have only got about 1000 - 1200 people at home, we had 250 applications within 24 hours. We could afford to take just the Pushtu speakers and other Afghan language speakers". But that says they are still operating as a public service organisation.

But the Node course, you must get on to this. At the end of the second world war, all sorts of people had been working in government departments, there had been cross fertilisation from universities and industry, and all been doing their bit, and when the war finished they went back to their old jobs. But Joe Bloggs in the Treasury knew Ivan Skavinsky in Oxford, or better still so and so in Manchester, or somebody who was in the City, or somebody who was in a law firm or whatever. They had all worked together but then they started to realise - it was 1955 - that this was running out, people weren't knowing each other any more. The Civil Service was losing their contacts in business and industry. So every year they sent out 24 people to go together, twelve from industry, one came from CBI, he wasn't very successful as I hear, and the rest were bankers, British Steel, and so forth, twelve from the public service, one from the FO and 11 from round about Whitehall; and we all were put together in a place called the Node, which is one of the big oil companies' places up by Milton Keynes. You just went at it for three or four weeks together. The civil servants naturally won the business game every year - traditionally - because they had no idea of risk and just took it, you know, none of this "prudence of mind". But you lived with each other and you learned to live and love each other in a sense. I'll mention today one of them - Tom Frost ex-head of the NatWest - is on the Board of Advisers here.

In your company?

In this company, here, for banks that we operate in Croatia. We have him and we have Ian Lang and we have the ex head of...

Was that Ian Lang the former Scottish Secretary?

Former Scottish Secretary and the DTI and there is another guy, Don McCrickard - ex head of TSB - who is on the Board as well.

Our Node Course still meet once a year - we have reunions. You must get hold of the Node because that was quite influential in the way that the Foreign Office related to various parts of Whitehall.

Of course they still do the Defence College course.

That is another course that relates to the army and the military; this was relating to business and to the world economy. And it is working. Worth chasing up.

Does Node stand for anything?

The Node is the name of the place - that's all. It does not mean anything other than just the name of the place.

So that is my education. It's getting rambling and I don't mind rambling. I wanted to tell you about public service, John Kerr.

And now I want to know about your start in the Department of Agriculture because you then went out of St. Andrew's House to be Agricultural Attaché in Copenhagen.

Well, when I was doing my National Service I had taken a second class interpreter qualification. (I missed it by two marks for the first class!) - in Danish because I was stuck in Germany and I decided

During your National Service?

I was sent up to Schleswig-Holstein which is quite near the Danish border, and I worked away at my Danish and built it up into an interpretership which I believe is between Lower and Intermediate in present day FCO terms.

Did you have German?

No I didn't. I had a bit of German later on when I went to East Berlin but we were not encouraged to make many friends outside the base. It was not quite as bad as non-fraternisation but you were not encouraged.

What unit were you with?

I was with the RAF. This was also a - putting it bluntly - signals operation for listening in, I would not talk about it twenty years ago but now you can. And they were very, very cagey about who came on base.

I think that is understandable.

So it was much more acceptable for me to learn Danish than to learn German. It sounds very strange. But that is how it was. They did not tell me officially what they were doing until I said to them, I see your names are down on the same lists for interpreterships as me, only you have Russian - and then they gave me a briefing on what I shouldn't know which I knew already.

Were you commissioned?

I was commissioned as a National Service Education Officer.

I see - that was one of the few ways you as a National Service man could get a commission.

I could have got it in the army without any question. I was under orders from my father not to do anything dramatic. I had a brother who was a tuberculosis case at that stage and my mother, he said, just couldn't take any more. My brother was a medical student who never had any self-inoculation - this was just before penicillin came in - and he got tuberculosis in the wards and was three years in hospital - but he got through it. It taught him a lot about medicine.

The reason I went for the Agricultural Attaché post - this is rather a historical but daft thing and it was opposed by the Ambassador there and by the

In Copenhagen?

In Copenhagen. And some of the people in MAFF - was, I said to them, I applied for it and I was the first person who had not got an agricultural degree who had ever applied for this sort of post and I said to them: "The last thing you want is somebody who knows which end of a cow the milk comes out of. What you want to know is how they are subsidising the milk that they are sending to you". They had never thought of that before; they quite warmed to this. I was put down as - I was told this later - somebody that might do next time because I was about 31 then, and I was "far too young". But then they saw the others and they were straight out of 'the milk comes out of the backend of the cow' brigade. So they wrote off and the Ambassador didn't like it. He didn't fancy this at all - he objected to my age and wanted a horny-handed son of the soil. Eventually they pushed it and I went.

Who was the ambassador?

Montagu Pollock, one of the old school. Nice guy.

Old school, that says it all.

Old school. Going on with the old school again, then the next thing that happened was they had the 1963 negotiations - well they finished in 1963, didn't they - we had the French veto and the Foreign Office realised then that they had made a mess of the negotiations. Roddy Barclay had been in charge of it and they had run rings round him. Eric Roll, do you remember him? -had just wiped the floor with Roddy Barclay who did not understand what the nature of these negotiations was. My contacts down in Holland were laughing at our negotiating, they really were, and laughing in a sort of bitter way because they were desperate for us to come in. And I think the higher echelons in the Foreign Office accepted that they didn't have people who understood what the reality of multilateral economic diplomacy was, and this was important, so they went out and did a bit of headhunting. Now I had been down to Germany a few times because Norman Statham, do you remember him? had got me down to talk to German politicians - I could not speak German but he

was translating - about British agricultural policy - and he and I got on quite well and the next thing was that I applied for the Foreign Office. I think I got a little bit of encouragement from one or two sources. I went over to London and was interviewed and horribly underinterviewed - this was appalling. I had been interviewed for the Civil Service and I went into that thinking, I don't really care, they'll pay me £5 to go down to London and I'll get £5 from the Danes anyway so that is fine - but I came out stripped clean after three quarters of an hour. They were good, they were very, very good. I didn't get that impression from the Foreign Office. They didn't know how to interview. It was really Carlton Browne of the F.O. And I came back and said to John Henniker-Major who had been Head of Personnel Operations Department, "I was under-interviewed". "I forgot to warn you about that", he said. Anyway, the guy who on the Interviewing Board from the Civil Service Commission was against me getting into the Foreign Office because he thought why hadn't I applied for the Foreign Office first time around. I had applied once but not bothered the second time. We just didn't know about it in Glasgow, did not think it was possible for someone from Glasgow. The FO was regarded as "Brideshead Revisited"; it was the Home Civil Service was regarded as "rigorous". You took real exams for that. And Glasgow was a very sophisticated place in that respect.. I feel rather sorry for anybody who didn't go there - much more rigorous than the Oxford people were, much more rigorous....

Well there were some pretty rigorous chaps coming out of Glasgow

I got a 2nd at Glasgow - I know I would never get a 1st, but there were no Oxbridge people ahead of me in the economics papers I can tell you. And I wasn't working hard...

I did a degree in Classics and a degree in Economics. I did five years, took Classics one year and then Economics and Political Science the next and I think the teachers were very - rigorous is the word. This was the origin of Adam Smith who had worked there.

You went to the FO in 1963.

The F O was looking for staff and this guy didn't think I should get in. But unfortunately for him I had met the Earl of Home who was passing through Copenhagen and he asked me what Denmark was like and I had told him it straight, being the one person in the Embassy who could speak Danish. It sounds very puerile, but the Danes are a different people when they are talking English. Manic in English and depressive in Danish is perhaps a strong statement - but there are differences.

The UK was dealing with them officially at that time (Faroese fisheries, etc) and I told him that you just had to hit them hard and not be too kind to them, and he quite liked this and had done a little note for the Office saying: "just the chap we need". So they took me on that basis eventually.

Well that is good enough basis.

My wife and I had sat up over a weekend arguing whether we should go in or not and we came to the conclusion ...

Go into?

The Foreign Office. And we came to the conclusion - with four kids - that not only was it my own personal predilection so to speak that I wanted to work for something that would involve a more united Europe that would get us away from any risk - you're oppressed by these things when you've just come out of the second World War - any risk of a future war in Europe, but also it was the right thing for our children. We regarded ourselves as springboards for our kids and I think we were right. And we went in and I was put into West African Department and that was great fun, wonderful stuff. I worked too hard and I was told at the end of the year that it was very nice what I had done for this conference but it was far too much for them to read. But I enjoyed it. And then I applied to go to West Africa because I thought I would have to learn French and they wouldn't let me go to Paris to learn French. I applied for West Africa and it was marvellous and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

And did you speak French there?

I spoke French there. I learned. I had been taught French in a Scottish school as if it were a dead language. As my teacher in Brussels when I took my Higher French admitted to his amazement, I could rattle off the imperfect subjunctives but we had never been taught to speak it. It was during the war and we had never met a Frenchman. I then started to learn French in Dakar and eventually when the time came I took my Higher French in Brussels. I enjoyed West Africa thoroughly, it was a wonderful posting. You worked from 7 in the morning till all hours.

Dakar - that's Senegal. So what was your impression of that country?

It was very poor and very sustained by the French. It was a French city at that time. 60,000 French people buying croissants from a French baker in the morning. I had a lot of respect for the Senegalese themselves, very little for the Mourides - the Senegalese Muslim leaders who were the most backward, benighted crowd of abusers that I have ever come across.

How do spell that?

M O U R I D E S - that is a sect in Senegal, they are actually the leaders. Every year they went off on the Haj and they took with them a lot of nice young lads and they never came back.

What did they do, sell them?

Sell them

A portable currency.

A portable currency, exactly. I was also accredited to Nouakchott, which again was a slave state. They were running slaves there as well. Basically we had very little to do with Nouakchott except the iron mines in the north and we had a big interest in that.

The UK?

The UK. The ore went straight off to Britain. And we owned a large amount of the company and that was why I was going up each month or so - I quite enjoyed that until I was PNG'ed from there because of Rhodesia. The French ambassador, Deniau, who had been in Brussels gave me a call when I was up there trying to persuade them not to break off relations and said: "I have just been reading the Mauritanian telegrams: you are being expelled". He was very sweet. Dakar was a tremendous place to be a young diplomat - you could learn the trade and nothing much was going to happen there. You had things like Rhodesia and so forth but we were not terribly involved in that. I worked hard. I built the new embassy, which was great for learning French, I can tell you.

Physically?

We built a new one. The expert came up every month from Lagos. He was the Ministry of Work's guy. You were there, you were dealing with the nuts and bolts of it. After it was all built, I went up into the roof one day and discovered that there did not seem to be any concrete over the strongroom. And I called them up and sure enough there wasn't and the strongroom had been without concrete over the roof all the time of its existence and it had not been noticed by our Ministry of Works lad so we had to do something fast.

That was just good fun and our kids were at the right age for it. People are leaving the Foreign Office, the FCO, now because of kids and various other things. A place like Dakar is just heaven for small children. We would take them to the beach every afternoon. They would go to school in the morning and they would come back and you would finish at 1 or 2pm. You would take them to the beach and have a great time, bring them home, tell them a story, put them down to bed and go out dancing to 1 o'clock and then come home. My wife, my first wife, came down with breast cancer, I am afraid, in the middle of this and that was the start of a rather bad patch altogether. She had eventually three different doses of cancer and died when I was in East Berlin. So it all happened and she was described by the doctor in the Western Infirmary in Edinburgh where they flew her back to as the classic figure, so to speak, for breast cancer. She had been a nurse there too so she was well looked after. But I had to go straight back after one day with her when she came out of the operation. I am afraid that was largely because of an Ambassador who wouldn't put his leave off. The Office gave me permission to go back for three days. Full stop. Not the best way to handle that particular situation, but these days have changed now. Anyway, three months later she was back and we carried on. After that I was posted back to Britain and...

1967 to 72 you went to..

Well, before that I had been posted to North America. I was told by Personnel Department that this was a big plus, I was going to Ottawa. And to get into North America at my stage was a sign of: "you have done well young chap", and all the rest of it. I said: I don't want to go to Ottawa. I want to go to Brussels. And Norman Statham, who had lost a leg as you know, marched across and spoke to Personnel Department and I replaced John Robinson in Brussels, and from then on I was John Robinson's man there.

What happened to John Robinson at that stage?

He was posted back to London - as Con O'Neill's number two - as a Counsellor, he had been a First Secretary in Brussels. So I went in there and James Marjoribanks who has just died (I saw him regularly before he died, rather sad. He told me at one stage that he had just been vegetating and stuck in this home in Edinburgh - all very sad). He was my boss. David Hannay was the other First Secretary. We were only seven of us altogether and when the Scot Nats came out to complain, we could point out that 4 of us were Scottish. That didn't impress them at all.

Who was the Representative?

Well that was Marjoribanks. That was the EEC Delegation, I was talking about.

Marjoribanks was Head of the UK Delegation. Then we had a couple of Counsellors. Honestly, as one of the Counsellors said, the Counsellors are never up to the standard of the First Secretaries. I think by and large it was true. Sounds dreadful to say it. They were nice guys but most of the work was done at First Secretary level in Brussels and it still is, I think.

I had to say this to Anthony Acland because he was worried about a chap in his embassy when I was over in the United States being a bit lazy and not going round and doing things. And I said: "Look, if you are an Under Secretary and you say to somebody: tell me about X, then immediately that X goes on their list as a point that you need in order to get what you want and therefore they can set it off against something else. We can't operate at that high level any more. You have to do it as a First Secretary". I think that's a real point. Of course the big boys are needed for e.g. resolutions in the United Nations. But if you are doing a huge "across the board" economic negotiation, First Secretary quality is what you need. Real quality. So Norman walked across and he got me transferred to Brussels and in I went. And I was there for seven years. Eventually I got to be the Head of Chancery at the Delegation.

Wait a minute - 67-72 it says in your...

No it must have been more than that

73-75 Head of Science and Technology Department

But I left in 72 and did 6 or 7 years. Is that possible? Yes you add up the

63-64 in the FO, 64-66 Head of Chancery, Dakar

Then from 66, it must have 66 that I went to Brussels because I did that job for nearly seven years.

I see so it could have been all of 72 and maybe a bit of 73.

No I wasn't there in 73. Wait a minute, I probably came out the day before the end of 72, because the UK joined the EEC on the 1st of January 73 and I left Brussels then. Anyway, I stayed there as Head of Chancery at the Negotiating Delegation and Head of Chancery at the UKDEL and I loved the job and, frankly, I owed the Office the rest of my life after that. It was just wonderful, marvellous.

Why - because it was such a challenge?

Just the job that I asked for. That was what I'd wanted to do. Putting it very crudely: I joined the Foreign Office to get to Brussels to help do something about Europe. I am not saying federalism or anything like that - I am not going to object if it happens, I am not going to say that that is the end of it - but to make Europe safe, so to speak. Make it work, make it safe. Because I had four kids. It sounds very improbable, but that is the way I was looking at it and the way you did in those days and I got there, the Foreign Office got me there, and they gave me a job where at least I could help, and I loved it. I thought it was wonderful. And I could write lots of dispatches for James on things like agriculture. Having been in agriculture was not a disadvantage.

Did you specialise in agricultural things?

Well, no - we had an Agricultural Counsellor but he was old school in the sense that he was very good at agricultural topics but he had no idea of policy making and he was out of the advisory service. He was an agricultural specialist and they had just got it wrong. Nowadays they do not send agricultural specialists. They are now all administrators or economists. So that's the story there.

Did you play any part in the achievement of that - well you obviously did play a part in the achievement of our entry in 72, but could you be a bit more specific about what you actually did?

Well, let's put it this way. It was a typical Head of Chancery job in that you were blamed if anything was not done, that is point one, and you do not get any credit if anything is done well. But basically it was the job of being the generalist of the organization. A typical example - Whitehall would produce a brief on the energy side - and this happened every time - for our negotiations on Euratom or whatever, coal or steel, and that brief would come out from London on the night before the meeting. It would be rewritten by me before the meeting, and I know nothing about energy. Still, I knew enough - I knew what the Euratom people wanted to hear and didn't want to hear. Does that make sense? So it had to be rewritten. By this time the agricultural guys were a bit smarter. Freddie Kearns was brilliant, I take my hat off to him: he was not such an easy touch. My job was to rewrite things that were not up to scratch for us for the negotiations. The big point was to win, never mind about persuading people, the big point is to win. Now, you are not going to win necessarily by having the best arguments. You are going to win by getting arguments that they don't want to have to turn down for their own political reasons or whatever. This is not a question of being logical, it is a question of being thoroughly familiar with the interior logic of the subject. That is in terms of what will get you through to the end, and how do you get this and that to progress at the same time so that the two come together and make a package. And this was all in a sense packaging. Now, I was working as a member of a team. There were about seven of us who really were the war cabinet. Not a single telegram went out of Brussels in all my time but was designed - and this is an admission - to hit home to four hundred people in London and to convince them of some argument that John Robinson and Con O'Neill approved of. And that was my job. And if anybody says that was falsifying the public service - tant pis -, that was the way I was doing it. That was the way I was paid to do it. Paid is perhaps the wrong word. I was there to be John Robinson's man.

I ran people inside the Commission who would tell me exactly what had happened at Commission meetings and I would put it down and send it back to people whom I trusted, like John Robinson. I could guarantee to write a report on a meeting of the opposing negotiating side within half an hour of their meeting finishing which would have all the major details in it. And that was my job. David Hannay would do it as well. He was particularly good on the trade side. He was brilliant at that. He handled that and did a marvellous job. Another issue. People like Christofas, Kenneth Christofas - our Minister, who eventually came to join us was absolutely brilliant but he couldn't do that - he could not skulk around.

Was he Transport?

No he was Foreign Office. Do you know the little story there? It is not his real name. His father died and his mother married again and Mr Christofas, her second husband, was so nice to Kenneth that Kenneth decided that he would pay a compliment to his stepfather by taking his name. So he was not Greek in any sense at all.

How did you get on with John Robinson?

I loved him. I think I respected him intensely for his brain. There was no question about it. I respected him intensely for the drive he showed. He in turn respected me for understanding what he was about. Does that make sense? And he in turn never had any doubt that if he told me to do x and I would ask him the necessary questions I would do it. And therefore I was his eyes and ears. I will be honest and say at the end of all this my wife was certainly not in good spirits, to put it as mildly as that - she had in fact gone home for an operation and they had put her on drugs that she got dependent on - and I was not in a very good state when we finished. And they looked after me, John Robinson and Con O'Neill. I simply was not fit to take over a Whitehall department at the end of it.

I was exhausted but I got a fortnight off and I was fine but I could not have taken on a Whitehall department and looked after her at the same time and they made sure I had a sabbatical year in Brussels which didn't come off in the sense they were prepared to put me into the Council in order just to say: thank you very much, Jimmy. You have done a good job and we will look after you. I did eventually go back to the Foreign Office. John Robinson never ruffled me. I'll put it that way

He ruffled quite a number of people.

Oh, one is not supposed to say this: nobody ever hears this. But a private monthly circular letter was sent out by the PUS in those days to all FCO staff abroad. At the finish of our negotiations it simply said "p.s. if any of you think that you can't influence the course of events, remember John Robinson". That man changed the course of events and that man was by far the best of his generation in the Foreign Office. There is no question about it as far as I am concerned. Everybody makes much of the fact that he didn't do anything much after that, but that was not what he was there for.

No, no. But I think in a way he was creating some enemies or some jealousy

Oh jealousies, not then. I think the jealousies came later on, the jealousies came when he was sent to - he was not a Whitehall warrior in the sense that he could operate in a Whitehall department. He operated with Con O'Neill. Con O'Neill did the front work and John ... You have read Con O'Neill.

I have.

The report? Doesn't he say right at the beginning: if I have done anything well it is because of John Robinson, if I have made a mistake it is because I didn't hear what he was saying. That man was absolutely, profoundly brilliant. Now he made a lot of enemies after that in the Foreign Office because he was too clever by half and secondly he then went on and messed up relations with Peter Jay. They sent him out to be Minister in Washington because they were dead worried that Peter Jay that was going to be cutting swathes through the Foreign Office and they sent him out as number two; and the two of them simply didn't get on. And of course then he went to Israel and that did not come out well and then he retired. My predecessor in Dakar, Patrick Moberley, was his successor in Israel - and Patrick told me that he had been down to see him in France and John Robinson had said "I wish I had retired ages ago". He was a man who had done his work and if you have done your work you have to find something totally new, you have to walk away and do something else. Which is why I wrote to the Times myself saying I am fed up with all these blokes from the Foreign Office writing and saying I was Ambassador in Ouagadougou 1934-1936. They should forget it. They have been there, they have done it.

That is the only way they get their letters into the Times.

Well I think it is pathetic. One trick ponies. And the Times publishes this letter and sure enough the next letter that came in they published immediately next day was by David Hannay, ex-Ambassador. O.K., is that enough of the trivia?

I think so. You came back and went as Head of Science and Technology Department. Iis there anything you want to say about that?

I think they saw me as somebody who had been in the Whitehall system and therefore (this is not making me out to be other than a foot soldier) was a useful guy to have in interface departments. You can have a nice fellow who is running Far East Department but if you have got somebody running Science & Technology, you are not dealing with Science & Technology, you are dealing with a number of Ministries and making damned sure that they don't do anything that is very naughty. So that's why I got two departments like that. One after the other. Science and Technology was great fun. First I had six months in another double headed department with another counsellor. It was Marine and something or other

MAED

And I was doing one bit and Harry Dudgeon was doing the other and that just carried on for a while and then I went straight into Science & Technology which was "Concorde". And the great thing I have in my record (as has everybody who served in that department) was that we saved Concorde from the Treasury and from the Department of Industry, which was the sponsoring department and wanted to kill it as well. And I am convinced that we did a good thing for Britain there because without Concorde being there, and I know this from my experience after I had left the Service, London might have lost out to Frankfurt as the European centre for world finance. Don't laugh at this one. If you are sitting in an American office and you are running a big group over here - on say foreign exchange and you are doing a huge amount of business, if something goes wrong you know that with Concorde you can be in London in 3½ hours. If it is Frankfurt, it is 8 hours. You never have to do it but the fact that you can get here in 3½ hours means: "I am safer - I am feeling happier about being in London and operating with big risks". I mean the risks are horrendous. I have a daughter who was a foreign exchange dealer - she is married to one now. My son is in business too. I just know, I have seen it, that this kind of thing - ie "London is more accessible than Frankfurt" - is not something subconscious; it is what they write in their submissions to their credit boards. "We can afford to have the operation there - that huge risk - in London, because I can get there within 4 hours". That's what happened with Concorde. And luckily Concorde has existed - even if it is going to be taken out of service. But anyway we were working hard on this, plus space programmes and environment. I am very cynical about global warming having done the Club of Rome in my time - I have seen it all before. It was good fun and a smart department - good bright kids. Michael Burton was the number two. I enjoyed it. The subject matter was good and the intellectual challenge of it was excellent, but you were up against heavy weights inside the other Ministries.

Inside Industry?

Yes. Industry and so forth.

I meant the Department of Industry.

You were dealing with them and you were dealing with Trade as well and a whole host of them. And Treasury; Leo Pliatzky was there as well and I enjoyed that. Then my wife had - she seemed to be getting better and I was being considered for a posting and then all of a sudden she went down with another dose of cancer and I simply said to them: I am not telling her to turn her face to the wall, she's had it twice before and she has to be helped. I have to say that Kenneth Scott in Personnel Department who I know now very well as he lives in Edinburgh too - was brilliant on that and I was posted to East Berlin as Commercial Counsellor.

You went as Commercial Counsellor to East Berlin in 1975?

Yes. I had met some of the Trade and Industry people and had been dealing with them. They knew me and therefore accepted me as Commercial Counsellor. I went out there as number two to Curtis Keeble. I enjoyed that. Quite frankly it was a good job and I was in denial about my wife dying. She had been interviewed by the Treasury doctor and the Treasury doctor had said to me "She could last anything from three months to three years and I would give her nine months", and I said "I just don't believe you". And she said, "I know, I don't expect you to believe me". And she lasted exactly nine months - and the last couple of months I was at home with her. She died and then I was brought back to London partly because Percy Cradock couldn't stand death - that sounds very sad. He was by now the ambassador. He just couldn't stand it; - a very strange man - brilliant but the most economically illiterate man I have ever come across - he does not understand economics. He was a lawyer, he was a man who joined the Foreign Office because he had to learn Chinese to be able to enjoy Chinese poetry. He wasn't a bad lad. He was just illiterate economically. He could look at the figures produced by the East German government and not see that they were false because it didn't add up because he had no concept of how you added up economic figures. It didn't work. Anyway I was posted back to the FCO and that suited me quite well, in fact, in that case the best thing that I came back and I took over TRED, which was a terrific department.

You obviously knew a lot about trade relations but how about exports? How on earth can you sit in an office in the FCO and export things?

Well you can't. Let me be very blunt about this. I was asked by Anthony Acland when he came out to Copenhagen when I was ambassador there and we were standing at the airport and he said: "What is the justification for us as a Service being involved in exports?" And I said "(i) You have got to have a constituency. You have got to show the British exporter who is going abroad that you are on his side. (ii) In some cases you can help them but you have got to show all of them that you are prepared to help them. (iii) Only at the centre and that means you, Anthony, can you work out what sort of resources you want to apply to this. But be in no doubt that if you don't go for it, you are dead as a Service". The reason why Hong Kong did not get any support from the British public was because it had no constituency in Britain, of people whose livelihood had been assisted by, or was dependent on, Hong Kong. They hadn't worked that way at all. That is a rash parallel, rather grandiose as regards the Foreign Office. It is the case that you can help, you are expected to help, and you must show that you are willing to help now; that means that you are supplying a service. In the United States we had a system which did help, because lots of people do want to get into the United States and lots of people do want to have some contact. We had, for example, 'road shows' where we came back and went round everywhere in the UK and you could guarantee 200 people would turn up for each stop on your 'road show'".

Now by 'road show' you mean to say that the Consul General would come back from somewhere or other and you would send him out on a visit to...?

No. This was when I was in New York. I came back with 6 or 7 of the officers that we had recruited in the United States as local commercial officers. These were bright young people who didn't want to make a lifetime career with us but what they wanted was a three year contract with us, giving them the opportunity to make contacts and get training. What we did was, we took somebody who knew about lingerie or somebody who knew about electronics and we said O.K. you are coming to us, you are going to work with us and you will be working in Chicago. You will be able - and they knew this - to phone up and say I am speaking from the British Consulate General and I would like to come and talk to you about what you do and whether we can help you. And they go out and talk to these businesses and they would get a training that is as good as any they would get in Harvard - in the Business School. After three years they say: thank you very much, I'm off. But during those three years we had very, very bright people. We brought these

locally engaged commercial officers back. We did a description of the United States, split it up into seven different areas, countries - call them what you want, but it is no use trying to sell in California the way you are going to sell in New England. Different audience, different people, different reactions - you've got to tailor to the market. Now you are in electronics - here's someone will tell you about it. These bright young people made a spiel and at the end of it you split up and UK business people attending the road show could write down on a list - I want to see the Consul General, I want to see the electronics man, I want to see etc. and you would get on like quick dating and give them five minutes each.

So this is when you were Director General?

When I was Director General. Now the US is one end of it. The other end is Nigeria. If you try to do business in Nigeria without going into the British High Commission, you are either one of the big oil companies or very foolish. And even the oil company - will keep in touch with the High Commission. The trouble with the British High Commission in Nigeria was that they were getting so much business from people walking in through the door. One of the things you must get across to your people in the Service: is - the importance of the customer who walks in through the door. Warm flesh is a lot more important than cold paper. You have got to deal with them straight off. You cannot ignore them. You must give them service when they are there. And there were so many coming through the doors - we could see it through the stats - (we had some very good Second Secretaries in TRED who could read the stats and say there is something going wrong here - they are not visiting enough - they are not increasing their knowledge of the country) and so I went through Lagos and saw them on my way to South Africa. I went through and sorted out this post.

Oh this was in Nigeria?

In Nigeria, when I was in TRED. I just said, O.K. I'll divert out. It was a hell of a journey, I can tell you, getting into Nigeria and then from there to South Africa in the time of apartheid. I landed in Congo, Leopoldville.

You then had people at home who were controlling the Commercial Service, that was in those days, FCO people who were controlling in conjunction, very loose conjunction with the Department of Trade. We were responsible: we took people from DTI on secondment. Nowadays it is much more

sensible. They have one person who is out of both departments who runs both departments' interests in one place. But, then, it was the Foreign Office that took charge and you were constantly getting fed things and feeding things back to the Department of Trade, but the FCO was responsible for the field staff. Each case was different, of course but we were looking at each from the point of view (I say it again) How do I show British industry that we in the Foreign Office love them? How do I show that we can actually help them? That's more difficult. How do we get the result? The easier cases are the very, very sophisticated ones for the lower level of exporter and the very undeveloped dangerous areas for any level of exporter. In between - a place like Germany - we do our best, but it is sometimes difficult - a place like France - we do our best, but it is sometimes difficult - a place like, don't laugh, a place like America you can do good because it is very difficult, for people must realise that that is not one market, so you can create an immediate interest there.

You have ten consulates.

Yes, we have more than that. Much more.

Consulates General?

They may have cut them down now but I think you will probably find it is much more than that.

When I was there.

When was that?

'84.

Where were you?

Houston '81 to '84?

Start going down the coast and you had (and I am not counting the strange Consul we had in Portland, Oregon), Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles and then you had Houston and Dallas.

I regard Dallas as just an outpost of Houston

There was one in my day. It may have been an outpost but it was a separate one, it was run by a guy who was very good. Then you had Miami....

Oh, I see, I was just counting Consulates General.

Only Consulates, only - oh I see?

Consulates General.

Yes but you had Miami and all the way up ...

Atlanta.

Atlanta - call it ten, call it thirteen. But it was a big structure. How did you find Houston?

Houston was interesting. The only real interest there was oil. And investment in oil or by big American oil and oil service companies in the North Sea and various other places and the only thing that we could really do there was to make sure that when British business people, suitable people came out, they got introductions to the top levels of these oil companies. These oil companies are fabulously rich. How do we as threadbare UK Civil Servants present somebody to the head of Exxon for example or various other major corporations? We used to do it by encouraging royal visits, and we got to know these top people in that way. We had many royal visits.

Putting the question back to you. How would you have looked if you had said I am terribly sorry but the FCO is not interested in oil. You could cut your throat.

Exactly. That would have been the end of the post.

That would have been the end of the FCO. A number of people around the world could have said: I am terribly sorry: I don't have the time or resources to concentrate on commercial work, which is the polite way of saying it. They are dead.

We didn't actually do commercial work.

Of course.

The way that we achieved this result was by being political, making speeches, going out talking to people on British policy.

You do your stint of English Speaking Unions and all the rest of it. At the end of the day you are saying I am also building up expertise, if somebody wants to come out here and sell widgets for integrating into oilpipes I know where to send them.

That's right. It is a vast organisation - the oil industry.

I agree. I would not have done without my posting to the United States. Anyway, that is my TRED experience. There is another side, which was the control of exports to communist countries. That came under TRED as well. And commodities, which was also marvellous fun and was great preparation for going to Ghana, which I got.

This is another story that you might want to pick up on. Not many people look back on David Owen as being a comfy Head of the Office in a sense but he had some good statements to make and one of them was "Why didn't anybody tell us about the revolution in Iran?" And the answer was (eventually) because the young lads in the Embassy were not sent out to go traipsing about listening to people in places outside the capital. One of the things that he had been horrified to discover when he went through Africa was that he had many heads of mission in Africa who didn't like Africans. So the first question I was asked was "Do you like Africans?" "I love Africans", I said. Mind you, I have to say I was "brought up" in West Africa, and West Africa and East Africa are two different continents all together. I have no, I wouldn't say no side but a positive predilection for Africa as a place to be. So I was asked if I wanted Somalia and I said no thank you. It was a counsellor job and I think I'll wait for something else. (This was Curtis Keeble who had been my first ambassador in East Berlin and who was absolutely marvellous to me. When I came back after one bout of cancer with my wife and she could hardly walk - it sounds very stupid - I could not believe that she was so ill - does that make sense to you? I know I was looking after her, she was frail as far as I was concerned, extremely frail. His car was at the airport to meet us and to drive us

to the house. He was lovely. And when she died and I came back, my daughter and myself were invited to his house just to say: I haven't forgotten). Curtis was the Chief Clerk and Curtis put it to me, (I didn't know what the inwardness of this was), but would I want Somalia and I said: Not for me, it is the wrong side of the continent. Anyway, if I wait long enough I would get promotion. What I didn't know was that an Under Secretary was gunning for me to be removed. This was the way it was. He was my boss in TRED and he didn't like me in the least for some reason or the other - that is one of these things. He was eventually overruled by everybody and I got to Ghana. The result was that I got a post, which was, I thought, absolutely fascinating and marvellous.

The real point there was the IMF. Eventually we got to the point where the IMF deal for Ghana was constructed, and then failed at the very last minute. Well, I went through coup after coup. But the main point - if we had to sum it up in two lines - We had a deal with the IMF for Ghana with the president Hilla Liman, who understood what we were trying to do and was working with me on this, and we had the Americans on side. I had a very good American colleague but suddenly it all fell flat because Reagan and the IMF were not seeing eye to eye and the head of the IMF was desperate for re-election and did not want to upset Reagan by being kind to anybody.

Who was the Head of IMF at that stage...?

A Frenchman - his name has gone, my memory is going. (De La Rosiere?) And I had the job of going in to see the President and telling him.

President of Ghana?

Of Ghana, and as soon as I got the word. I must say the Foreign Office was very good. The Foreign Secretary was put in to bat. It was a January cabinet and I got word back that there had been blood all over the floor but the Treasury would not budge on this one. They weren't going to take the IMF on. And the result was I walked in and said to him - "It is dead" - and his face went absolutely plastic. He knew this was the end for him. He had nothing to offer his people.

Who was the Ghana President then?

Hilla Liman. He had paid a state visit to Britain; he had met Mrs Thatcher. She had asked me in front of him what I thought and I had told her and she had accepted it and she was on his side. But

that didn't make any difference to the Treasury. They were not going to take on the power struggle with the IMF.

Anyway, Ghana was marvellous. You may not believe it but the real problem in Ghana is to stop them saying "this independence is a wonderful thing but when is it going to stop?" We had the Bishop of Kumasi, the Catholic Bishop of Kumasi making sounds about how the Ghanaians couldn't rule themselves and was it not time to bring the British back? It was absolutely unbelievable. The British - really the English - had been very decent in Ghana. Hilla Liman had been picked out of a village which you would not recognize as being capable of sustaining human life - I have seen it - and was sent down to a school in Tamale by a District Commissioner who had recognized him as a very bright boy. And they walked with their trunks on their heads - with a policeman to accompany - from say 150 to 200 miles away each time they went down to their school. And when the President came on his official visit to the UK, I discreetly removed myself for a Saturday morning while Hilla Liman received the widow of that man (the former District Commissioner) and I'm sure she was heaped with gold. Every single member of that government in London at that time had a story like that and was looking out for the somebody in that area who had helped him. The British had been utterly decent, we did not have settlers, but the British had been utterly decent and were remembered with great affection. If you ask my second wife who did not know the first thing about me when she decided she was going to marry me and came out to Ghana having been a Hansard reporter and supporting four kids of her own, if you ask her which post she liked best of the three: Ghana, Denmark - and she spoke Danish - she took her intermediate Danish - and New York, she has no doubt.

Ghana every time.

They were utterly sweet. I know that if her car had broken down, the only risk was that they would damage their backs carrying it home for her. You would never have any doubt. I spent five years there and I was told by a very friendly and very nice - he has been very decent to me - Michael Palliser that it was in the public interest I went back to Ghana, because every time I went back home on leave they had another coup. It was the old business. The civilians could not manage to get the country turned round because you need something up front if you are going to make life better. You need some food in the shops. And that was where the IMF came in or rather did not. And then you had another Jerry Rawlings type in opposition. And I was sent back and stayed there for five years. I enjoyed it. I can't say I wasn't worried but mostly on behalf of the Ghanaians.

What happened to the cocoa trade?

The cocoa trade. This was what the Archbishop was very worried about. Easier to say it this way. Ghana Airways had one aeroplane, (it is not quite true; they had several small ones but only one big one) and 10,000 employees. The cocoa trading organisation had 10,000 employees, an employee for every two tonnes of cocoa. This was a way of distributing money but of course it was totally inefficient and of course it meant that there was a huge tax on the cocoa farmer. And cocoa was therefore being smuggled across the border to a country where the CFA was used. (The French West African franc currency). And this was a major problem. This is what we were trying to get them off, weaned off subsidies. This is a classic difficulty - so we were at it all the time, teaching, preaching. Basically, life would have been much easier if they had decided that every Ghanaian that went to Sandhurst was given a course in economics. They all - even the decent ones - thought that you could control prices. You just control and set the prices.

So you had fun with Hilla?

No he wasn't fun. He was safe, good, clean - it is very hard to find a clean politician that hasn't been on the bribery trail in Ghana and you knew he could be presented. He had a degree in French and he had also worked in Cadbury' as a student. And been at the LSE. And he was a good man. He knew what I was saying to him and he knew I was working on his behalf, put it that way. He was a man who wished his country well. Not by any means common in the Middle East these days. We had all sorts of other interests of course. I had dealt with the military governments, I had dealt with Jerry Rawlings, you just took them as they came and you tried to do the best for Ghana and we had an interest. Don't forget - this wasn't purely commercial - every single junior member of the British Government at that stage thought that they personally had marched for Ghana's freedom.

This was a Labour government?

Labour at first. Then Conservatives too - were thinking - some of them - (the Churchillian ones - thought it was the end of the British Empire etc) but quite a number of people - cynical ones - in the Conservative Party thought - good thing we got them independent, because then we are not responsible for them and they are trouble when you are responsible for them. One thing that was

common in both parties was the belief that the French were making a big mistake in trying to run their colonies still. We were there to help the Ghanaians; we were very fond of them

To help the Ghanaians?

To help anybody in the Commonwealth, we were there to help the ex-colonies but we were there to help them to be independent. And that was not just cynical, it was a strong feeling. So when you said: I am High Commissioner in Ghana you were thought to be talking on behalf of somebody who was not the same as shall we say, what would you suggest? Saudi Arabia? You were in the family and Mrs Thatcher would take from me a plea - veiled of course in our interest - that we had to do certain things for these people that she wouldn't have accepted from an ambassador in a non-Commonwealth country. Never think that 'real politik' is the sole motivation of politicians. Of course, they are not going to do anything against either their own interest, their party's interest or the country's interest. But they can be moved.

We did do things for the Commonwealth; there is no doubt about that. And we did work hard to preserve it.

Have you been - Yes, you have of course, because that is where I met you, but I think that everybody who has been in the Foreign Office ought to go down to the Empire and Commonwealth Exhibition at Bristol and see it, because the real thing that you and I have shared is a Foreign Office which became the FCO that was not concerned so much with Canada as with the emerging Commonwealth. That may have been something that I was too inclined to say but I felt whereas we respected enormously the Australians, and the New Zealanders, we were working harder for the interest of the Ghanaians and the Nigerians.

They certainly needed it more.

Yes they needed it more and we also felt that grown-up kids can be left. Does that make sense?

Do you think we did a better job than the French - looking back?

We had different countries. By and large, I would say looking up and down the French territories in West Africa, the Ivory Coast is the only one with a viable economy. Senegal is not viable.

There is groundnuts, full stop. Mauritania, not really viable, it's got a nice iron mountain but that's about it. Whereas Ghana, oh, the riches of Ghana! Not thinking of the tropical elements - out of the temperate - if that is the right word - the elements above Tamale you could produce enough grain to feed the whole of West Africa. It could be the breadbasket of West Africa.

It was very rich when they first became independent.

We had left them with £400 million in reserves.

1957.

That was more than their annual income when I went there. And they squandered it, there was no doubt about it. Largely because the family system in those circumstances is still geared to drought and looking after each other and you know: "you are my wife's cousin's third cousin, you know, you must give me a job." An economy just cannot be run on that basis. The Asantehene was very important for me to know, and I knew him very well and he came and was with us in our house. Nice pictures of my family, all sitting around. He loved my kids and I could send my kids up to him. Up to Kumasi to visit.

Tell me, who he is?

Well, he is dead now. His name was Opokuware II but in fact he was a QC from London who had been pointed out as being a prospective Asantehene - he had been sent off to be trained.

But what is the Asantehene?

Asantehene means King of the Ashantis. The Ashantis were the Vikings of West Africa and the dominant tribe in Ghana. "Kill one Ashanti and a thousand will take his place." And if the British had not got there - put it that way - (and we were very horrible when we took the Asantehene and sent him off to the Seychelles) if we had not got there, practically all the other tribes and the Fantis certainly would have been wiped out by the Ashantis. Bloodthirsty is not the word.

It was a bit like that in East Africa too, in Kenya where we had the complication of white settlers.

Well, I am glad I did not have settlers to deal with, I can tell you. Commercial interest, but that was a different thing. The Asantehene was very important and there were various other chiefs up north. Oh, there was a marvellous one the Wa Na. Every year in The Daily Telegraph there was a little piece that said, tiny little note: The Wa Na has again jumped over a cow. One of the traditions in The Daily Telegraph in my time. Because the Wa Na.- the "Na" means "chief" in northern Ghana, the chief of the district Wa, had to jump over a cow to prove that he was still manly. Eventually he got so that the cow was tied down on the ground and he stepped across it. We visited him once and he was by that time a decrepit nasty little man - smiling between his broken teeth.

There was a lovely chap up in Bolgatanga who was the Bolganaba. "Naba" was in fact bit higher up than a Na. And he was great fun too and he visited. One of the important things about Ghana, and we found this when we got to Denmark, was that you never ever were surprised when somebody rang the doorbell and said "I was just passing by". The Bolganaba was "passing by" - he had come 500 miles. And in he would come and he would sit down and you would chat and after a while he would tell us what was on his mind. You don't rush it. And we sat in Denmark when we got there and I had all this Danish family, I spoke Danish, and we sat there for our first week and nobody came because they would phone you up at the office and say: "Are you free for lunch a week from today or could you come for dinner? And these are close people that I knew. Come to dinner in a fortnight!

That's like England.

Nobody would press the buzzer and say: couldn't wait, heard you were here. You don't say in Africa can I pop in, am I disturbing you? You just say: come in.

On one occasion we had a problem - a violent problem of public order in Ghana, the threat of a coup. Relations were so strong between Britain and Ghana that I was phoned and told in the office that the President and three Ministers were on their way to see me in the office and they came round and said, can you give us some troops? I went on. "I know what you are saying, you just want some troops training here". On another occasion I was told at 6 o'clock that the President was coming with his government for dinner at 8. I had a houseboy who was marvellous. (I said to my wife many times, there but for the grace of God that's me and he could have been doing my job). At 8 o'clock on the table was a Sandhurst type meal, you know, nursery food, for the guests and we went through the Ghanaian economy, because this was pre IMF. This is not "me". You know

quite well what I am talking about? You are there to be what you have to be but they are doing it not because they think: Jimmy is a great guy, they think this is the guy you have got to tell so it gets it to the right people in the right way. Nobody could criticize them for coming to see the British High Commissioner on that basis. You can't say you were irrelevant. This was where Owen was so right. If you've got a man or a woman who by the slightest trace of reaction shows that they are not comfortable you've destroyed the relationship.

I know. My experience of Africans was that they have an extraordinary way of sensing what your feelings are. You haven't got to say anything -

They know, they know exactly. They know exactly if you are for or against. I'll tell you a story, my children were raised in Senegal and when we came back on posting back to the UK we stopped in Orly airport and these little girls (my son was not with us because he was back at school) were 8, 6 and 4 and they just looked around uneasily and said: "What is wrong Daddy? People are sitting at separate tables. They are not talking to each other." They had walked down the street in Dakar, pretty little girls in pretty little dresses and obviously white but 20 people would see them and 20 people would react to them. Even if they were beggars. They would (exactly what you were saying) the eyes would show that they knew who the other person was and that was it. There is no question about it that they respond to human beings. All these Ghanaians who are here as illegal immigrants in the UK, who have overstayed - they will all go back, not because they can't stand it here, but because at the end of the day they need people, they need to be with people who react fully to them. In exactly the comfortable way they know. By the way, just a little thought, how many Ghanaians do you think there are the United Kingdom?

I have no idea.

I ask you to hazard a guess.

10,000?

I asked the Ghanaian High Commissioner about this. He had phoned us up and said come and have dinner. (We were up in Edinburgh). Sure, provided you give us Ghanaian food, so we got Konkombre and all the rest of it and we had a great time with him. He was Jimmy Aggrey-Orleans - he was Head of Protocol when I was in Accra. I said to him: I see a lot of Ghanaians around and I

can recognize them, (you must be able to do the same with Kenyans), I know them. I say to the railway ticket collector: you are from Kumasi - and they are always dead scared that I am going to hand them over to the authorities.

He said "1 million" and I don't think he is wrong. I think he is right. Downstairs in the entry on the ground floor of this building, we had two nice white faces but they are not there all the time. Most of the time they have a security service in and I see three Ghanaian men and one Ghanaian woman.

We had a fire alarm here, down we all went and I found myself standing with the Pret à Manger girls right down below and a guy who was Indian, I think, walked round and said it is all your fault with your kitchen. They said we don't have any kitchens. And I said "These girls are so modern they can't even cook." "I can cook" said one of the girls. She was from Lithuania. So I asked the rest of them, "Turkey, Spain, etc". Please marry some English men and raise the level of intelligence in this country. We need them all, they are brilliant. These Ghanaians come across and they do five or six years, not many more. It is no more strange for them to do this (because they feel very close to the British), than it would be for an Australian to come and work here. We have got two Australians through there (in the Charlemagne office) who are real Australians. But there is no doubt that they feel more at home here in London than they would in the United States. And they regard themselves as doing something that takes them out and they get a view of the world. The Ghanaians say the same thing, but they have to go back. They have this huge need for contact with human beings. Their sense of humanity, that's the way I would put it, I tried to define it in these terms before - their sense of humanity is greater than we are really capable of comprehending, and if you don't respect them..... I know that I look a Ghanaian in the face.... I'll tell you a story. I was never conscious of being white until I went to Washington. When I had lived in West Africa, I was never conscious of it. I went to Washington and I was in a hotel in the centre and taking a bus out to the suburbs to go to the embassy and of course I was going in the opposite direction to the white people who were coming in. The blacks were going out and they were looking at me in that bus in a way that made me feel white. I had never had that in West Africa.

I know how sensitive West Africans can be and if you do something that is undermining their sense of humanity they won't be comfortable with it. They won't chop you up in little bits but you will be cut out. But I saw the way it worked on my kids - they had their own sense of identity in Africa that they had suddenly had to close down a little bit when they got back to the UK. And this is

quite a genuine point. Little children getting very nervous at what was happening in a place where people were sitting at separate tables not talking to each other.

I think that covers West Africa very nicely, thank you very much. You went from there to Copenhagen?

The Office were very kind to me, I had always wanted to go to Copenhagen. And they turfed poor Anne Warburton out who had been there for 7 years. She had been there much too long. No matter how good you are, you do get...

Stale, really..

Not stale, but you get over enthusiastic. Anne did a farewell despatch about, you know, "those few friends you have and their allegiance tried" and all the rest of it. And the Danes couldn't care less about the Brits. The Danes are an intensely selfish nation. The Danes played it both ways during the war. They had more people fighting on the eastern front than there were ever in the resistance and until 1943, 1944 it is highly unlikely that Denmark could have been a founder member of the United Nations - it was the "Showcase Province" of the Germans. You don't hear that.

I was always under the impression that they really disliked the Germans.

No more than we do.

But do we dislike the Germans? I don't think we do.

What is the English for Schadenfreude? 5-1. You wouldn't say that about the Poles, would you?

One Dane said to me, the Danes are Germans pretending to be English. That is not true. They are basically very, very Danish and they have played it both ways - that's the way they do it, and Anne was just so caught up and they love Ambassadors and Ambassadors who are very enthusiastic. Nobody minds, and of course they are manic in English and depressive as I said in Danish. They do just sort of play around. I love them. I had an old lady there who had received me into her house in 1948. My best man when I married again is her son. I called this lady "Mor" - which is mother. She was not a second mother, that's wrong, but I had a relationship with that family where I knew

them exceptionally well and I lived in Denmark through a family rather than as somebody who was just employed to live in Denmark. I had Danish friends from twenty years before when I had been there as Agricultural Attaché. The head of the Danish civil service had been - not a close friend but he knew me from those days and he understood me and I understood him and that all helped. But, basically they all knew that I knew enough about them not to be a - what shall we say - "token friend of Denmark" Ambassador. And sometimes it was a good idea and sometimes it wasn't. They were much more comfortable with a happy Ambassador that took everything they said. They were terrible in NATO. Absolutely appalling.

Were they?

Oh yes, footnotes in NATO all over. They have changed now completely, they are now on the side of Bush and the ones that oppose the French but they didn't have any feelings in those days that they wanted to put their heads above the parapet, in fact they refused. They had major difficulties. On every communiqué of NATO they had a Danish footnote. They were as difficult with regard to the development of the Common Market/European Union as we are. And for much more cynical reasons than we have. We have great discussions about sovereignty. They have great discussions about: do we need any more because we have got trade, and that is all that counts. But, really, deep down it was a question of: can we preserve our exclusive Danishness in this?

I have written a book on Denmark, in Danish - for the Danes. It got to number four in their bestseller list, believe it or not. It was only for three weeks. Never mind. "World famous in Denmark" is not a very great thing. But it still is a fairly standard book in Denmark on the Danes. It was not too hard. It says lots of nice things about them. They did a booklet on the Danish constitution when its second century anniversary came up and about five pages of this Ministry of Foreign Affairs booklet were devoted to Mellon's view of the real Danish constitution, which has nothing to do with the written constitution. This was "Letters from a small island" repeated on a very minor scale. It is tiny. And there wasn't much money to be made out of being an expert on Denmark, but it was great fun.

I've done another book as well, which was quite useful. As Agricultural Attaché I had discovered their wonderful churches. About 400 of them had remnants and in some cases very considerable remnants of the wall paintings that were there during the Middle Ages. They had all been white-washed over at the Reformation but now you can pick the whitewash off. There were some books

on this but, eventually, a long suffering but happy wife went round probably all 400 of them in Denmark because we travelled around Denmark and photographed them all and I did a book with an English version and a Danish version. The English version is called 'A Danish Gospel'; the Danish version is called: 'Jesu Liv i Kalkmalerier'. And that is "Jesus' Life in wall paintings". (Kalkmalerier is the technical term in Danish). Not as daft as it sounds because if you turned up and said to the local Mayor: I am the British Ambassador and coming here, what can you tell me? there isn't much of a future in that. But if you turn up and say; I am on a visit to Skive, which is just up the road, you have got a wonderful church that I wanted to see, do you mind if we go down with the keys and open it up together? And they just open up to you and you can get anything you like out of them. Because you are sympathetic. I did about 5 Danish TV programmes, three on basically the subject matter of the book and one before that which was a teaser, but also another one which I did for Christmas Day which was the Christmas story of Jesus up to the point of him being a small child, done with pictures from Danish churches, for the slot what we would call Queen's Christmas message time when they were all sitting down. Piet van Deurs - who was one of their top presenters - read the text from the Gospels. He and I got on like a house on fire. We still correspond and he sends me programmes on the Vikings and things like that. He was well known. I was Ambassador at the time so one had to be very careful about the way they did it. "Pictures by James Mellon".

The job was to act as contact man. You had to know all the political parties etc etc. I took a very strong line, which is in a book which I am sure you have seen. What was it called?

"With respect Ambassador?"

Is that what it was called? A TV programme or a radio programme but they did it in a book as well and I am quoted in it quite widely as saying: "I do not think you can do your job if you cannot read the newspapers, if you can't conduct a conversation. You can't understand the people." And I insisted that everybody in the Chancery learned Danish and they did. When I was there as Ambassador, the number two, Richard Dales, spoke very good Danish, and everybody could read the newspapers.

Danish is not an easy language. I did the French Higher - you know the technique, you stand beside somebody and translate straight away. With French, I could start translating as soon as somebody started to talk. With Danish, I couldn't. I had to wait till the end of the sentence and

then put it together and not because the verb was coming at the end; it is not that at all. It is that the circles that encompass meaning are different in Danish from the circles in English. Whereas in French and English they are largely, I won't say wholly, but they do coincide. If you are looking at it in mathematical terms French to English is a one to two relationship and going backwards it is two to one. (If you look in the French and English dictionaries you will probably find that there are fewer French words than English words). That is not the case in Danish and the Danish words don't cover exactly the same meaning. You would be well advised, if you are translating and don't want to get it wrong, to hear the whole sentence before you start translating. So that was a different game. I don't know how we got on to that one.

You had this need for language proficiency, which does not make it easy for people in the embassy. You have a tradition that people like good old Oliver Wright who was Ambassador there - I don't think he spoke any Danish.

Oh, he had been Ambassador in Denmark?

I met him there. I went and called on him when I was in Brussels. He was later my Ambassador in the United States. I have a lot of time for him. He never visited the Faeroes and he never visited Greenland. When I said to him, why not, it is part of the job? No, my job was with the politicians in Copenhagen. And I forbore to say to him: Yes but you don't understand the politicians unless you have been to where they come from. It was the same with Ghana. Nobody would say to me I am glad you went to Bolgantanga but everybody would know that I had been to Bolgantanga and everybody who had a third cousin living up there thought it was a good idea. This is part of it. You don't understand the Danish inability to treat the Greenlanders right (They treat them politically correctly, but they don't treat them right) unless they have been up there. We did a week there as tourists: I paid for myself. Then immediately I stopped being a tourist and went round the same places as an Ambassador. (I didn't do what the rest of the Ambassadors did; I spoke Danish and they didn't. The Danish Foreign Office arranged tours for them). I went round the same places that I had already visited but this time speaking to the mayors and so forth and they would say to me we have this and we have that and I would say: "Yes, but you have a big problem with drunkenness. I was here last week." 50% of the population in Greenland has VD, 50% of the population is under 16. Start again. The average consumption of booze, liquor in Greenland when I was up there, and that is a long time ago now, was probably of the order of about £4000 to £5000 per person per year. You cannot throw people out of their houses in minus 30 degrees. So they

don't pay their rent. They drink, and fornicate and they do all sorts of things. It is a hell of a life. They have been brought out of a stoneage existence and put into a welfare state existence - but the Danes don't want them down in Denmark. They may pretend they do. If you haven't seen it, you don't understand all this.

The Faroese are absolutely hilarious. They regard the Danes as very, very inferior to them. They are the kings of the sea. But they live off the Danes; that doesn't stop them taking huge subsidies. At 4 o'clock in the morning you can be going round, linking arms or around the shoulders, going round in a circle and singing. That song (that I just sang) was about Charlemagne and they sing it: 'Kongen sittur i Ronceval'. It is all about Charlemagne, Ronceval and all the rest of it. "Now we are singing a modern one. This is about two girls coming to the big city in 1910." The big city is Thorshavn, the capital of the Faroes. It is unbelievable that something that Carolus Magnus is still present there. Why are there so many Magnuses? Why is Magnus Magnusson called that? Because the Faroese, Icelanders, the Vikings were absolutely bowled over by the fact that somebody could control the world, as they knew it. They didn't know how to do it. They could attack the world, they could send people all round the world but they couldn't actually produce a state. I have a grandson called Magnus. This is where it comes from. And these things are still with the Faroese. Two members of the Danish Parliament are Faroese and two are Greenlanders so in your three or four years, if you don't go out and see them once, and understand their background, you have lost four people.

That's right. Out of how many?

Not very many. 179.

They were significant members.

If you have got seven parties or eight parties. I have seen major legislation being passed by Greenlanders and Faroese and they can be bought up - in the nicest possible way. Just the same way as you get in America that last vote from the last senator then maybe another army base suddenly goes in. And Denmark itself of course splits up into different parts. The joke, it is not a joke, it was said to me truly by people in Copenhagen - "we were sent to Aarhus but we used to pull the blinds down at night and pretend we were back in Copenhagen". (Aarhus being the capital of Jutland). We went down to a place on the German border, Aabenraa, we had a Consul there.

We had dinner with him. It was a nice party and suddenly if you can speak Danish they stop talking to you and start talking to each other, so they were talking to each other and we were part of the company and my wife - I take my hat off to her, she did very well in Danish - she heard one woman saying to another: it's a pity about Karen - she is marrying a German. "Yes, yes - terrible". Still, said somebody, it could have been worse it could have been somebody from Copenhagen. She was not joking. They all agreed with her. These are all Danes, outside - there's no question about it, every Dane is closer to every Dane than to anybody else, but inside - it is not just one tribe. This is why I insisted that everybody in the Embassy had at least some idea of what was happening here and realized they do not say the things in English that they really feel. Everybody pretends that foreigners can speak English. They can't - they speak a form of English and they communicate some of their thoughts in English - but they don't speak English in the sense that they give you the whole personality. They are trained to be nice in English. They don't give you the full range of their views. It's impossible.

They are not thinking in English, obviously.

Everybody says the Danes speak marvellous English - so they do. I have said to Danish friends of mine, you know, people in the Danish Foreign Office: be careful, it is not in your interest to negotiate in English. And they look at me in absolute amazement because they all think that they can speak English but they can't negotiate in English. Since I left there, I now have a Danish son in law. He lives in Britain and has been out of Denmark for a long time. He works for the BBC. He is ex-McKinsey. He was sent back from Kenya where he had been living with his parents when he was eleven and he said it was terrible going back to boarding school in Denmark. But he did his studies in Denmark, took his degree in Denmark then came over and took an MBA here and has stayed here ever since. He tells the story of going out on behalf of the BBC to Lego to negotiate with them. (Lego is Danish for 'leg godt' - play well - that's where it comes from). So he was over there negotiating with them and he told me with a smile on his face, "I was very naughty to them. I insisted that they spoke English and of course they just couldn't hack it." Son in law's English is deep down, theirs was up front and at times they were talking to each other in Danish, you know: "What do we do next?" - and he would be saying, "Look I don't want to push it too hard but I do understand what you are saying." Do you remember the TV series "True Brits"? About the Foreign Office? And it had David Hannay at the end, who was magnificent. It had that marvellous girl from Bangkok who was the Consul who went into the prisons with all the girls who had been mules and caught with drugs. But it also had a negotiation inside the European community and at

three o'clock in the morning they produced - and I take my hat off to the Dane who allowed this to be done - a Danish diplomat that I know, talking to other Danish diplomats in English at three o'clock in the morning and he started to talk Danish English. He was so tired, and he was supposed to be negotiating, and he was turning to the chap beside him and saying such things as 'what does that say in Danish'? And that is what you would say in Danish 'hvad siger det på dansk?'. He was just unable to speak his normal polished English because deep down it was something he had learnt, not something that was part of him. I am not criticizing their proficiency in English, far from it. But it is important not to assume that what they say in English represents them. They are not capable of telling you everything in English. So you have to go half way and learn their language so you can read the papers, so that you can - even if you can't do as well in Danish as they do in English - you can at least hear what they are saying in Danish and you hear that it is different. You may not get all the nuances, but you hear it is different. So that was part of my game on this one. What's next now? We've done Denmark.

We've done Denmark. Let's finish off with New York. Director General of Trade and Investment.

New York was great fun, Trade and Investment, yes, but it is a political post in effect. It is also a political post that the DTI want to have, to give their lads and lassies another outing so to speak in a place they would like to go to, which is not a hardship post as they see it. I have to say, I don't remember any outstanding members of the DTI in such posts. Not saying that they weren't competent, but I don't think they were outstanding when they were sent abroad on a posting because it is always new to them and it takes a while to find your feet not because you are unbright but because there is a whole different set of "parameters". This is the word we use nowadays though it is not correct). And the Foreign Office is always desperately looking around for one of their own with better qualifications than the candidates that the DTI puts up on their side. Now they put me up for it, I think, because somebody else had been turned down - I was sitting happily in Denmark - and they put me up for this on the basis that I had done TRED and therefore I was known to the DTI. I had visited them and I had dealt with them and they couldn't say they didn't like me because they hadn't complained then, and I had done a Commercial Counsellor job for a while and what was wrong with me? I was suddenly phoned up and they said: we need a presenter. (I was also capable of standing on a platform) and you are okay. Will you accept? And for the first time in my life I did not ask my wife what she thought about it, because my wife has got a daughter in the United States and I knew she would be more than happy. So as she walked out from the last paper in the Danish Intermediate exam - she was the first wife ever to take it, ever to take an

Intermediate exam - as she walked out I said: how did you do? She said, I think I did all right. (She had got it). I said: Well, we have been posted to America! She took it very well, she is very sweet.

I listened to her tapes. It is not an easy language I can tell you. She did three years of cycling in in the mornings and doing three hours a day in a school that was designed for immigrants. She was the only person in the school who had native English. It was run by the Danish government - and it was good stuff, but they were teaching them what you would call estuary Danish. And I used to listen to the tapes and just crawl. 'You cannot speak like that' and she said 'You don't know what it is like today' Flat a's, you know. It is just like... there is not a public schoolboy or schoolgirl nowadays in Britain who wants to 'speak' proper' English.

I got to New York. I got there on the basis that what they wanted was a presenter and somebody - and I am making it quite cynically clear - somebody whose paper qualifications could match anything that the DTI could put up. My reading (I don't know the truth of it. You'll be able to get into the files and it could be interesting - tell me if you do -) they had put up somebody else who had been turned down and then they had to turn to me although I was an ambassador. They try to deal with people who are free at the time. So I was pulled out after three years in Denmark and sent off for three years to New York. Loved it. I have always said that you could be put me blindfold in New York and I would know it. The electricity in the air is just fantastic. I could have spent my life in New York but I had to take my wife out every month and show her a bit of green.

As a matter of fact I didn't spend all my time in New York. I had a week every month going round the various consulates. Do you know Frank Kennedy? Frank Kennedy had done me a great favour. He had refused to take the job of supervising the Trade and Investment parts of the Consulates General in the US unless he got the job of reporting on the Consuls-General into his job description.

Frank was in the view of my number two in New York who had served under him the best commercial operator the Foreign Office has ever seen. I remember saying to Frank when he passed through my office when I was Head of TRED, and they were sending him to Nigeria as Commercial Counsellor, that I was ashamed of a service that put somebody like him into Nigeria without promoting him. I said I thought he was much better than that and I really was ashamed. It

was because he had come from being Treasurer of Nigeria into the Commonwealth Service and they just did not recognise that he was the guy who had identified Jimmy Carter for the Embassy as a coming man in US politics.

That's right. When Kennedy was Consul General in Atlanta.

- and said "you've got to get alongside him." And by the time Carter was appointed everybody in his entourage had been mated off with somebody from the Embassy. He was that level of person. And eventually he got a dreadful ambassadorship - you couldn't call it meretricious - in a horrible post in Africa - Maputo. And then he was transferred to New York. He was not an easy man to deal with I have heard but he was very effective. He went on after retirement to be a Board Director of British Airways. And he was commercial - oh - brilliant.

Well he had done me a great favour. Because there is nothing worse than having to run an organisation when you don't have any power. And the result was, that I had - well not power, but I could say to somebody: pay attention. You have got to sharpen up on this. I shall be writing the report to the ambassador, instead of some minion in Washington. Those guys knew nothing. They lived within the Beltway. They were stuck in the Teheran situation, they hadn't travelled enough. They didn't realise that what people say inside the Beltway is all very well but if you are going to understand the United States - get out! I mean today, I have family in dear old California. They have no idea how out of touch they are with the rest of the United States. Are you finished now?

No, I want to ask you a particular question. You were Director General for Trade & Investment; did that mean that you covered the Invest in Britain Bureau?

Yes, that was pure politics. Here was I a Scot dealing with the Scottish Development Agency. You are dealing with people who are not going to give you any of their contacts. You get on with them. You mustn't upset the Scottish politicians, but you mustn't let these Development agency guys think that they can monopolize information and waste opportunities. So you are working with them all the time, and I spoke their language too, I can tell you - they knew quite well where I came from - and I was going round then, in Scotland. A great deal of what you are doing in that job is going round the UK. And I went round the UK; I was not taking special time off or anything it was my leaves. I took my wife to Northern Ireland. Every time I went to Northern Ireland, I took my wife with me at my expense, and I said to the Northern Irish look after her because she is the one

sitting at the end of the table where the important guest is and if she says I have been there, I don't see your problem, it is a lot more effective than me saying it. With the result that I would be taken in an armoured car - you are always hitting your head on these cars, you get into them and you hit your head every time because they were armoured and the weight was fantastic - but then she would be taken on a different route with a nice policewoman sitting beside her. But you have to go round. You're in an area of intense politics all the time inside these government agencies. If Wales gets something, Scotland throws a tantrum. If Wales gets something and you don't get something for Scotland - it's your fault. If Northern Ireland gets anything everybody complains. Don't say that this means that you can't do a job, your real job that you were doing is making sure that everybody knew that there were investment possibilities in Britain and all our people speak English and we have the rule of law etc. etc. and you tell them about the Common Market and the European Union and all that and the way in is through the UK. And then when you have done all that you let the individuals do the bits, which ever bits. I have to say there was an immense amount of pressure on me to try to get things for Northern Ireland, because even one job brought into Northern Ireland was a coup for a minister.

Did you ever succeed?

No, not in any real terms, what we did was prevent people taking it away. And this was Dupont particularly. I know the inside of the Dupont Hotel very well indeed. I have been there many times.

I have to say that I told Patrick Wright, the PUS when he saw me on my retirement: 'You have a new man in New York and you are going to give him a K at the end of his tour (I don't know if they still do it, but this was the recognised thing), give it to him at the beginning. Because the minute I got my K I could phone up a major US company and I would be given lunch and with people for lunch you can talk to them. Before I was given a 5 minute courtesy call. You were invited for lunch if you were a K. My successor got his after a year and dear old Tom Harris - he would have been in Washington in your time?

Yes.

He is a brilliant man, he got his K up front, well the excuse up front was 9/11 (11 September 2001). What you are doing at the top of that tree is basically opening doors, and other people have to come in and carry through the project.

I will tell you the truth about this job. The main reason for having a senior member of the Service - yes you do have a major task in running the consulates and the consulates are filled with good people - secondly you do have a large political, and intensely sensitive responsibility to deal with investment overall in the United States and that has got to be somebody who can punch in Whitehall as well. But the real reason is that Maggie, for example, counted her Cabinet and found that one half of them were in the United States.

At any one time?

At any one time, they mostly go on to other places but they all come through New York. My record, not mine, my wife's record, was to have three different Secretaries of State in our flat for three different functions in one day - breakfast, lunch and dinner.

That's some weight of responsibility.

She did it. She worked at it very, very hard, but basically we were operating on the basis that the job required it. New York was the one place where I did not build up huge amounts of friends; I have got some left I still write to - I have just written to a nice German-Jewish guy who left the UK after fighting for Britain during the war in an infantry regiment and he has done his life story and I have written back to him. But apart from him and maybe two or three others I don't know many people in New York. Sounds strange. Because you saw plenty of people but only once or twice each. I was the instant expert on drugs, the instant expert on privatisation of prisons because that is what you did in the morning, that is what you did at lunch, that is what you did... and you assembled twenty people and underneath you you had a staff that were, I have to say, top notch, absolutely brilliant. The Office could pick whom they wanted when it came to selecting staff for appointments in New York. And they were brilliant people. My job was to tell my wife what was happening and she would be given the guest list by my secretary, who was perfection, absolute perfection. There is no ambassador in the world, with the exception perhaps of Washington, who gets the same number of British Ministerial visitors. And they are not coming to talk politics, they are coming to get ideas.

What I was thinking of when I asked you that question was that when I was there all the Inward Investments consuls were seconded from the Department of Economic Development in Belfast - all of them

No, we had DTI. I had a whole section there. I also had an in-house section from Belfast. I had four counsellors, (one was consular), besides the NI section.

That might have been the situation when I was there

I think Frank had changed it. I had one Counsellor who was trade, I had one Press Counsellor who came from Washington, one Counsellor was consular, because we had a big consular business, and I had one Counsellor who was inward investment and then I had a separate NI section which was headed by a Counsellor from Belfast.

No I am talking about the inward investment team.

I had two inward investment sections. One was from Northern Ireland. I had also an investment team, which was DTI, working out from New York which was dealing with things like the Welsh. You had only got two independent teams in the UK. Scotland had got its independent team, N. Ireland had got its. But the English had been very sensible and said: damned if we are letting Manchester set up its own office there, this is nonsense. You would have half of Britain living in New York. We are going to have one team only and I got that. And they were good. They worked hard. It takes about three years to get one of the inward investment projects going. The real graft is in following up the leads and I was helping out.

One of the best businessmen in the US I met was through inward investment. He was from Buffalo. He said: come to me and I'll show you what America is like. Not many people would do that. I had three days with him. The thing I remember most from that was how he'd set up his own business.

He also said you and I have no idea what drugs are about (this was way back in 87). I said, tell me more. He said: We are of a generation that can tell a drunk if we have one on the staff. We have no idea who is on drugs, and he was absolutely prescient on this. Drugs was the big new question I

had to deal with in New York. Nobody believed in Britain that crack was ever going to get a grip. I have taken a Home Secretary to the New York police and been right through the whole thing with them - candid cameras, secret cameras on Wall Street, dealers selling drugs to girls (that looked just like my daughters) buying their drugs for the weekend. The drug culture is huge there and what we were listening to was the US authorities saying to us: you will never beat it, we are not going to beat it, we have lost.

The main point which I have never really thought about in these terms until now is that in that job in New York you are dealing with the British government in the sense that you are giving British ministers access to ideas. They don't come for the politics of it, they are not coming to ask how do I get America's vote in the United Nations? Or how can I get the Americans to help us in Ghana. That is a different game. What you are doing is taking the ordinary ministries and saying: you have got problems with education of young black men? Have a look at this. You have got a problem with drugs? Have a look at this. You have a problem with prisons? We can put together a breakfast for you with twenty people who are concerned with private prisons. And they tell you. They come in and they know the score. They are trained to it. The Americans are forthcoming in a way that we are not. If we have a breakfast for twenty people for the American Ambassador, the first twenty minutes will be spent on: how are you Mr Ambassador? And how did you like this and have you been to.... The Americans go straight into it.

It was a superb job. So then I left at 60. I got a job, I don't know how you feel about it, but everybody who is leaving the Foreign Service wonders what they are going to do next and I have told everybody who was in that position, not to worry, wait, because nobody pays the slightest attention to your availability until you are available, so maximum patience. You cannot expect any reaction until about six month before you go. I was offered this job in Scotland, Scottish Homes, which was the National Housing Agency because I had been picked up when I was working there by Ian Lang as being capable of doing odd things and I was put into this "front of house" role as Chairman of Scottish Homes which was a great job. There are major housing problems in Scotland and I am still working on it but luckily I was opposed by the housing lobby, and luckily I said to all these people that were furious about this "Conservative" guy, Mellon, that I would visit every Council in Scotland within a year. Well I didn't manage it within a year, there are 57 of them, but I did it within a year and a half. It was real hard work. People shouting at you at meetings, but worthwhile. And that is what I spent my time on.

I took on Thamesmead as well, here in London. I was headhunted for that. Do you know Thamesmead? Did you see the film Clockwork Orange? Clockwork Orange was filmed in Thamesmead, a GLC estate, which had of course won all sorts of architectural awards. I took that over as Executive Chairman. It had 14% unemployment. 9 people elected from districts in charge of it. I took over as the executive chairman. I insisted, and it was not easy, that they cut their expenses because they didn't understand the relationship between rents and standards. They had lost £10m in three years. We brought three people onto the board, excellent people, one from a bank, one a surveyor and one from Grand Met. I got the Grand Met Marketing Director because I was working with Shepherd at that stage with the Prince of Wales. Brought these on for 15 grand a time and the people on the board did not have normally anything like 15 grand a year. But I told them they had to for this quality of people. Unemployment is now down to 9% and they have got people building houses there for a quarter of a million. They knew instinctively that they wanted me to sack their chief executive. Does that make sense? The elected members included some of the worst people you could ever imagine. The nicest, the most effective member of that collection was a dentist, an Indian dentist, who was very good but he was voted off. The most next effective of them was in the third row is now dead - of the first Cray funeral. Although it was very discreet, and I didn't know about it for ages, he was moved into Thamesmead because of protection of witnesses, of threats. But I don't think he was a protected witness. But you had these people and we managed to work with them. They really hired me to change the Chief Executive and I got this marvellous new Chief Executive who was the ex-Deputy Chief of the Housing Corporation and he was brilliant. But there wasn't room for two of us in the sense that I wouldn't just sit back as executive chairman and he was capable of doing it all. We are still great friends, we're still working on housing together. He is now Livingstone's enforcer for the London Plan because he had sorted Thamesmead out. But basically I was asked by this organisation here, for whom I had been a nominal chairman would I do more? Two of the three directors were ladies and they both decided to get pregnant at the same time, so they came and asked me if I would give more time. It came just at the right time. I swapped and started working for Charlemagne Capital and have been working for them.

The end. Well not the end, but certainly a very good place to end this interview.

Well, yes I am still working on a split capital trust, you have heard of those? Well, I can tell you if you think it is an agony for the people invested it is an agony for the people who are trying to do something with it. Gearing is marvellous as long as the markets are going up, luckily we do not

have zeros and we do not have any widows and orphans that depend on it. We were big on pension funds. But even so it can be bad business but we are working on it all the time. I am also with a company in Scotland which is dealing with green use of woodchips for heating and that is going quite well. Connected with housing mostly so that is how I come in there. Then I have another one which makes me feel that the world is a good place, a superb company full of people who are in love with technology but have had no idea how to run a business until now, providing portals for students in schools to operate their own learning environment with their teachers. You don't need textbooks because the teacher will say to the class: I am going to take that bit out of that textbook and that bit out of that and a little bit for you Johnny because you need a bit of brushing up and you will find that on your computer at home when you get home and that is your homework for tonight. Not only does the portal allow the teacher to do all this but it allows the headmaster to see that the teacher is doing it and allows everybody to see that all the schoolchildren are being properly done by. All the London schools are now in one Learning Grid.

Oh, wait a minute. Just a little addition about Togo.

We haven't dealt with Togo. Togo had a Resident British Ambassador and so had Benin back in the old days and then they were scrapped and they handed Togo to Ghana and Benin came to Nigeria. So the Ambassador in Togo was me, resident in Accra. Didn't have any office in Togo at all. I had to go down there regularly and call on Eyadema, the President. For example, on one occasion I was called ... He always called for me at four o'clock in the morning, no sorry, he called for me the night before and I was down there by four o'clock in the morning, because everybody in West Africa starts very early because it is cool - on one occasion I was called down because a couple of British mercenaries had decided it was cheaper to - or perhaps more profitable - to give information to him, rather than to shoot him as they had been employed to do and I went down and I listened to this. He presented them to me and I listened to all this.

The next thing, however, that happened was that suddenly Togo where we had been existing - we had an ECGD contract for an oil refinery which I had to protect; it was in danger of being closed down. I had a marvellous Pole who had been a Mosquito pilot during the war who was running it, that sort of thing was just keeping us going - when suddenly we had the Falklands War and who was on the Security Council?

Togo?

I tell you, I was down there very regularly and then suddenly Eyadema, who was a thug - (when they say he killed his predecessor Olympio they don't mean he had him killed him, he shot him personally. When he went shooting with Strauss, because Togo used to be German and the Germans kept in touch, when he went shooting with Strauss, the Bavarian politician, he went shooting from a helicopter with a machine gun. When I turned up with my new wife and he received me in his country home, people in the room were going round with terror in their eyes. He said: Do you hunt? I said no. He snapped his fingers and the next thing we knew as we came out, there was a huge frozen antelope, which was given to me. We were then flown down in his plane with the antelope hanging over the top of the seat behind us.) However, he fell in love with Mrs Thatcher. All utterly respectable. When we started to send troops to the Falklands he began to spark and I could get anything out of him on behalf of Mrs Thatcher. And when she eventually won in the Falklands I was summoned down and I had to take a personal message from him to Mrs Thatcher. A personal letter: "Maintenant que vous avez récupéré votre territoire souverain.....". It was just a love letter expressed in politics. He was absolutely bowled over by her.

Power, you see.

More than power. Determination. One thing I learnt in the Foreign Service was that Mrs Thatcher had an immense reputation outside Britain. Do you remember the ceremonies for the Bicentennial? The US had the whole fleet in New York and we had sent an aircraft carrier. I was on the aircraft carrier - it was marvellous. We saw the whole thing, saw the television coverage at night. "And here is the President coming", it was Reagan, and....."The French had sent an official", they were recognising that they got the Statue of Liberty from France, "the French had sent an official", this was the French President - the US TV did not recognise him at all. Two weeks later Mrs Thatcher has an operation on her thumb and comes out of Downing Street giving the "thumbs-up" with a bandage on it and they show it on every television station in the US and there is no question of saying: "this is an official". This is Mrs Thatcher. She was recognised throughout the world. So when Togo and Eyadema had power in the Security Council, she was the right person to have and we didn't have any problems about getting votes in the Security Council. Okay?

Thanks.