

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Richard Oliver MILES (born 6 March 1936)

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This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Mr Oliver Miles, on 27 August 2004.

Entry to the Diplomatic Service

MM I see from your entry in Who's Who that you entered the Diplomatic Service in 1960 having been educated at Ampleforth and Merton College, Oxford. What sort of entry procedure did you follow?

OM Entry into the Diplomatic Service, I think it was called the Foreign Service in those days, followed the normal procedure. In my final year at Oxford I did the series of tests, which actually aren't very different from what they are today, starting with a written test which was held all over the country, followed by the so-called weekend which I think was never actually a weekend but was two and a half days of intensive group tests and individual tests and then a Final Selection Board. Very much the usual procedure.

MM And you joined as a DS 8...

OM I think it was called an A9. Yes, that's right because I remember after I had been in for a while, maybe a year or so, I got a letter from the office saying the grade of A9 was being abolished and you will henceforth be an A8, but this is not a promotion. Then I got a letter a bit later on saying the grade of A9 had been reinstated, but that I would remain an A8.

MM How nice. So what job did you do to begin with?

Posting to MECAS

OM To begin with I did a very short few lectures, induction lectures and so on in the office, I think from memory no more than a couple of weeks or four weeks, and then I was sent, very sensibly I think, to the Arabic School in the Lebanon because I think I had made the case, and I am sure others had made the case that my Arabic, which I had learned at Oxford was a wasting asset unless it was quickly used. Therefore they didn't give me a home posting as is the practice nowadays. They sent me straight off to Shemlan where I stayed for about six months. I did a course called the advanced course, but it had to be a specially tailored course for my purposes to change the classical Arabic I had learned at Oxford into something more

workable.

MM So that was a very good start for an Arabic student.

OM It was very, very lucky. I was impressed by the way that the Office handled me and also particularly by Donald Maitland who was then the Director of the school in the Lebanon. He took a real personal interest. He had never had anyone quite like me before and he sorted me out well and truly.

MM So after leaving MECAS (Middle East School of Arabic Studies) you went to...

Acting political officer in Abu Dhabi

OM After leaving MECAS I went to Bahrain. In those days the set-up in the Gulf was that we had an office in Bahrain, which was called the Political Residency, and which was the headquarters of Gulf operations, and then we had Political Agencies around the Gulf. I was sent to Bahrain as what was called a floater, meaning I would take on any odd jobs that came along. But almost immediately an odd job did come along and I had to go to Abu Dhabi because Edward Henderson, who had been in Abu Dhabi, had gone sick and they couldn't find a replacement of the correct grade so they sent me.

MM What were you doing there?

OM I was a Political Officer, acting Political Officer to be precise, which was a job far above my seniority. I was only 24 and this was a very independent job because it meant dealing with the Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Shakhbut, diplomatically but also running my own office. Most of the time I was there I had no British support. I was dealing entirely with my own staff and so on, and my boss was Donald Hawley who was the Political Agent in Dubai, who was away up the coast. I had no communication with him other than a radio-telephone which only worked when I wanted it to work.

MM What was your actual job?

OM My actual job was conducting a relationship with the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi which was one of the so-called Trucial Sheikhdoms with which we had had treaty relationships since the middle of the nineteenth century and I was doing partly a diplomatic job, talking to him about all the issues which came up and conveying British policy and reporting back on what he was doing and so on. And in addition to that a certain amount of what you might call quasi-colonial work, for example in theory I was a magistrate in my own court in Abu Dhabi.

MM What sort of cases did you deal with?

OM I only ever actually dealt with one case, which was a case of assault. The point was that under the treaty relationship the local government, if you can call it that, the Sheikh was responsible for anything affecting local Arabs and we were responsible for Commonwealth citizens and foreigners, not, I think I am right in saying, not Arabs. I think with other Arabs jurisdiction would be passed over to him. The case I dealt with was a Pakistani or an Indian who had assaulted a local girl and I found him guilty and sent him to prison for a month, which looking back on it I think was a bit severe. We had to send him up the coast to Dubai because we didn't have a prison in Abu Dhabi and he sent a pathetic message back saying that all his worldly goods were in a tin trunk which he had left in the Taj Mahal cafe in Abu Dhabi, would the court graciously condescend to look after this trunk and send it on to him when he had finished his sentence. We duly did that and a month later I discovered it actually belonged to somebody else.

MM So what was your next posting after that?

The Kuwait crisis of 1961

OM After Abu Dhabi I went briefly back to Bahrain. I should mention it because as I said my posting to Abu Dhabi was within my posting to Bahrain, and that was of some interest because I was there during the 1961 Kuwait crisis, which happened at the end of 1961 when there was an alarm that Iraq was going to invade Kuwait. I was involved in a lot of de-cyphering of telegrams. And then I went home to London and went into what was then called the oil desk in Economic Relations Department.

MM So that was quite a transformation from everyday life in the Gulf to the oil desk in London.

The oil desk in the Foreign Office 1961-3

OM From the living point of view it was a total transformation. Of course there was a thread of continuity from the professional point of view because Abu Dhabi was already on the way to becoming an oil producer. It wasn't an oil producer yet, but it meant I had some experience already of the oil industry in the field, so to speak, but my job in London of course was quite different. When you are in the Foreign Office as opposed to being overseas the job is very much the same as that of any other civil servant in any other department. In London you are collating information, preparing it, reporting to senior officials, advising Ministers and so on and of course sending out instructions to posts overseas, not that at the level I was at in those days I could send many instructions to anybody.

MM You would have to understand what was going on in the world of oil...

OM Absolutely. And the big story for most of the time I was there was OPEC, which had just emerged, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, which has become part of the international furniture in the last generation or so. But at that time a few wild cards in the Arab world and in Venezuela were trying out the idea of putting together an international cartel of oil producing countries. It was a very novel idea and one which of course was regarded with a great deal of doubt, not to say suspicion and hostility, in places like London.

MM I'm sure, yes. It's interesting because in 1961 the Iraqis were threatening Kuwait.

OM Yes. There was quite a serious war scare. I think it had arisen from the fact that we had just renounced our traditional relationship with Kuwait under which Britain was totally responsible for Kuwait defence. I think the Iraqis saw this as an opportunity to, so to speak, open the Kuwait file, or reopen the Kuwait file because they had had a claim on Kuwait, a dormant claim, for many years. The Kuwaiti Government very sensibly asked for, and got, British military support and as a result what was I think quite certainly a plan to invade was abandoned by the Iraqis.

MM Interesting. History repeats itself.

OM Absolutely, except that unfortunately the second time round nobody had the forethought to provide Kuwait with enough military support to ensure that an invasion didn't take place.

MM That was a challenge that had to be picked up by the Americans.

OM Yes, by that time, if you are talking about the Kuwait war in the 1990s, by that time British influence had long since dwindled almost to nothing in the Gulf, except as one of the many foreign powers trading there.

MM But of course we presumably still had some residual responsibility for the defence and foreign affairs of these Gulf states.

OM In the 1960s?

MM In the 60s.

OM In the 1960s in Kuwait's case, no. In Kuwait's case the traditional relationship, I think I am right in saying, my memory may be faulty but I think we'd abandoned that relationship even as early as 1960, 61. But in the southern Gulf, what were then the Trucial States, now the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, Qatar and Oman, our relationship was a much more complex and full one.

MM Anyhow, the oil desk in London, that was a fairly brief interval was it?

OM Yes, I can't remember the exact dates. I think it was about two years.

MM Oh, as long as that.

OM Yes, it was a real spell of work there. I think it wasn't until 1963... no it was less than two years I think, and after that I was sent to Jordan on what you might call my first regular

diplomatic posting. Of course the Abu Dhabi and Bahrain venture had been a bit of a one-off.

MM So, Amman was your first...

Posting to Jordan in 1963

OM Amman was my first embassy.

MM And what did you do there?

OM I was the 3rd Secretary in Chancery, or was it the 2nd Secretary, no I think it was 3rd Secretary, which didn't mean I was third of three. In effect the Chancery consisted of the Head of Chancery who was Alec Stirling and me. Head of Chancery in those days was the title we used for what nowadays would be called Head of Political Section. I was the only junior in the section so I remember Alec said to me, 'we will have to divide the work up, I suggest I do the King and you do everything else'. I thought he had drawn the short straw because I thought the King wasn't going to stick around too long, but I was wrong and 30 years later, of course, the King was still there and the people I had been dealing with had mostly vanished without trace.

MM That would have been interesting anyway.

OM It was fascinating, really very interesting, especially for someone like myself who had the opportunity not only of learning Arabic but actually getting quite good at Arabic, because the other thing that Alec said to me was, 'the ambassador, like me, thinks one of us ought to be in the office and the other one out of the office, and the ambassador likes me to be in the office so you had better be out'. So I spent my time travelling around the country, getting to know all sorts of people and I mean 'all sorts'. For example, one of my jobs was Information Officer, we didn't have a specialist Information Officer, and at that time if you remember the West Bank as it is now was still under Jordanian rule and all the Jordanian newspapers were published in Jerusalem so virtually every week I used to drive over to Jerusalem, Arab Jerusalem I am talking about, and talk to the editors of the Jordanian newspapers there. In those days it was very difficult to go from Jordan to Israel and I couldn't actually do that at

that time, but I did go to old Jerusalem frequently and to Bethlehem and Ramallah and Hebron and all the towns that have been in the news so much.

MM Was Glubb Pasha still in power then?

OM No, he wasn't. The King got rid of him not long before I got there. From memory I think it was in 1958 or 1959. It was I suppose still discernibly in the aftermath of Suez when British military involvement in the Arab world was very much suspect to Arab nationalist feeling, and that was the background to his decision to get rid of Glubb Pasha. I didn't meet Glubb and I think he had certainly been gone long enough by the time I was there that it was no longer a burning issue.

MM But did you find that the Jordanians were well disposed towards Britain?

Relation between Jordan and Palestine

OM Yes, I think generally speaking they were. But of course Jordan has a large Palestinian population. At that time we reckoned it was about half and half, now it is generally considered there is a Palestinian majority. By Palestinian I mean people who had come essentially from the western side of the Jordan river, it is a nice distinction but the ruling class if you like, the King, the senior officers in the army and most of the key government figures, were Trans-Jordanians, people from the eastern side of the country, but there were a very large number of Palestinians. The prevailing feeling among the Trans-Jordanians was certainly very positive towards Britain; among the Palestinians much more mixed. I had some Palestinian friends who would say that they were anti-British, and made no bones about it.

MM What was the reason for that?

OM Essentially because they blamed us for the creation of Israel, they saw us as depriving them of their country. As a result of the creation of Israel, the 1948 war and so on, there were a very large number of Palestinians who had become refugees, had had to leave what became Israel and had to move into what was then Jordan. Not Trans-Jordan, Trans-Jordan

had existed earlier, but after 1948 the territories west of the Jordan which were annexed by Trans-Jordan created a new shape of the country and it was renamed Jordan. Now of course it is Trans-Jordan again because now all territories west of the Jordan are actually controlled by Israel. But at that time they had territories on both sides of the river.

MM So you would say that we weren't able to get away with asserting that it wasn't us who granted, or created, the state of Israel but the United Nations or America or...

OM Well, of course one used to talk about this all the time. It's quite a common experience - I was born in 1936 so I was then in my late 20s but I would be accused of personal responsibility for the Balfour Declaration, for example. If you are a British diplomat you can't just say, 'well, it wasn't me.' You have to accept that it was Britain that made the national home for the Jews possible. And the national home for the Jews was what turned into Israel and so, in a sense, there is an historical responsibility there which you can't escape. Or you can't escape it if you are a diplomat. Perhaps it would be easier if you weren't a diplomat. And that of course is very real; people say that the Arabs have long memories and so on, the truth is that I think most countries have long memories for things which affect them really directly and it's easy for someone who isn't involved to forget. This is something I learned again when I worked in Ireland much later in my career that the British on the whole don't lie awake at night thinking about the Battle of the Boyne, but the Irish do.

MM Did you yourself see anything of the King?

OM Very little. Only really on formal occasions at that time. I did meet him and get to know him slightly much later in my career when I was doing political affairs in London in the 1980s but at that time I scarcely met him.

Aden and the settlement of some of the problems associated with the Protectorate

MM Anyhow you were very young at the time and you went from there to Aden, or...

OM Yes. What happened was that in 1965 it must have been by this time, a Constitutional

Commission was set up to try to sort out some of the problems of the relationship between Aden and the Protectorate. They wanted a Foreign Office Arabist to be secretary of this Commission so I was borrowed from the embassy in Amman and sent off on a short term assignment to Aden as secretary of this Commission headed by a chap called Sir Evelyn Hone, if I remember rightly, who was a New Zealander originally who had been in British government service I think in Africa for many years and was regarded as an expert on constitutional problems of ex-colonies, and so on.

MM This move was in 1965.

OM I think so, yes.

MM Was that the time when were you actually in Aden?

OM I spent about between 1 and 2 months in Aden. It was a short term assignment. I went to Aden to familiarise myself with the problems of Aden which I didn't know very much about. I then was with Sir Evelyn on various trips around the country, meeting different people and so on. Then I went to London for an actual conference where I was secretary general of the constitutional conference and then after that I went back to Amman briefly. I went back to Aden later.

MM So you were in Aden at the time when there was all this trouble over independence, I suppose?

Assignment to Aden in 1966

OM Yes, I was. Let us take that now. I have told you about my short term assignment. After that I went back to Jordan. I was in my place in the embassy but later, after another spell in London, I was posted to South Arabia. It wasn't a diplomatic post, technically I was lent to the government of Aden but the purpose of it was that the Foreign Office wanted to have someone who, when independence eventually came, would be familiar with the country and could be Head of Chancery in the new embassy, which is what I eventually did. So after the short term assignment I returned to Amman. Returned to Aden in mid 1966 and was

immediately sent to what was then called the East Aden Protectorate, which was the eastern part of what is now Yemen where I was based in a place called Mukalla on the Indian ocean coast of Aden which was the capital if you like, the main centre of the East Aden Protectorate in those days.

MM What went on there?

Brief history of UK association with Aden

OM Well, sorry, you are going to have to get another little dose of history. I will make it brief. The British occupation of Aden in the nineteenth century was intended simply to secure the sea port and subsequently the bunkering station but it became, as in India, necessary to deal with a lot of, what in India were called 'native states'. In Arabia they were a bunch of miscellaneous Sheikdoms and Sultanates and such like and the British gradually extended their relationship with these, not by way of conquest, not by way of taking over administration, but by establishing treaty relationships of different sorts with these people. This went across the whole of what is now the southern half, if you like, of Yemen, including right out to the east. In the eastern part there were three Sultanates with which we had treaty relations which were handled from Mukalla. In Mukalla there was a chap whose title was British Resident, and I was a deputy to him. I was a Deputy British Resident and when I arrived there at the beginning of my time things hadn't changed very much although the élite, if you like, were aware that change was on the way and knew the British were thinking of leaving, although they really couldn't believe we were going to leave, but still that was the public position. The reality was that we were still dealing with these people in the way that we had dealt with them for many years and my first tasks there were very traditional ones. I went on camping trips up into the hinterland, up to the Hadhramaut and over what was called the Jol, which was the plateau, which was tribal territory. My job was to understand the relationships between the tribes, to sort out disputes and indeed stop wars. That was still going on as late as the period I am talking about. But the wars were becoming more related to the international dispute, if you like, between the British Protectorate and Yemen. At the time, in what is now the northern part of Yemen, a civil war was in progress. The old Amir had been overthrown by republican groups supported by the Egyptians. The Egyptian army

was taking part in the civil war, the Egyptian intelligence service was well established just across the border, and many of our problems were beginning to be seen not so much in terms of old tribal contests but in terms of manipulation by the Egyptian intelligence service from the other side of the border.

Egyptian involvement in the dispute between Aden and the Yemen

MM And were they indulging in overt propaganda...

OM Oh yes, very much so, yes. They were the glory days of the Voice of the Arabs which was Nasser's great propaganda machine and was very effective.

MM I seem to recollect the retreat from Crater town and all that, and Mad Mitch. What year was that? I thought it was...

Appointment of Sir Humphrey Trevelyan as Governor of Aden

OM That was just a little bit later, because what happened to me was that I spent I think the best part of a year in Mukalla but in the middle of 1967, maybe June or something like that, the governor of Aden, Dick Turnbull, was sacked by George Brown and Humphrey Trevelyan appointed in his place and Humphrey Trevelyan was a retired ambassador. He had been ambassador in Moscow and other places. And one of the things he asked for was a private secretary with a Foreign Office background, an Arabist. And the lot fell on me and I was plucked out of Mukalla and became private secretary to the last governor of Aden. Actually he had the title of High Commissioner, not governor, but it comes to the same thing. And it was during that period during the latter part of 1967 that the event you are referring to took place. At that time I was secretary to the boss so I was very much involved in all of it.

MM You must have had a ring side seat.

OM Very much so. And of course it is all very much in my mind now when I see what is happening in Iraq because the situation is not all that different from what we faced in Aden in

those days. Crater is actually the crater of an extinct volcano. It was the main centre of what you might call the Arab town of Aden, the main what the French would call the casbah, the Arab city. What happened there was that there was a rebellion or an armed attack by members of the Aden armed police and I think some of the Arab military who were under our officers and under our control, but they mutinied and the British army unit which was responsible for security in Aden took quite heavy casualties and we lost control over the Arab city. That put us in a very difficult position for a lot of practical reasons. It was impossible to run the country without control of the Arab city. To give one practical example, all the cash reserves were in the bank in the middle of Crater. So there was no money and there were other problems of that kind. For a period, and I can't quite remember how long it was now, not very long, possibly a couple of weeks, we faced this very difficult situation and then in deadly secret the Argylls mounted a military operation to regain control of Crater which was an instant success. It was an amazing coup actually, I think quite literally the first the inhabitants of Crater knew of this military operation was when they woke up at about 4 o'clock in the morning to the sound of bagpipes from the whole of the rim of the extinct volcano. They knew about the Argylls and they knew that you didn't mix with them and they knew that bagpipes were bad news. There were very few casualties, it was a brilliant operation.

MM Yes, they did well. So how did Humphrey Trevelyan get on with this new task?

OM He was by a long way the best boss I have ever had. I had a very high opinion of his operation. It was a funny appointment, his background was in the Indian Civil Service, or rather the Indian Government Service because he had spent a lot of his youth I think dealing with similar problems with the independent or semi-independent rajahs or what ever they had in Indian states...

MM Princes...

OM Yes, exactly, and then after Indian independence he joined... I think he worked for the UN for a short while and then he joined the British Diplomatic Service but by now he was already in mid-career or getting quite senior. He held some senior posts in the Foreign

Office, including being chargé d'affaires in Cairo at the time of the Suez war which was a bit of a baptism of fire and being ambassador in Baghdad, but he wasn't an Arabist, he didn't speak Arabic. He then went to Moscow which he was very much fitted for and thoroughly enjoyed learning Russian. He became very closely involved in the whole story of operations with Russia. Then George Brown, who was then the Foreign Secretary, made this rather imaginative appointment, called him back from retirement which is very unusual in the Foreign Service, and asked him to take over at this very difficult time after he had sacked Dick Turnbull as governor of Aden. And so Humphrey came out with the cards really loaded against him because as far as the Arabs were concerned he was a sinister figure from the Foreign Office and Moscow and that sort of thing. And as far as the British were concerned, particularly the British military, he had come out to do George Brown's dirty work after their friend Turnbull had been very badly treated so he had an extremely difficult hand to play. He played it superbly, brilliantly and immediately made friends, immediately established his position first with the British and the British military in particular, and then shortly after that he began to row back from the very difficult situation we were in with the Arabs. But I think his instructions from London, although I don't think I was fully aware of them at the time, were to get out with minimum casualties. I don't think he was really expected to do anything more than that. And that is what he succeeded in doing.

MM And we just went away and left it.

Consequences of the UK departure from Aden

OM Yes. Which was, I think, by that time inevitable. I don't think that we could have done anything else. We were very unlucky in a number of respects. We could go into that if you want, timing for example. I mentioned already the Egyptian presence in Yemen, the Egyptians also were under tremendous pressure and withdrew within months of our own withdrawal from Aden, they were out of South Arabia for ever not long after us. But if they had gone before us it would have been a different story. However, that is the luck of it. So, yes, we withdrew. The complication was that for most of the time that I was involved in Aden our main antagonist if you like was an outfit known to the British as FLOSY, (Front for the Liberation Of South Yemen), and FLOSY was essentially Egyptian inspired, Egyptian

financed and a conventional anti-colonialist liberation movement. But during the last year or so, and particularly during the last few months, it became clear that there was another organisation called the NLF, (National Liberation Front), which was much more mysterious, much more indigenous; it seemed to have nearly all its support and resources internally in the tribal areas, not in Aden itself so much. There was also a link, which I personally didn't ever really get to the bottom of, or understand, with Iraq and with the kind of Ba'athist Arab nationalism which was already prevalent in Iraq. Whatever the external links, the last part of our stay in Aden came down to a fight between these two, which the NLF won decisively and FLOSY were virtually eliminated. We found ourselves leaving the country to an authority none of whose members we had ever actually, so far as we were aware, met. We had no contact with these people at all. And so various simple and straightforward questions, like the cash in the bank, we didn't know what to do with it. So in the last weeks we managed to persuade members of the NLF that we really were going, which people hadn't believed until it was late in the game, and it was in their best interests to talk to us about practicalities when we left. So my very last duties before the independence of Aden, I wasn't actually there on independence day, I was in Lausanne involved in peace talks or independence talks with the National Liberation Front which was a fascinating experience. They were, as one of them whom I got to know quite well explained to me, they were the only people I have ever met who believed in the Maoist theory of permanent revolution, they wanted to see revolution in Arabia and they had their way for a while.

MM You said that in some ways the timing of our departure was unfortunate. In what way?

OM I was thinking particularly the relationship between our departure and the Egyptian departure, because in a way the Egyptians were able to control events and dominate the political scene right up to the time when we were fully committed to leaving, although they themselves were not able to stay much longer than we did. That was one aspect of the timing. The timing was also, from the point of view of the country, from the point of view of the Adenis and the people in the Protectorate, very unfortunate. It was then, I am trying to remember, at this time the Suez canal was closed as a hangover from the 1967 war and this meant that our departure from Aden had economic consequences. Aden at that time had two real economic resources, one was the British military base, which was a huge source of

expenditure by Britain, and the other was the bunkering trade based on the shipping traffic which was still, in those days, much more important than it is today, passing between Western Europe and the Mediterranean and the Far East and all going through the Suez canal through the Straits of Tiran and Bab al-Mandab, right down through the Red Sea and therefore using Aden as a bunkering port. Both these resources disappeared at the same time so Aden town was just left to wither on the branch. There was no economic basis for it any more and a hundred thousand people were left with no economic activity. They suffered terribly as a result.

Lack of British interests in Aden

MM Had we got any vital interests there?

OM No, I don't think we had at that time. I think in that sense the withdrawal was a wise move by London. Traditionally the original basis for the British presence in Aden was to protect the trade routes to India and that of course had become pretty well obsolete long before I got involved in the story at all. There were also economic interests particularly after the development of oil. Originally Aden was also a coal bunkering centre for the international shipping trade between Europe and the Far East. As coal was replaced by oil, which almost coincided with the emergence of the Gulf as a major source of oil, so it did become an important oil bunkering centre as well. But I don't think you could say there were any major British interests involved at the time I was there, no.

MM Had it got an airport?

OM Yes, there was an airbase and an airport, and so long as we remained, for example, in Kenya and there was a British military and colonial presence in Africa, Aden had its relevance to all that. But that had all wound up, or was in the process of winding up, before I got there. So, no, it was no longer relevant. Where I think there is a different argument is that the Labour government of the time, the Wilson government very much led on this I think by Denis Healey, the lesson that they drew from our failure, if you like, to stand up to the pressure of Arab nationalism was that we were no longer welcome in the area. There was no

point in outstaying our welcome. We should withdraw. And they applied this not only to Aden but also to the Gulf. And I think that was a step too far, personally. I think that the Gulf was an altogether different story. There was no local pressure on us to leave the Gulf at that time, as there was plenty of local pressure on us down in the South, and I think that British interests were thrown away in the Gulf, but I wouldn't make that argument as far as the South was concerned.

MM Thank you very much for that, and after Aden?

Return to the Foreign Office in 1968

OM I came home to London and went back to the FCO and did the odd course before I was sent off in 1970. I didn't leave Aden until early 1968. I have left out of the story that before I went to Aden I did a spell in what was then called Northern Department in the Foreign Office dealing with... the Department was dealing with the Soviet Union, but I wasn't dealing with the Soviet Union, I was dealing with Poland. It wasn't a very long spell, it was between my leaving Jordan and my going to South Arabia. Then when I came back from South Arabia I was sent back into the same job effectively, although by this time the Department had changed its name and become the East European and Soviet Department. There is an ineradicable tendency in British bureaucracy that when you have an elegant and brief name you throw it away and substitute a complicated and boring one, so East European and Soviet Department was what I joined and I did a spell there during 1968 after I had been briefly in the new British embassy in newly independent Aden and then came back, got married, did a little spell in London and then we were told we were off again, this time to Cyprus.

Posting to Cyprus in 1970

MM And that would have been when, 1970?

OM Early 1970. I was there just in time, probably two weeks after I arrived, one Sunday morning I was lying in bed with my wife and I suddenly said to her, 'did you hear that noise, it sounded to me like machine gun fire.' And she said, 'don't be silly, you aren't in Aden any

more.' But it was in fact Archbishop Makarios's helicopter being shot down by some friendly Greeks. They got the helicopter, but they didn't get the Archbishop. The Greek colonel who was flying it managed to land the bloody thing in a street full of telegraph wires and all the rest of it and he had two bullets in his back, but he still got down safely, the Archbishop got out and walked away unhurt. He was quite a guy.

MM Why were the Greeks trying to shoot him down?

OM It was the struggle between Grivas and Makarios, or putting it another way it was the struggle between the Greeks who wanted ENOSIS, which was the union with Greece which was Grivas and his lot, and the Greeks who wanted an independent Cyprus which was what Makarios had eventually settled for. And the ENOSIS gang regarded Makarios as a traitor to the struggle for the union with Greece. That actually was the dominant theme for the four years that I was in Cyprus because whereas in the 1950s there had been serious trouble and fighting between the British and the Greeks, and then in the 1960s there was serious trouble between the Greeks and the Turks, in the 1970s it was essentially Greeks against Greeks. So Grivas actually came back into the island, a clandestine role leading what was called EOKA 2, or EOKA Beta as the Greeks called it, the purpose of which was to overthrow Makarios, but they weren't particularly worried about us. So as far as we were concerned we had a diplomatic role which was mainly concerned, in fact almost exclusively concerned with the Cyprus problem, how to try to sort out the relationship between the communities and the relationship between Cyprus and Greece and Turkey. But the action in which we were involved was mainly Greek against Greek.

MM Was there any feeling against the British?

OM Remarkably little really. There were examples of it. The people who had actually fought in EOKA against the British bore a certain amount of grudge, but not much considering everything. I think it was, on both sides... there was more feeling against the British because we were reckoned to have supported and encouraged the Turkish element in Cyprus, which I think was essentially untrue. There wasn't very much feeling against us for fighting against EOKA which was reasonable, there was some, there was a museum of

EOKA in Nicosia to which I never went which had a special room devoted to EOKA leaders whom we had hanged and so on. That was a pretty bad mark against us, but no, generally speaking relations were very good. And of course relations between Cyprus and Britain are very deep. It was my first experience of working in the Commonwealth. When people talk about the Commonwealth they don't usually think of Cyprus as an example of Commonwealth but I began to see what it meant because you go into a remote mountain village and you go into the square and you sit down next to the old village elder who would be sitting there sipping his brandy and ginger, which was typical in Cyprus, and you would try out your Greek on him and you would find actually he had spent 30 years living in the east end of London. And only came back to Cyprus because his family were there. And this sort of relationship has pervaded everything. My wife was at the LSE and she decided early on that it would be fun to start an LSE alumni association and she very quickly had more than half the cabinet in it. President Makarios himself was not at the LSE but most of his ministers were. So the ties are pretty close and remain very close to this day.

MM Who was your High Commissioner?

OM I had three High Commissioners. For the last 6 months the High Commissioner was a chap called Stephen Olver who remained there and was there during the Turkish invasion which of course came in 1974, so not all that long after we left.

MM So you missed the...

OM With the exception of this Greek against Greek business which I have already mentioned, we were there during the longest period of peace that Cyprus had had since the mid-1950s.

MM It was tragic really that it should be so troubled.

OM yes, it's a very fascinating diplomatic problem, very complicated. Curiously similar in some ways to the Irish problem which I experienced later on. One parallel you can make between Cyprus and Northern Ireland, apart from the fact that it's rather small and therefore

you can get your head round the local scene in a way which was more difficult in a big place, but one of the difficulties is that both the Greeks and the Turks have the complexes that go with being a minority. The Turks are a minority in the island, although one mustn't say so, they hate being called a minority, they are called one of the two communities, but they are in fact the minority in the island and the Greeks of course are a minority in the sense that Cyprus is much... well, first of all Turkey is a much bigger country than Greece, secondly Cyprus is much nearer to Turkey than it is to Greece. So the Greeks feel overshadowed by the Turks and the Turks feel overshadowed by the Greeks. And this means that both are extremely defensive. They don't actually use the slogan 'no surrender' but they very well could. And it does make every little detail of any kind of compromise frightfully difficult to achieve in Cyprus. Understandable, but both sides, I'm afraid, have plenty of reasons to distrust the other. They have a bad history. It's perhaps not quite as bad as the sort of things that came to light in the former Yugoslavia a few years later but it's recognisably the same part of the world and the atrocities and so on that have been committed are really unspeakable. And people remember them of course.

MM Anyhow an interesting interlude and an introduction to the Commonwealth.

OM Yes. And also an introduction to the Greek world which was interesting and came good because later in my career I went back, in fact twice, and served in Athens. I had studied ancient Greek at school and started at university. When I was in Cyprus I worked quite hard on learning modern Greek and also beefing up my Turkish which I had learned a bit of at Oxford. The Turkish didn't really pay off in Foreign Office terms but the Greek really did.

MM Yes, how wonderful. So after Nicosia?

Personnel Department in the Foreign Office 1973-75

OM After Nicosia I came back and did a spell in Personnel Department, what in those days was called Personnel Policy Department. They had three personnel departments in the Foreign Office in those days. They don't have any now, it's all called Human Resources. Personnel Policy Department partly did what it says. We had policy questions about things

like for example the whole business of the employment of women, the question of married officers and so on, which was going through a process of transformation at that time. We also did recruitment, that is to say we were responsible for planning and organising recruitment and we also did something fascinating called conduct and discipline, dealing with the enforcement of diplomatic regulations and all that sort of thing with a rather small number of people in the service who do actually come off the rails in one way or another. So that was quite a mixed bag.

MM A vital part of management issues and skills, I suppose.

OM It was quite new for me, or I was new to it and I don't think I am a born personnel officer, but I certainly learned a lot. It was interesting. The Foreign Office, ever since the reforms I think at the time of the second world war, has believed in not having a separate cadre of administrators and personnel officers. All that is done by our own people who circulate from operational posts to administrative posts and of course some of them become more involved in it than others and some of them return again and again to that side of the Office. But I think it is wise on the whole. It avoids the complete 'them and us' philosophy that, for example, my father, who worked in the Colonial Service and briefly in the Colonial Office, told me existed in his Service where it was taken for granted if you were in an Overseas Civil Service post in those days the Colonial Office was your deadly enemy. I don't think that is really the case in our Service. At least most people don't feel that way. I think the army and the War Office had a similar rivalry and indeed hostility at that time.

MM That is pretty understandable I suppose. What rank were you when you went to...

OM By this time I was a first secretary and my job was designated assistant head of this personnel department. Foreign Office heads of departments are traditionally, what in Diplomatic Service terms would be called counsellors, and this means they are in their late 30s or early 40s, and then most Foreign Office departments in those days, and I think still, would have one or sometimes two assistant heads. As assistant head I was responsible for part of the set up I have already described to you.

MM As a pretty senior first secretary at any rate. After that you went to..?

OM One day I got a message from Personnel Department saying...

MM One of the other bits...

Jedda as Counsellor 1975-77

OM One of the other bits of Personnel Department, that I was going to go to Moscow as commercial counsellor. I went home all happy and told my wife and she said 'whoopee', and then I had the difficult task of going back to her after the weekend on Monday and saying it isn't Moscow, it's Jedda, which she wasn't so ecstatic about. So we went off to Saudi Arabia in 1975. The British embassy in Saudi Arabia in those days was in Jedda which is on the Red Sea. It has a ghastly climate. All travellers to Arabia describe the contrast between the dry, exhilarating climate of central Arabia and the ghastly swamp of the Red Sea and having experienced it personally I can confirm that it is so. But unfortunately the Saudis at the time insisted that all foreign embassies had to be in Jedda. We were not permitted to be anywhere else. It was a bit odd because the government was in Riyadh, which is right in the middle of the country. They spent some of the summer or autumn months in Jedda but most of the time they were in Riyadh. They insisted that we should be there allegedly simply because the man who had been a foreign minister for 20 years liked Jedda and didn't like Riyadh.

MM And was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jedda?

OM It was in Jedda, yes, but it was the only ministry I think, there might have been one other but I don't know which one it was. Saudi Arabia was a very difficult environment to work in, but one of the problems was essentially we were in the wrong place and I used to spend a lot of time in planes, or rather being thrown off planes, going between Jedda and Riyadh. We did actually have a sort of, I don't think it was illegal but it was a semi-official establishment in Riyadh, but it was no more than an embassy doss house in which we could stay, so we didn't have to stay in hotels. But we had no official residence there. This was at a time when Saudi Arabia had suddenly become very important in the eyes of the world

following the first oil price shock in 1973 which drove up oil prices and which meant that people suddenly became aware of the huge economic importance of the Arab oil producing countries and particularly Saudi Arabia. This was typified for me, I remember, when I did my briefing before I went out to Saudi Arabia. I went to see a chap in the Treasury to try to understand what petro-dollars were all about. I didn't really manage to do much of that but as I left he said to me, 'Oh, one thing I meant to mention, the Chancellor will give anybody lunch from Saudi Arabia.' I had to just bear that in mind. I think at that point it was probably true, people were desperately holding on to any contact that they could develop in Saudi Arabia. For me of course this was a wonderful opportunity because, speaking the language, I had never actually been to Saudi Arabia but I had been all around so to speak. I knew the history. I knew what sort of people they were and I was really a square peg in a square hole. But it was a very awkward little hole all the same and it was particularly awkward for my wife of course. It was a difficult place for families at that time. By the end of it we had three small children who took to it like ducks to water. They were quite happy bicycling around the compound and swimming all the time and that sort of thing. They were only little boys.

MM Oh, you lived in a compound.

OM We lived in a compound which was a bit odd, an embassy compound, but not all that odd in the sense that the Saudis also lived in compounds. Saudi families lived in compounds. The Saudi way of life is essentially very private, so they don't expect to have anything to do with your families. It worked after a fashion. We actually had a building which, in the wisdom of the Ministry of Works, had been provided for us, which was open plan, just one big living room, which in a country where the sexes have to be rigidly segregated most of the time was rather an awkward way to have a house. We used to find that when our Saudi friends came either my wife would be cowering in the kitchen, which was not air-conditioned because it was assumed that only an Arab cook would be in there, or I would be cowering in the kitchen and my wife would be entertaining her Arab friends. Either way it wasn't very sensible to have this open plan building, but that's how these things were done.

MM It was probably the standard.

OM That's right. So we worked very hard. My wife, as I said, found it extremely frustrating. I found it enthralling, the whole thing was just so interesting because everybody in the world wanted to know about Saudi Arabia. Nobody did know about Saudi Arabia. I actually had the opportunity a couple of weeks before I went out there to gain access to the library in SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, in London and their total holding of books on Saudi Arabia was more or less on one shelf. There was just nothing.

MM What about the Americans. Hadn't they got a selection?

OM No, I don't think they had. They had a lot of information about the oil fields. They had a lot of information, much fabricated, about tribal allegiances and so on. The Americans were well established. They had a very good embassy, and we had very good relations with them. They probably knew slightly more than we did in some respects but I don't think, overall, that they did. I think we were all of us on a very steep learning curve in those days, including the Saudis. To give you an example, you know that in the early 1960s, the first of the brothers of the present King, King Saud who had succeeded his father, became notorious as a playboy, got mixed up with Egyptian nationalism and all that sort of thing and was eventually kicked out by the Saudi family and replaced by King Faisal who had the reputation of being a severe, rather puritanical, figure. And when I went out to Saudi Arabia it was just after King Faisal had been murdered. I thought...

MM King Faisal had been...

OM He was murdered by another Prince, he was shot by a Prince allegedly because the Prince's brother, a minor Prince, I think his brother had been killed in some kind of fundamentalist demonstration. He was shot by the police, so he murdered the King. So I thought, preparing myself, that I really ought to understand what happened about King Saud and I tried to look it up in this famous library in SOAS. There was no information about it at all. There were a few newspaper reports, which were completely uninformative. It's only in the last year or two by reading academic books which are now appearing, written by Saudis about Saudi history, that I really have any proper understanding of what had actually happened and how it came about that King Saud was given the boot by his own family. And

it is important because one of these days they are going to have to do the same thing again. They will remember how it was done.

MM Yes, that will end the embarrassment between father and son. What were you supposed to be doing in the embassy?

OM What was I doing? I was promoted counsellor to go the Jeddah. We had an embassy with an ambassador, and under him two counsellors, one of whom was called political and that was me, the other one was called economic and commercial and was a very good colleague. Somebody once asked me, 'what is the difference between your jobs actually.' And I said, 'If it's got more than 6 noughts on the end, it is political.' There was a certain amount of truth in it because we were dealing with oil questions. But the main thing we were trying to do, I think if I could put my finger on what was the actual task, was trying to get to understand, and to know, the Saudis and get them to understand and know us. That was what it was really about. Although Britain had had a relationship with Saudi Arabia going right back to, well, not quite into the nineteenth century but certainly to the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship was very thin and it was quite difficult to improve this understanding. This was partly a matter of the official world and it was partly a matter of ordinary personal friendships. My wife and I worked very hard at trying to get some actual Saudi friends. And as you can see, it wasn't easy. Not because the Saudis are unfriendly but because they are very shy and very family oriented. If I could give you a typical example, or an anecdotal example, I remember we once had a visit from, perhaps it was the Minister for Education, or some bigshot from the educational world in Britain, and my ambassador wanted to get together a group of Saudis whom he could meet. I happened to meet the dean of one of the new universities which had just been set up in Saudi Arabia, and this was a chap who had got a Ph.D. in America, had just come back to Saudi Arabia, was feeling his oats, was running this new university, and I told him about this and said, 'I'm sure the ambassador would really like you to come and meet this visitor from London.' He said, 'I'd be very interested. I'd like to do that. When is it going to be?' I said, 'Well, I know he is planning to have a dinner party on Tuesday.' He stopped me and said, 'Sorry, I can't do that'. I said, 'But I haven't told you which Tuesday yet.' He said, 'No, every Tuesday I have dinner with my mother.' That is absolutely typical, and that would be much more important to him than

meeting the British ambassador.

MM Family obligations.

OM Absolutely.

MM Interesting really isn't it. Well, you have to understand these particular ways of the country, don't you.

OM Indeed you do. Jumping ahead I'll tell you in a way a slightly similar story about Libya. A couple of years ago, it was the time of the solar eclipse, the total eclipse, two or three years ago. I was in Libya and I had an appointment to see an official who was in charge of some economic department or other, purely a business affair, but I knew this chap. I had been to see him before. I went to his office and somebody let me in but the place seemed to be totally deserted, there was nobody there at all. I found my way to his office and there was my friend sitting at his desk. I asked him if he was expecting me. Yes. 'But,' I said, 'There is nobody here, where are they all?' He said, 'Home.' So I said, 'What?' He said, 'They are all worried because they had been hearing this stuff about if you look at the sun you will go blind, and they are afraid that their wives and children will be stupid. So I said, 'If you are worried you had better go and look after them.' That is what it is like in the Arab world.

MM Rather charming.

OM Can you imagine that happening in London or in New York? Anyway, coming back to Saudi Arabia, one or two high points. We had a visit by the Duke of Gloucester which was fine, and then we had a visit by the Duke of Edinburgh, which wasn't actually announced as being a kind of rehearsal for The Queen, but it obviously was and she came out a couple of years after I left. That was all, royal visits are something else. Looking after a royal visit isn't quite so easy.

Problems of protocol at the Foreign Office during visit by Prince Sultan

Prince Sultan, who was, and still is, the Minister of Defence, came on an official visit to London which happened to coincide with my being on leave, and I got attached to his crowd and operated as an interpreter for him while he was in London. That was fascinating because it gave me a kind of look from the other side of the curtain as it were. I was part of his team. I shall never forget the experience of coming with him on his formal call at the Foreign Office. His main host was the Defence Secretary, who was then Fred Mulley, but he came to the Foreign Office to pay a courtesy call on Antony Crosland. And it was, to be blunt, a total disaster. But it was quite an amusing disaster. I will tell you what happened. We arrived at the Foreign Office. I was with the Prince and a group of his staff. We weren't met at the door. There was some telephoning and so on and eventually we were shown into a waiting room. I could see that the Prince was beginning to feel uncomfortable. We weren't kept waiting very long but we were kept waiting briefly in the Secretary of State's waiting room. And then, eventually, I think Crosland had the grace to come out himself to the waiting room, but I am not certain of that, took us in the Secretary of State's office and the first thing he said to Sultan was, I am so glad to see you here and so on but I have to tell you straight away that I am sorry to say that I have been asked to go across the road to Number 10 by the Prime Minister and I shall have to leave you here. Fortunately I have Minister of State Dr Owen here, who is looking forward to talking to you about all the questions of the day. And the Prince said, 'It's really very kind of you to receive me, but there is no need for me to trouble Dr Owen. I don't have any questions I need to discuss, thank you so much.' He shook hands and left.

MM What a dreadful way to behave...

OM Well, it was an learning experience for me. You can imagine how I felt.

MM And of course they would have no idea how insulting that behaviour is.

OM None at all. But they should have had, because after all the Foreign Secretary is surrounded by people like me. But I suppose it is difficult to manage a Secretary of State who doesn't want to be managed.

MM And he was like that.

OM I don't know, David Owen certainly was but he was only a Minister of State at that stage. Funnily enough David Owen subsequently came out in the last part of my stay in Saudi Arabia as Foreign Secretary to Saudi Arabia and he behaved impeccably, although he always had the reputation in the Foreign Office of being the most difficult Foreign Secretary to deal with we had ever had, but he didn't show that side of himself to me. We also had a visit from James Callaghan as Foreign Secretary and that was a good visit too.

MM That must have been after Crosland's death then.

OM Yes, is that the right way round...

MM Crosland was Foreign Secretary when he died, and Callaghan became Foreign Secretary. As a matter of fact I had an interview with somebody who relates a rather touching story about trying to persuade Crosland to go and meet Kissinger, and it was very difficult to get him to do it because he didn't like meeting people to discuss matters he didn't fully understand, and he wanted to know the subject inside out. It might have been something like that with the Saudi leaders.

OM Yes, well these are the problems of course you face. Another thing I learned from that visit funnily enough is this. Prince Sultan was told that he ought to pay a call on the leader of the opposition, which was normal for visiting Princes and such like, and so we did. And the leader of the opposition was Margaret Thatcher who had just become leader of the opposition. And of course this was really bizarre, taking a Saudi Prince to call on a lady when people at that time were asking how could a woman take over the task of Winston Churchill? And the Prince was just as fascinated as the rest of us were to see how she would come up to it. She met us with Ian Gilmour who was acting as a sort of Foreign Office cum foreign policy cum Arab friend and she did quite well although she was quite clearly extremely nervous. I saw a fair amount of Mrs Thatcher later on and nervousness was not her main characteristic, but she was jolly nervous when she met Prince Sultan, I can tell you. He was jolly nervous when he met her, too. It was good.

MM Interesting. Anyhow you were saying Callaghan came out?

OM Yes. We had an entertaining visit. I remember going to look at the accommodation proposed for him. The Saudis had very kindly allocated a palace for him to stay in, the normal thing. We had a quick shufti at this palace and the thing that particularly sticks in my mind is an enormous bath, suitable for three quite large people to be in at the same time. It was in his suite. We were speculating how he was going to make use of this facility. And then we noticed, I don't know where they had bought this bath but the plug was right in the middle, so if you wanted to let the water out you would have to wade into this bath to get to the plug. I don't really remember much about the official part, it all went rather well I think. What I do remember is that after the official programme was over, and I think he must have been leaving the following morning, late that evening we were all in this palace and somebody found a bottle of whisky which we opened and were sitting and relaxing and saying well, it didn't go too badly, and all that, when suddenly the door opened and in came an Arab, a Saudi, while we were all swigging our whiskies. We all tried not to look guilty and then we looked more carefully at this Arab and it was Jim Callaghan wearing the kit that he had been given as a present by the Crown Prince Fahd. He was wearing the proper scarf and the robes. He made a very fine Arab, I must say. Ewen Fergusson, who was his private secretary at the time, grabbed a camera and Callaghan lost his cool completely. He said, 'Put that bloody thing away. I shall destroy that camera if you take a photograph of me.' He must have remembered a picture of Alec Home making a complete ass of himself riding a camel at the pyramids which was mercilessly used as propaganda against him for years afterwards. Callaghan could see himself on the front page of the Sun in this Arab kit. He wasn't having it. But he had learned a thing or two. I had a very amusing little encounter with him at the time of a visit by Prince Sultan. Callaghan was then prime minister. I actually went with Prince Sultan who was Defence Minister, one of the top Saudi leaders of course, to pay a courtesy call at Number 10. Patrick Wright was then the private secretary at No 10 and he was at the meeting and the Saudi ambassador was there and I was there. I was there as the interpreter for the Prince. But the Saudi ambassador wasn't having any of that and he took over and tried to do the interpreting himself. There was a key moment when they were talking about the oil price and Callaghan, ex chancellor and all that, was explaining the

devastating effect that the oil price had had on the world economy. Then came the big moment when he leaned forward and very daringly put his hand on Prince Sultan's knee, which is a thing Arabs do sometimes. Where Jim learned that I don't know. He said, 'I am sure we can rely on you, and that there won't be another oil price rise which would be quite irresponsible in the present circumstances.' And the Prince said, 'No, there will not.' And I translated this and the ambassador interrupted me and said, 'Provided present circumstances prevail.' And I said, 'He didn't say that.'

MM Good ambassador then.

OM The Ambassador there, did we have two or three? Alan Rothnie was the first one. He was...

MM No, I mean the Saudi ambassador.

OM Yes, he knew his stuff, although I scored a point off him another time. I'm sorry, I'm telling you stories about when I scored and he didn't score. We went to a demonstration of the Hawk aircraft, which we were trying to sell to the Saudis at the time. The Royal Air Force did an absolutely brilliant presentation and half way through coffee was served. While we were having coffee in came an RAF sergeant from Lossiemouth with a couple of Peregrine falcons which they used for chasing the seagulls off the runway, just as a kind of side-show. The Prince was far more interested in the hawks than he was in the aeroplanes. He immediately went over to the sergeant and started to look at the hawks and eventually he turned to the ambassador and said, 'ask him, are they berb or burp.' And the ambassador, who was a townie, didn't know his hawking vocabulary and hadn't the faintest idea what the question was. But I knew, so I scored, because what he had asked him was the question that falconers are always asked which was, 'Are these hawks caught in the wild or are they reared in captivity.' There is a big difference in the effect. And immediately the Prince and the sergeant of course got into some technical discussion about this. I thought, 'this is the way to make enemies,' using vocabulary that the Saudi ambassador didn't know. I have forgotten the words now but, as in English, there is a whole special vocabulary for hunting and such like.

MM Very interesting. That sounds like a very fruitful posting really.

Counsellor at the Embassy in Athens 1977-80

OM It was, as I say it was difficult from my family's point of view. One of my children was born there so some good things came out of it. And then we were sent from there to Greece, which initially we weren't very happy about, because my wife was feeling she should really spend some time at home, but it worked out quite well. The difficulty with Greece, if you are not the boss, not the ambassador, is that you don't live in the centre of the town and you have to commute. It is probably a bit better now but at that time the Greeks really hadn't made the transition from the traditional siesta based life to a more western type of life. So we found ourselves living with two different timetables. The usual timetable starts at breakfast, then the children go to school, then you go to the office and that sort of thing. And the other one starts really sometime in the late afternoon when people rise from their siestas, start ringing up their friends, and by ten o'clock they have got around to inviting them for dinner, by midnight you are sitting down. You can't really follow both of those simultaneously. We found, my wife particularly, that with our three, coming up to four small children, really intolerable. But in many other respects Greece was a big success. It was a good time to be there. I didn't mention it earlier but I had actually been to Greece on a familiarisation visit from Cyprus in the early 1970s when of course the colonels were still running the show. And not knowing Greece at the time it didn't make all that much impact on me. But coming back after the reintroduction of democratic government and so on it was good to have seen it in those difficult times. It was a far more hopeful time in the way that Greece was pulling itself up from the floor in the late 1970s. Karamanlis was the prime minister. He was the hero of the hour if you remember. He had been in exile in Paris and he had been prime minister before the colonels took over. He left Greece as soon as the military regime came in and had nothing to do with Greek politics for many years. When the colonels' regime collapsed in 1974 a message was sent to Karamanlis and he came back and immediately took over. He was a Conservative. He was from the right of the democratic spectrum but he was an impeccable democrat and the first thing he did was to organise proper elections. He was elected by a majority. By the time we got there in the late 1970s he was looking a little bit tired and people were getting a little bit disillusioned. Andreas Papandreou, the socialist, and

I mean socialist, pretty dark pink socialist, a democrat but well to the left, was coming up fast. Shortly after we left Papandreou actually became prime minister and was prime minister on and off for a long time after that. Karamanlis is the uncle of the present prime minister. And then he became president which is a formal constitutional position. So it was an interesting time in Greece and there was plenty going on. Going back to the Cyprus problem of course there was plenty to do with that but more I would say internal stuff, trying to understand the Greek system and trying to understand their attitude towards NATO and the European Communities, as they were in those days, the European Community.

MM Were they already lobbying to join?

OM Yes they were. But on the other hand Papandreou was leading a strong anti campaign, which he abandoned as soon as he became prime minister, a gross piece of political opportunism. He was anti NATO and anti European Union until he actually got to be prime minister. More important than either of those, and over-shadowing both of them really, was the relationship with Turkey, which was always very fraught and difficult. But it was an interesting time for me and I'm very fond of Greece. But I am also very fond of Turkey. It was quite a fascinating time to be there.

British interests in Greece and the relevance of NATO 1977-80

MM What were your main interests in Greece?

OM They were mainly related to the international scene as I have described. They were to do with avoiding war between Greece and Turkey, to try to find a solution to the Cyprus problem and in those days, of course, there was also, because it was cold war time, a constant fear that Greece was a less than loyal member of NATO and was liable to get into bed with Bulgaria or wherever. Somewhat exaggerated fears I think but there was some basis to it and people in London tended to have, and in Washington even worse, a very blinkered view because nobody really knew or stopped to think about what the Greeks were actually interested in, what they were driving at, and I think the key to understanding it was that the threat to Greece's security as they saw it was exclusively Turkish. They were never really worried about a threat from Moscow or the Warsaw pact or anything like that. They were

almost solely concerned with Turkey. Therefore they found it extremely frustrating that NATO, which is supposed to provide each member state with an absolute guarantee of its security in the sense that an attack on France is regarded by Britain as being the equivalent of an attack on Britain, we have just as much an obligation to respond as we would to defend ourselves. There is one big exception to this which is that it doesn't apply within NATO itself. If you are attacked by another member of the alliance it just doesn't arise. So NATO gives Greece no protection whatsoever from an attack by Turkey. That's the way the Greeks saw it. The logic of that might mean that you would leave NATO, and that's what Andreas Papandreou wanted to do. But on the other hand if you leave NATO, then you leave Turkey as an ally of the United States and you are isolated, so that is not very sensible. So they hang on in NATO very much against the grain. They don't see anything in it for them. I can understand that and I can remember during the period we are talking about my colleague in the American embassy said to me one day I hope you are coming to the big lecture they had organised. They had brought in some real old timer, a retired American ambassador, who was going to give a lecture on NATO. He gave the lecture on NATO and afterwards my American friend said to me what do you think of it? I said I thought it was absolutely terrible. It's clearly a lecture he has given in any number of NATO capitals. He didn't once mention Greece and he didn't once mention Turkey. It was all about Washington and Moscow. The Greeks aren't interested in that. It simply confirmed them in their view that NATO was entirely irrelevant to their concerns.

MM Do you think there was any risk that the Greeks played up the Bulgarians against the Turks? Was that the danger there?

Implications of Britain's historical legacy

OM Not really. I don't think so because in the first place Turkey is by local standards almost a superpower, militarily speaking. They were very much stronger. Of course, they were capable of making a complete mess of things. Their invasion of Cyprus was a demonstration of that. The invasion of Cyprus was full of the most ghastly military foul-ups, sinking their own ships and that sort of stuff, but nevertheless they're streets ahead of the competition in terms of simple fire power. So no, I think the danger was always simply that misunderstanding and distrust and deliberate misrepresentation would turn small incidents

into big incidents and big incidents into war, and that nearly happened once or twice. Right at the end of my time in Greece as ambassador in 1996 there was an incident which was public at the time, everyone heard about it, involving a place the Greeks called Imya, the Turks called Kardak, and it is actually some islands, or rather just rocks which are on the line between Greece and Turkish waters in the eastern part of the Aegean and there was a flare-up there. It was a little bit like the Falklands story. It started off with a pretty rusty old Turkish freighter running aground on one of these rocks and they were promptly rescued by either the Greek or Turkish coastguard, but which ever way round it was it was fine and everyone was happy but then some people woke up to the implications on both sides and started to claim infringements of territorial waters and so on. It must have been a Greek coastguard who came and rescued them. Both sides said this was wrong and there was an exchange of diplomatic notes between the two governments which were pretty inflammatory but confidential. But then it went public and the next thing that happened was a leading newspaper in Istanbul, I think it was Hurriyet, organised a stunt and sent out a boatload of Turks who hoisted the Turkish flag on one of these rocks. The Greek mayor of Kalymnos, an adjoining inhabited Greek island, promptly sent a boat out which pulled the Turkish flag down and put the Greek one up. And so the fat was really in the fire. There was a real war scare, and both sides sent aircraft and ships to this tiny little area. The possibility of something going wrong by mistake was absolutely enormous. It was my last bit of effective diplomacy because I was instructed by the Foreign Office, which was probably the February of 1996, or maybe January 1996 just before I retired, to go round and bang the table and tell the Greek foreign minister that he had got to make sure they pulled their forces back. We were doing the same thing in Ankara. And they did. It wasn't just the British who did it, we did it jointly with some of the allies, I don't know exactly which ones but about four of us did it and it involved getting hold of the foreign minister at 4 o'clock in the morning and reading the riot act. It wasn't well received at the time but it had to be done and it worked, it was effective, but it was a nasty moment. There could have been a really shocking war, certainly an outbreak of fighting for nothing at all. It was an interesting illustration of one of the difficulties of British diplomacy in the region which is that, I am skipping on now to 1996, after this little incident began to blow up both the Greeks and the Turks appealed to their allies to support them. And needless to say the allies ran like hell and tried to avoid supporting either side and said it is up to you chaps to sort this out. The Greeks appealed to

us to confirm that these rocks, tiny little islets, were on the Greek side of the line in the Aegean. We said no, this is up to you and the Turks to sort out. We are not responsible for the line. They said yes you are, and they produced the basis on which their frontier is determined, which is a treaty sometime in the 1920s between Italy, which was then occupying the Dodecanese islands in the eastern Aegean, and Turkey, which defined the line. And attached to the treaty is, guess what, a British admiralty chart. So we were caught. We are the people who actually drew up the charts for the whole of the Mediterranean and indeed most of the world as well. It is very difficult, faced with that, to say, 'It's no good troubling us, we have no idea where these places are.' There it is. You have drawn a line. You have put it on that side of the line, why won't you stand up in public and say so? Coming back to what we were saying a long time ago about the Balfour declaration, if you work, especially in the area where I spent most of my life in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, you have to accept that we are part of its history. You can't get away from that. Nowadays people think either that it is all nonsense and is forgotten, or they think, even worse, this is something which only self-important people in the Foreign Office attach any meaning to, and nobody else gives a damn. They are so wrong. Everybody else in the Mediterranean knows very well where Nelson was and where Napoleon was and all the rest of it. And Nelson ended up on top and Napoleon ended up underneath so we actually carry most of the responsibility. That goes for problem after problem after problem. You can't get away from the British historical legacy.

MM That is why it is so important to record it.

OM Yes.

MM Well, that was a fascinating period.

Return to the Foreign Office as Head of NENAD.

MM And you came back to be head of NENAD (North East and North Africa Department).

OM That's right, in 1980. And that was really a wonderful job. A Foreign Office Head of

Department job, I think still now, but certainly in those days, had a lot of responsibility. Because he somehow was at the intermediate point. Below him there are people who know the individual problems very well but don't have the access to senior people, and above him there are senior people who have to take decisions but don't have the detailed knowledge of each little locality. And it is the Head of Department who traditionally is the kind of hinge on which that turns. If you read the British diplomatic history from the nineteenth century onwards you will see constantly that it was the Head of Middle East Department or Head of French Department or whatever it was, who is the man to whom the Foreign Secretary actually turned when he needed an answer. I remember Roger Tomkys, who was my predecessor in the job, saying to me when he was handing over to me, you will find the really alarming thing about this job is that you will go into the office in the morning and you will be facing something new, something has blown up in your area, and you will think 'what do we do now?' You will prepare a paper and put it up to a minister and by the end of the day you find that what you wrote is now British policy. That's the worrying bit. And it is quite true. It was a very exciting, very difficult task. The Foreign Office traditionally has two Middle Eastern departments, one is called Middle East Department, the other is called Near East and North African Department. The dividing line essentially is that Middle East Department used to deal with Arabia and Iraq, the Gulf and Iran, and my Department dealt with the Mediterranean Arab states, so that is Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt and North Africa. So when we weren't worrying about the Palestine problem we were worrying about Libya, or whatever. And there was always something pretty exciting going on. It was a really good, fun job. You felt you were where the action was, which was nice. A lot of very good people worked for me there. The world is full of chaps who used to work for me in NENAD and I am very proud of the little finishing school I used to run. People like Jeremy Greenstock and John Holmes and Steven Lander who ended up as Head of MI5, and all sorts of people like that who were feeding me their ideas at one time.

MM is there anything further you want to say about it?

Political co-operation in practice

OM About NENAD? Probably not. I could go on about it. One thing is just worth a

paragraph. In those days it was called political co-operation, which was working with the European partners, and one of our tasks was to provide someone, sometimes me sometimes someone from the Department under me to attend probably monthly meetings of so-called Middle East experts. In those days it used to rotate round the capitals of the Nine, or perhaps it was the Ten, I'm not sure. So one six month period it would be Dublin and another six month period it would be in The Hague and so on. And that was new to me and interesting. One thing about it, for example, was the language problem which in those days, and I think still, we solved by a sort of stratagem which was to say the working languages at this level of co-operation were English and French and nothing was ever translated between English and French so you can speak or write a paper, certainly a paper in either of the two languages which worked all right after a fashion but certainly some of us didn't have all that much French, not me. I can manage in French but it's not my speciality, and I can't really express myself fully in French on a technical subject, and it was worse of course for the people who were neither English nor French. If you have a German, for example, or a Swede or a Dutchman or a Belgian, unless he was a very Flemish Belgian he could probably speak French, but to expect them to be entirely fluent and happy in two foreign languages doesn't leave much room for regional expertise. If you then expect them to understand what is going on in Egypt it is asking an awful lot. So that was one of the problems, but we managed. Also I remember Julian Bullard who was the Political Director at the time, a very senior ambassador who was in charge of all this side of the office, saying to me once, Political Co-operation is like a cheap screwdriver. It is something I have always remembered. It is actually a useful analogy for other areas of life as well. He said, if you have a simple problem the simple screwdriver deals with it perfectly satisfactorily, it works. If you have a really difficult problem to deal with, don't even try because you will not only ruin the screw, you will ruin the screwdriver. And you could see that that was actually how Political Co-operation worked. We solved the easy problems.

MM This was while you were in London as Head of NENAD. So who did you have Political Co-operation with?

OM By this time we were in the European Union. I think it was called the European Economic Community at the time, so we were dealing with the Germans, the French, the

Dutch, the Italians, the Belgians, the Luxembourgers...

MM At the embassies?

OM No. They would also be attending meetings, probably once a month, which were called the Middle East working group. We would meet in our presidency, in London, and then somebody else's presidency and then we would report both to foreign offices in our own capitals and also to the political directors who met at a more senior level than us, and also had this sort of international agenda. This did have reality when we had a problem which was very much high up on the agenda, as for example when I was at NENAD in the Lebanon civil war. When you had a problem about, say, European participation in the multi-national force or something like that, it was very valuable to have an opportunity to make sure that we were all at least starting from a common basis of facts and so on. We used to circulate a lot of information, until the problems became too difficult and then we would kick them upstairs.

MM That's an interesting sidelight on life in London.

OM Yes. And it was new of course. There had always been meetings with other powers, always contact between the Middle Eastern side of the Foreign Office and the Middle Eastern side of the State Department or the Quai or the Auswärtiges Amt or whatever. And one of the even more interesting things I did while I was in NENAD was to go with an under-secretary for bi-lateral talks with the Russians, or I should say with the Soviets. That I think was 1982, and that was very interesting and rather embarrassing because I found we agreed with them on practically everything.

MM With the Soviets?

OM The Soviets. They had such a sensible view of the Middle East and it coincided with ours. We had to fall back on Afghanistan to find an area where we really properly disagreed.

MM That has an historic background to it as well.

OM Yes. I remember there had been a story in the press that Gaddafi had just been to Moscow, and had spent nine hours with President Brezhnev. Eventually I had an opportunity to collar my opposite number, the Head of the North African Department in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, and I asked him if it was true that Gaddafi had spent nine hours with President Brezhnev and he said yes, it was but it wasn't my fault!

Appointment as ambassador to Libya in 1984

MM After NENAD you went out to be ambassador in Tripoli.

OM That's right. And that was short but exciting. I was only there for four months or so.

MM Was that all?

OM Yes. I had been to Libya once or twice during my tenure at NENAD so I knew what sort of place to expect, but it was very exciting for me, because it was my first job as ambassador. That's very heavy. It's like the navy, being captain of a ship, you are really for the first time doing what you have been trained to do. Secondly, Libya was a very unpredictable, exciting place, which seemed at the time to offer lots of snakes and lots of ladders. When I went out there in January 1984 the ladders seemed to be in the ascendant. We thought that we had got over some of the very nasty problems we had faced in the previous years, and we were perhaps in line for some decent work together. For example, on the one hand I had managed to get some British prisoners out of Libya which was good, some chaps who had been locked up for various things. On the other hand, I had a mammoth programme which I was just beginning to put together for improving English language teaching in Libyan universities and schools with an input from the British Council. The British Council had in fact been kicked out of Libya. There were also commercial tasks. All of that seemed to be going OK and then we suddenly had this disastrous news from London that a police woman had been shot outside the Libyan offices in St James's Square.

MM 1984 was it?

OM 1984.

MM So that why you were only...

OM That's why I was only there for a short time. And very soon after that, within a couple of days I think, I got instructions to break off diplomatic relations with the Libyans, which I did. We gave them a week to get out of London and of course they gave us a week to get out of Tripoli. It was a real scramble and very difficult. But fun, it wasn't frightening. In the end we came out of it unscathed but it was very, very tense and difficult.

MM How did you come out?

OM I flew. What happened was that, as we realised afterwards the Libyans were controlling us because they were afraid of what was going to happen to their people in London. And once the families of their people in London were allowed to leave our families were allowed to leave and that was one day. We all went down to the airport and I said good bye to my wife and kids and the other embassy wives and their kids and waved them off. Then the following day we all left and we went home together leaving behind two heroic members of my staff who had volunteered to stay on to run the British interests section in the Italian embassy, which was very good of them.

MM What happened to all your possessions?

OM In the end it was all right. We weren't sure what was going to happen. What's supposed to happen is that you appoint what is called a protecting power, which means another friendly power which looks after your interests, provided there is agreement to do so of course. There are some stories to tell about that as well, but the Libyans elected to have Saudi Arabia as their protecting power in London and we elected Italy as our protecting power. So what we had to do essentially was to hand over our property, including both embassy property and personal property to the Italians for them to take under their protection. The reality was slightly different in that there was a lot of stuff, and stocks of perishables. We all had freezers full of food, so we had to get rid of all that. We had diplomatic colleagues round

queuing up for steaks and things, not to mention booze, which was another problem because it was technically illegal and so we couldn't just hand it over or sell it on the market, so to speak. You had to pass it on to diplomatic colleagues or leave some for the Interests section, which was all right. The Libyans were very decent about that in that they didn't try to complicate things. But we were very worried that the British embassy might be burned down because the Libyans had a record of burning down embassies after they broke off diplomatic relations, and of course there were a lot of, not precious things but valuable things in the embassy like furniture and so on. So we went to great lengths to move as much of that as we could physically out of the building, although the building was supposed to remain under protection, and pass them on to diplomatic colleagues who took them for safe keeping. Actually that was all wasted effort because the Libyans behaved impeccably and they never interfered with anything that was in the building. The stuff had to be trundled back again later on. But at the time we felt it would be wrong to leave the grand piano for the Libyans. I remember making a huge effort to get down two enormous portraits of King Edward the seventh and his Queen from our main hall. When we got them off the wall we discovered they were actually too big to go out through the front door, so we had to put them back on the wall, but they were all right. They are still there. I have seen them. So all that was a bit trivial but tense, fraught, at the time. The worst part was that as soon as the news came through from London about the killing, it was more or less midday in Libya, and we discovered that the Libyans weren't allowing us to leave our building. And this of course was because the Metropolitan police had surrounded the Libyan offices in St James's Square and they weren't allowing anybody to leave their building. So we were under siege and that remained the situation until the following morning. So I was stuck in the embassy all night with all my staff, and a couple of kids and the wife of my consul who happened to have been visiting the consul, so we had one family on board. But my family, my wife and kids and all the other families were all stuck in their houses and also under house arrest as it were and that was nasty. The Libyans had quite a poor record. They had burned buildings down. When they burned down the Jordanian embassy they did supply a ladder for the ambassador to get out so that wasn't too bad. But they didn't burn us down in the end. And I take some credit for that because I managed to persuade the BBC to let me give a little chat on the World Service, which I knew Gaddafi would listen to, about diplomatic immunity and how buildings are part of the system and are protected, their office in London would be looked

after even though diplomatic relations had been broken off and eventually no doubt it would be handed back to the Libyans in due course if and when relations were restored. I said that I assumed the same would be true of Britain and our building would be treated with proper respect, and it was. There was a nasty moment when, after the staff had left the London office, the police went in and they found the machine gun, the sub machine gun which had been used for the murder, so the Libyans promptly found a machine gun in our office, naturally. The guy who had volunteered to stay behind as the Head of the Interests Section was actually interviewed that afternoon live on television by some western correspondent who said I hear the Libyans have found a gun in the British embassy, although your ambassador said before he left there were no weapons there. Have you got any comments? He said "Paul Daniels couldn't have done it better." You will have to write down who Paul Daniels was because future generations won't know and I don't think the Libyan secret service knew either.

MM He is some kind of stage magician.

OM That's right. Yes, he was weekly fare, he was a conjurer, he was up on the television more often than one could believe, and did very good tricks.

Contact with Colonel Gaddafi

MM Did you see Gaddafi?

OM Not much, I did a bit. But he didn't like ambassadors. He did have to deal with ambassadors sometimes. He never really had to deal with me as it happened because I was there for such a short time. I made a point of asking all my diplomatic colleagues about their personal relations with Gaddafi and of course some of them would be a bit cagey but some of them told me their stories and the fact was it was obvious he kept it to an absolute minimum, and if he was pushed then he would dream up some very Gaddafi-like method of doing it. For example, Libyan relations with France at that time were in very bad shape. They were almost at war in Chad, both sides were backing opposite sides in the civil war in Chad and one day Gaddafi wanted to talk to the French ambassador so Mrs Gaddafi rang up the French

ambassador's wife and asked whether she could come round to tea. So, somewhat mystified, the French ambassador's wife said of course she was very welcome to come to tea and she did. And while they were having tea who should arrive but hubby who said I have got a message for your husband, could you possibly deliver it? It's a strange country. I didn't have any real personal contact with Gadaffi apart from very formal contact, handshakes and so on. A very limited amount of conversation.

MM When you did have conversation did you talk to him in Arabic?

OM Yes, but his Arabic is spoken with a strong Libyan dialect, and in the short time I was in Libya I didn't really get properly, I did try but I didn't properly get to grips with the dialect. So that was a problem, and I think it is a problem for many people. I think many visitors find him difficult and I think many Arabs find him difficult for that reason.

MM A jolly interesting interlude. What did you do next?

Interlude at the United Nations in 1984

OM After I left Libya I did a short spell in London doing some miscellaneous jobs, a bit of tidying up after Libya but mainly other things, and then I went to New York for a short spell. I went to join the United Nations mission, the UK mission to the United Nations, I should say, as a supernumerary which was convenient because I had the gorgeous rank of ambassador. In New York the UK mission has the problem that they have to talk to 150 or something ambassadors and the boss can't do them all the time so they normally have at least two people with the rank of ambassador but an additional hand is always welcome. I got mixed up in things like the general assembly debate on the Falklands, and so on. I had never dealt with the United Nations before and really it is something that diplomats have to have some knowledge of. It was a good education for me, but that was only for a few months.

Posting to Luxembourg as ambassador

And then after that I went to Luxembourg as ambassador which was a bit of a change. It was

again a very good learning experience for me because I had never worked in a Western European capital before and Luxembourg is actually a Western European capital. Some people think that Luxembourg is some kind of joke, like tiny states like the Vatican or San Marino but it isn't actually. Luxembourg is just big enough to be a fully working state and they do have their own political parties, their trade union movement, their industry and their problems and so on. It is more like a city than a state but it is a state. So that was quite interesting. I was there for three years. There is not very much to do but on the other hand we had a very small staff so you end up doing a bit of everything and that was all right. I enjoyed that in a way, it was quiet, also a bit dull but it was a learning experience. One of the things I did in my spare time was to join a band, which was rather entertaining. It was a village band, or I should say a town band from a town called Echternach, which was down on the Moselle. We used to play at the Luxembourg equivalent of village fetes and so on. All the other members of the band were local chaps from Echternach. Our leader was a retired colonel, commanded the Luxembourg contingent in the Korean war, and we had a butcher and a postman, and a couple of school masters and they had me. The really amazing part of the story, which subsequent generations are not going to believe, is that somebody had the bright idea that we should go on tour. We did a tour of Florida as a Luxembourg band. I took some leave from the Foreign Office and I went and toured Florida with the Luxembourg band. And I bet not many people can say they have done that.

MM What did you play?

OM The flute. It doesn't really fit into what is technically known as an oom pah, oom pah band but they were very kind and said I could play my flute. We even played at Disney World at Orlando in Florida, which was the high point of our cultural experience.

MM Well, it shows that you were accepted into Luxembourg society.

OM Yes, that is exactly right and of course that is one of the things that is difficult for an ambassador, because people tend to tell you what they think you want to hear, and there is a lot to be said for breaking out a bit, not that I got any vital political intelligence out of the local postman, but you end up understanding the country, understanding what it is all about,

and you hear the stories that people don't normally tell you. For example, you know that Luxembourg is the home of some very important European institutions. They have the European Investment Bank, one of the buildings of the European parliament, the European Court of Justice and so on. I was told the story of how this came about. Back in 1951, or whenever the whole story started, there was a meeting of the Six to be, and they were discussing the question of where the institutions would be and of course the French were absolutely determined that they wouldn't be in Germany, and the Germans were absolutely determined that they wouldn't be in France and Joseph Bech, who was then the prime minister of Luxembourg listened quietly to this conversation and eventually said I'm sure we could find somewhere for you in Luxembourg. And they said, right, done. And the Coal and Steel Community was set up in Luxembourg. The ECSC no longer exists but the institutions that do exist are the legacy, if you like. What Bech had forgotten was that he hadn't spoken to the Archbishop. Luxembourg is a very strongly Catholic country and the Archbishop in those days was, and still is to a certain extent, a big factor. He rang up the Archbishop at three o'clock in the morning from some God forsaken place like Brussels and said, Your Eminence, I have good news for you, and he told him the news and the Archbishop said, how do you mean good news, all these Protestants coming to Luxembourg, it sounds to me like a thoroughly bad idea. And Bech had to spend the next hour or two soothing the Archbishop.

MM What language do they speak?

OM There is a language called Letzerburgisch, which is actually, in linguistic terms, a dialect of High German, but it has become separate from Germany because of French borrowing. Luxembourg in Napoleonic times was part of France. Although the Luxembourgers can still understand Germans from places like Bitburg, just across the border, who speak in a heavy dialect, the people from Bitburg can't really understand the Luxembourgers. So they do in effect have a language of their own and they all speak it, all of them I am told. And I have heard them speak it and they do it quite unselfconsciously but they all speak German, and they virtually all speak French as well, and most of the educated classes speak English and quite a lot speak other languages as well, so it is an interesting example of how, depending upon the environment you are brought up in, the number of languages you speak can be totally flexible. But Letzerburgisch is the ordinary language of

communication between them. It's not very much written down, there aren't any newspapers published in Letzerburgisch, the local newspapers are in German or French. I once asked my brother-in-law, a lexicographer, whether there was any technical distinction between a language and a dialect. Is Letzerburgisch a language or a dialect? He said that there isn't really a technical distinction but there is a well known aphorism, which I think probably goes back to Napoleon, to the effect that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. And on that basis Luxembourg is halfway there because they have an army but not a navy. I once happened to be in London with the Luxembourg Foreign Minister and the secretary general of the Foreign Ministry, the senior official under him, who were of course good friends and I knew them both well. They both spoke virtually perfect English and French and I normally communicated with them in English. When we came back on the aeroplane they were chatting about what we had been doing in London and then chatting about personal things and so on and they kept on slipping into Letzerburgisch and apologising to me saying sorry we should be speaking English. They would talk in English for a minute or two and then slip back into Letzerburgisch.

MM So a very interesting three years.

OM Yes it was. Very educational and very interesting but in a very placid, calm sort of way.

MM So a rest after Tripoli.

Stint with the Home Civil Service in Belfast 1988-90

OM And then after that I talked it through with my wife, I seriously put in for a home posting and they gave me one in Belfast.

MM Ah yes, of course, after Luxembourg. I was hoping you were going to come onto that. So you came back to London and they rewarded you with Belfast.

OM I was asked to go to Belfast, which of course is not a foreign country so it is a bit of an odd ball as far as the Diplomatic Service is concerned. The reason that they needed someone

in Belfast was essentially to do with the relationship between Britain and the Republic of Ireland but the specific reason was that under the Anglo-Irish agreement, which had been signed about two years before, an arrangement was set up which was in effect a permanent conference involving the Irish foreign minister, the Tanaiste, and the Northern Ireland secretary. So a British minister and an Irish minister had a regular direct line of communication and this was as a result of the agreement signed between Margaret Thatcher and Garrett Fitzgerald a couple of years before. As part of this set-up there was a permanent secretariat in Belfast and this was headed by a British and an Irish ambassador, who worked jointly to run this secretariat. I was the second incumbent on the British side, so it was already running and I came into it to do that job. But that wasn't the only job I was given. I was given another role and subsequently a third role as well. The second role was the obvious one as part of the staff of the Northern Ireland Office, in particular trying to understand and advise the Secretary of State on political affairs in Northern Ireland and also to some extent in the whole of Ireland, although we had the embassy in Dublin who were primarily responsible for that. The third role which I got involved in after I had been there for about a year was to run a group which was trying to co-ordinate the public relations or propaganda if you want to put it that way of the Northern Ireland Office, the army and the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary). I can tell you herding cats is nothing to making politicians, military and police speak with one voice in Northern Ireland. It was a very difficult job indeed. But the primary job was the one I spoke about at the beginning, being joint head of the secretariat. The background of course was that the Northern Ireland agreement was very unpopular in Northern Ireland with the Protestant majority community. It was unpopular to the point that it had been the cause of very large public demonstrations and indeed threats of violence from the loyalist paramilitaries. So we had a severe security problem and we lived in effect in a bunker. At least my Irish colleague lived in a bunker. I lived in relatively civilised circumstances but under a great deal of strain and constantly under threat, so it was quite a tense and difficult role. I think it was really the most difficult job I have done. That's partly down to the Northern Irish people who, much as I love them, are extremely hard headed people, and, of course, the closer you are to a problem the more the factor we have already discussed about the British heritage and so on clicks in, and the British are held responsible by the people in Northern Ireland for everything that goes wrong. And the Foreign Office are worse than the British, and the Anglo-Irish agreement is the worst of the

lot.

MM Did they take steps to identify you as either Protestant or Catholic?

OM No they didn't, strangely enough. That was always a bit of a puzzle to me. I am actually a Roman Catholic.

MM I thought they would have been on to that immediately.

OM Well, it is very odd. I made a point of never volunteering to anybody what my religion was and to my surprise nobody asked me. I thought either they looked it up and they knew, because after all if you look in Who's Who and see that I went to Ampleforth it is pretty obvious that I at least used to be a Roman Catholic. I am still as it happens. But then I realised that it wasn't so, actually they didn't know and they didn't care. Eventually, I said to one of my Northern Irish friends, I'm really amazed that nobody has ever asked me this question, I've been waiting for somebody to ask me, nobody has even asked me. And he said, the English are different, we just assume you are all Anglicans. It doesn't make any difference to us, you can be what you like. And I realised that there was this curious phenomenon in Northern Ireland that in local terms people work on the assumption that if you are a Protestant you are a Unionist, and if you are a Catholic you are a Republican. They know perfectly well that it doesn't apply in the South. There are Protestant Republicans. There aren't so many now because there aren't so many Protestants in the South but the history of Irish nationalism is full of Protestants, including some of the most extreme Republicans. In Northern Ireland there is a kind of fundamental assumption that the political communities are identified by their religions. You get exceptions. A famous one is Brian Keenan, who was an Irish Protestant, but an Irish nationalist, and maybe that is why he left Belfast and went to Beirut. It is very difficult to be both an Irish Protestant and an Irish nationalist in Belfast. But that was a difficult job. The Anglo-Irish agreement part of it, the British ambassador Irish ambassador part of it, was in a sense straightforward, it was the job I was trained to do, I was just once again dealing with the range of problems that exist in all countries using normal diplomatic methods. My Irish counterpart was a very professional and excellent representative of his country and I wrestled with these problems to try to

control, try to keep them in hand, try to make sure our ministers didn't do anything stupid and so on, in the way that diplomats always do. But it was very hard. Tom King was my first Secretary of State and Peter Brooke was the second one. I was there for both of them, totally different men. In a way I liked them both and admired them both. According to their lights they did a good job. They were utterly different. Tom King is an extraordinarily inconsiderate man, and considering what a nice man he is, and considering what a straightforward and good man in many ways he is, astonishingly unaware of other people's needs. For example, the minister of state that we had most of the time I was there, I think it was John Cope, had a dreadful hip problem and was in severe pain if he ever had to sit still for more than 20 minutes. I don't think Tom ever noticed. You would go into his office, I would go into his office, summoned for some meeting or other, and outside you would see all the most senior civil servants in the Northern Ireland civil service sitting around waiting. Because he had no idea of keeping time, everything would just slip and slip, they would wait for hours and hours and waste their day. It was tawdry. As I say, from my point of view in many ways I admired him. Peter Brooke was absolutely the opposite. A complete gent, a really nice person to work for and a very subtle mind too.

MM He needed one.

Return to the Foreign Office to deal with Export Promotion 1990-91

OM I don't know if there is anything else you would care to talk about, a bit out of the ordinary for the ordinary Foreign Office experience. When I had done a couple of years in Northern Ireland, I came back and was offered the Under-Secretary job dealing with the economic and commercial side of the Foreign Office. It was quickly transformed because for a long time there had been discussion about how to improve collaboration between the Foreign Office and the Department of Trade and Industry in connection with trade promotion. Essentially the system is that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has its people overseas and is responsible for commercial offices in all our missions around the world including consulates and the DTI has its staff in London dealing with the same subject and also has offices around the United Kingdom, under its own name in England, but using, at that time Welsh Office, Scottish Office, Northern Ireland Office in the other three

territories. Although there had been reasonable collaboration between these two sort of arms, it was always a source of problems and many attempts had been made to sort it out. The relationship between trade promotion and trade diplomacy and the other forms of diplomacy, political work, has always been a problem and nobody has found a really perfect solution to it yet. The solution that we tried was to set up something called the joint directorate, which was staffed from both departments. I was the first head of the joint directorate. I was strictly speaking listed as an under-secretary both in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and in the DTI reporting to different Secretaries of State. My job was to try to bang heads together and make sure people in the British commercial office in Düsseldorf and in the Department of Trade office in Leicester were speaking to each other, and on the whole I think we made some progress. It was a curiously un-political job if you like, in the sense that most of my work had been political. This was administrative. But it was fascinating. I have always enjoyed export promotion. Some people do and some people don't. It has its own fascination, it's desperately trying to catch a fish, and when you do it's very exciting...

MM ...and somebody else claims all the credit...

OM That always happens. Another reason why it was rather an interesting job from my point of view was that I took the opportunity of travelling a hell of a lot. I was always away. I visited our trade offices in obvious places like New York and Tokyo, and less obvious places like St Petersburg and all sorts. And that was very interesting and I think useful. Trying to make sure the system we thought we were operating from London actually worked. One has one's moments. I remember going to a trade fair in Hong Kong - I ended up going to visit a chap who was manufacturing artificial limbs, it might have been in Bournemouth, I went into his office and he said, are you from the DTI? And I said yes, and he said why don't you just put all the papers you have brought in that cupboard, because that's where I always put them, and then bugger off. So I said, I'm not really from the DTI anyway, and I have come to talk to you. And I pushed him and pushed him and eventually he said he had a problem that he thought I could help with. He said he had a so-called agent in Hong Kong who was totally useless as far as he could make out and he couldn't get any sense out of anybody. The agent was supposed to be selling his limbs but he suspected he was selling them half way across China. He didn't mind provided he paid for them and he gave me some

specific questions. This was in the days before email. I got on the train back to the office in London, managed to get there just before closing time, and sent a FAX to the office in Hong Kong. The next morning I came in and there was a FAX in reply. I rang up my friend in the artificial limb business and said, 'you remember you asked me about this yesterday afternoon? Well, here is the answer...' And he practically fell into his..... it was a good moment.

MM I think the whole problem about export promotion is that British factories just weren't producing stuff.

OM There is a lot in that, yes. And of course you can't solve things that aren't there, you can't...

MM You can't sell financial services either.

OM Well, you can up to a point but there are limits.

MM ... export services can do for exporters.

OM Yes, I acquired a lot of experience with this in my last post actually which I will come to in a minute, but when I was in Greece as ambassador export promotion was a different sort of job, it's less technical and it becomes more political. In some ways of course you get a good overview, and one of the things that you also find you are doing is, at least in this day and age, collaborating with people who would sometimes be your opponents. So, for example, I have actually worked jointly with a French ambassador to try to promote an Anglo-French product. That gives me a good story to tell when people say, oh, the French are so much better at this than we are, why can't we do what the French do, to which my reply is I know damn well what the French do and they have the same problems as we have. And on the whole their methods are the same as ours. You find people put unreasonable demands on government and some you can meet and others you can't. I met a champagne salesman once who told me that the French government was totally useless at promoting champagne around the world, and I said that surprises me, give me an example. He said,

would you believe it they didn't do anything in Mexico until we went and actually asked them to - I thought, I have some sympathy with the French government.

So that was a couple of peaceful years and by that time we had moved to Oxford and it was nice to be able to have some idea what time you were going to catch the train in the evening, instead of the usual political department where you really had no idea at all. That's one of the drawbacks. I was busy, there was plenty to do but most of it wasn't classified and that's a blessing because one of the problems of working in the Foreign Office in my day and I think it is still is that you can't take work home on the whole so once you are out of the door you can't use time on the train to work. But in export promotion you can.

Inward Investment in Britain

MM What about inward investment? Did you have anything to do with that?

OM Yes I did. Not absolutely directly, it wasn't so to speak part of my empire but of course it has similar problems. I mentioned that I went to Tokyo and I remember going to a meeting in Tokyo of an inward investment meeting which the economic counsellor of the embassy used to hold every month to bring in all the people in Tokyo who were trying to sell projects, to attract inward investment into projects and equipment, and obviously he had the DTI there, he had the Welsh Office, the Scottish Office, and the Northern Ireland Office but somewhat less obviously to me he also had the East Kent Promotion Office and the Nottingham Promotion Office and they were all competing with each other of course, fighting like cats. And his job was to say well look, calm down chaps, don't steal each other's business. By all means steal business from the French and the Germans but don't steal from each other because I am supposed to be supporting all of you. Yes, we did get involved in that to some extent. And that of course was a big success story, and remains a success story. Britain for a variety of reasons, and only one of them is to do with the government, has attracted a huge amount of investment.

Export Promotion seminar in Russia

One of the exciting things I must just boast about that I did during this time was to go to Moscow a couple of times and I actually gave a seminar in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations on export promotion. Because they had said they were interested in the way we did it and we were ceasing at that time to be antagonistic, trying to find ways of collaborating. I speak Russian. I learned Russian when I was in the Navy before I ever joined the Service, and I discovered that there was an ICI man in Moscow who spoke good Russian, and of course there was a chap in the commercial department in the embassy who spoke Russian. The three of us ran a seminar together on how to promote exports. And it was quite a touching occasion because it was quite difficult to set up and there was a certain amount of obstruction from the Soviet side and at the end of the afternoon when we had finished doing the seminar, the man who was responsible in the Soviet ministry, who were our hosts so to speak, who had been quite difficult, said to me, 'I want all three of you to come to my office before you leave.' I said, 'Sorry, we can't, we have got to go back to the embassy. You are all coming to a reception there this evening we will see you later on.' 'No,' he said, 'You must come to my office now.' So we went to his office and he gave us all some rather ghastly sort of ministry calendars and things and he said, 'I just wouldn't want you to leave the ministry without my telling you how emotional I found this occasion. Here we are talking like ordinary people, like friends instead of what we have all lived through.' And I was pretty impressed.

MM Yes, the Russians are unusual.

Ambassador in Greece 1993-96

OM ...After that I was watching the clock so to speak because I knew that I was coming towards retirement, by this time I was 56, rising 57 and the Foreign Office kick you out when you are 60 and as a general rule of thumb won't send you to an ambassadorial job for less than three years. So I was beginning to wonder whether I would miss my chance of getting a more senior ambassadorial job but, bless him, Michael Jenkins, who was the ambassador in The Hague, decided to take early retirement to take a lucrative job in the City. David Miers was posted from Athens to The Hague and lo and behold a gap appeared into which I stepped. So I got the job in Athens. And that was a wonderful way to end my career because

I'd already got a good grasp of the language from Cyprus and my earlier time in Greece, I already knew a lot of the personalities, the geography and history from my earlier time in Athens. It's not just that the Greeks are keener on ambassadors than they are on people further down the line but I found I was really flying, it was fun. My wife and children enjoyed it too. It was a great ending to my career and I did have nearly three years. I retired on my 60th birthday.

I've already mentioned one of the political problems I ended up with. More generally, when I came back to Greece I found that Greece had been through a very bad period in the intervening three, four or five years before I came back. The economy and the political scene were a mess. There was a very discredited conservative government in power. Mitsotakis, a nice man, was the prime minister, a Cretan and a traditional friend of the British from Second World War times when he was involved in working with the British in the resistance. But the government was falling to bits and was very unpopular. Then there was an election and in came PASOK, which is the socialist party in Greece. Democratic socialist but well to the left of the Labour party, they are very pink socialists led by Andreas Papandreou, who by this time was really past it, to put it bluntly. But still very popular in Greece, because of a huge amount of charisma. He spent most of the time whilst I was there shamefully disposing of his family life, getting rid of his wife of 40 years and marrying an air hostess who was regarded with a mixture of amazement and revulsion by most Greeks. The whole thing was pretty unsavoury. And the old boy was getting more and more to the end of his time. He died just before I left. The last thing I had to do was write to the Foreign Office with my wise assessment of the incoming prime minister Costas Simitis, who was the man who actually brought Greece back from all the mess and got their economy into order, got their relations with Turkey into some kind of order, got them into the Euro, against the odds, got the Olympic games for Greece, made a bit of a mess of the preparations but it seems to have worked out in the end and was altogether very good news. In a very un-Greek sort of a way, a very quiet man and very unpretentious, doesn't have any social graces, a perfectly sociable man but not at all flamboyant or ostentatious, a complete opposite to his predecessor. He had a lot of difficulty keeping his team in order, but did so for a period of 7 or 8 years, something like that. Eventually defeated fair and square by a Conservative government under young Karamanlis, Costakis Karamanlis, the present prime minister whom I know slightly because

one of the good traditions we had in Greece, right back to the 1970s when I was first there, was that somebody in the political section of the embassy every month used to have open house with lunch for Members of Parliament. The Greeks like that. They enjoyed it. They used to come to meet their political opponents and talk freely around the table. And we used to get everybody, the communists and the near fascists (there weren't any real fascists), the main parties and so on, and as a result we got to know future prime ministers and lots of people. That was one of the pleasures of working in an open society with a democratic system, which you can't do, of course, in many of the countries I worked in.

MM Indeed. They have achieved so much under the present government comparatively recently. How do you think they managed to get themselves ready for the Euro?

OM It's an amazing achievement. Of course the Greeks are very capable people. They are disorganised collectively but individually they are very capable indeed. They've got lots of talent as entrepreneurs. For example, the Greek presence in the world shipping industry is something quite extraordinary. And so they managed, for once, to harness their talents and pull together. Perhaps one little anecdote to give you a clue to an answer. I don't know the full answer of course. When I was there as ambassador, the European Union ambassadors, who by now were the 12, Greece is one of them so there were 11 ambassadors, used to take turns to give a lunch to which we would invite a Greek VIP of some sort. I remember inviting the Minister of National Economy and his after lunch speech was serious, not just a joking speech. He said I am going to split this speech into two parts. We will start off talking about the economy and our problems in the hope that you will support us, and will bring maximum pressure to bear on Greece to do what we have got to do, which is very difficult, to get our economy into order, to get our taxation system working properly, to get employment to a more European level. He said, I will welcome you doing the maximum that you can to support and indeed to pressure us to do what you know we should do. The second part of my talk will be about international relations, about Turkey and Cyprus, Macedonia, the Balkans and for God's sake tell your capitals to lay off. It was a very telling way of putting it.

MM Yes, interesting. So it was a superb end, really.

OM Yes, it was very good. For most of my career one of the questions diplomats always ask each other is, which was your best post? And I used to say Jordan. But now I have to stop and think and I have to say Greece. It was a lovely way to end. We ended up in a moment of glory. We organised in my last 6 months a tremendous festival which we called Britain in Greece. My wife actually ran it. And it was astonishing. I really say this with pride in my wife's achievement, but of course I was also very much involved. We had obvious things like the Red Arrows and the Royal Yacht but we also had things like the Nottingham Playhouse and we had Stomp, and we had Scotland Yard detectives, we had Baroness James giving a lecture on the future of the novel, and we had Bill Morris giving a lecture on the future of the trade union movement and we had, oh, it goes on and on. We had chamber music, we had poetry, we had commercial promotions, we had a military band, which played at half the military cemeteries in Greece. It was a tremendous affair. And that was a lovely way to go. All paid for by money that we raised from Greek and British companies working in Greece, with very little input from HMG. I don't say that in a spirit of complaint. I say that as a matter of pride. Really the only thing that we got from the Foreign Office, apart from advice and contact making, was a lovely little booklet on the history of Anglo-Greek relations which was written by my friend Richard Clogg, who is professor of Greek history here in Oxford. It's a joy to read, and it went down so well with the Greeks. The high point for me was when my rather staid and conventional friend, former Greek ambassador to London, rang me up one day and said, Oliver, I just want to tell you that I have just walked down the main avenue outside the embassy and I saw a double decker bus full of Greek children waving union jacks. I just thought you would like to know.

Post script on spies

MM Before we leave your career, you mentioned at an earlier stage that you met George Blake whilst you were at MECAS, and that he cropped up again in your career. We need to tell people who George Blake was. He was one of the spies, wasn't he?

OM Yes. George Blake as we subsequently discovered was a chap who was working for SIS or MI6 as it is called, which in those days was something we didn't admit to the existence

of, of course. But he was a Russian spy, or a Soviet spy, and he was subsequently arrested and convicted and then escaped from a prison in London and fled to Moscow. Where he remains, I'm not sure he is dead yet. I had two encounters with him which were interesting in themselves and also had some effect on my career. The first encounter took place when I was an undergraduate at Oxford. I mentioned at one point in the story that I had studied Russian in National Service before I came up to Oxford and as a result of that I was involved in some Russian activities in Oxford including going on an exchange visit to Moscow as a student in 1958. During my last year as an undergraduate in 1959, or maybe it was 1960, a chap came to see me. He rang up, didn't say who he was or give me a name. He obviously knew who I was and he knew a bit about me. He explained that he was working in the Ministry of Defence and that his job was to try to keep an eye on Russian students in British universities and make sure they weren't getting up to anything they shouldn't be getting up to. He said I understand you know some of the Russians who are here in Oxford as undergraduates. Would I be willing to keep track of what they were doing and let him know if I thought any of their activities were something that ought to be brought to the attention of the authorities? Though at the time I was a naïve young undergraduate and convinced of the wickedness of the Soviet system, I was not terribly keen on becoming an unpaid spy. I said that to him, and I also said thankfully this was my last year as an undergraduate reading very difficult subjects, Arabic and Turkish, and I intended to get a First and was spending all my time working, so there was not a lot I could do for them. And he was very sensible about that. He came to see me a couple of times more and he even asked me if I was thinking of trying to join MI6 myself. I said, 'No, I thought I would try to join the Foreign Office.' He said, 'what happens if you don't get in?' And I said well, I'm not sure what happens if I don't get in. He said, well, let me know because maybe I can give you a hand. And then I got my First, and I got into the Foreign Office and I've told you the story of what happened after that and how I went off to the Arabic school at Shemlan. That was probably in September. Then in about October of 1960 the new course arrived at Shemlan from the Foreign Office to do a full year course, followed possibly by the 6 month course which I was doing. Big excitement at the school, new boys arriving, suitcases in the front hall, and who should come in but this chap George, and he took me on one side and said, 'Look, the first thing that I want to tell you is that my name isn't George Askey,' I think it was, or something like that, and he said, 'My name is George Blake.' By this time I had to some extent rumbled him. I knew what he

was so to speak, and I said, 'I'll call you whatever you like, you tell me a name and I'll call you that.' He said, 'No, it really is George Blake.' And it was of course. And he had been sent out by the Foreign Office to study Arabic. It looks from the history as we now know it the reason he was sent out was because they were on to him. They suspected him of being a Soviet spy but they weren't yet ready to arrest him and therefore they wanted to put him somewhere where he couldn't do any harm while they waited. Learning Arabic wasn't going to do anyone any harm, except it did actually do some harm in that the Arabs have always said, partly as a joke but these jokes get out of hand, that Shemlan, the Arabic school in Lebanon, was a spy school. And if you ask them now why they keep saying it was a spy school, which it is not, one of the answers they will give you is 'wasn't George Blake there?' Of course he was, as a student. He wasn't on the same course as me, as I have explained, but I got to know him socially quite well, which I hadn't before. I got to know his wife. I've even got a Dostoevsky that he lent me which I think I've still got on the shelf. Unfortunately it isn't signed. I suppose he was too cautious to sign such a thing. And then when I had finished my own course I went off to Bahrain, as I have explained. One day I heard on the BBC, to my amazement that someone called George Blake had been recalled from the Lebanon and had been arrested and charged with espionage. There was a long story about how he was eventually given 42 years sentence and then he was sprung by an Irish Republican Army sympathiser from the jail in London and he went to Moscow. So I thought this is all rather odd. When I came back to London I was actually called in by Security Department and asked about my relationship with George Blake during my time in Shemlan and to my surprise I found that they weren't aware that I had known him previously at Oxford. I thought that must be on file but it wasn't on the file so I told them about that as well. And everyone agreed that there wasn't anything to be done about it. But it did actually interfere with my career because I mentioned to you that at one point in my career I was actually told I was being posted to Moscow, and the reason I wasn't sent to Moscow eventually was that Sir Thomas Brimelow, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the time and of course a great Soviet pundit, vetoed it. He said we can't send a chap to Moscow who has had a relationship with George Blake. And I said rather feebly when I was given this bad news from the Security Department, I said, 'look, if there is one person in the world who knows that I am not a spy, it is George Blake. He actually tried to recruit me as one.' And they said, 'Don't bother us with the details.' So that was the sorry end of my relationship with George

Blake. It was an extraordinary story and having known the chap socially quite well during the month or two, we used to socialise together and I got to know him and his wife and used to have dinner together and that sort of thing, I was completely unprepared for what happened, completely. And I still find it hard to understand how a man could have behaved in the way that he did.

I must just mention that Kim Philby was also in Beirut at that time. He is another reason why the Arabs say that Shemlan is a spy school. So far as anyone has been able to discover he never once set foot in the school, which is up in the mountains, not in Beirut. Philby worked in Beirut and when he wasn't in his office he was usually drunk in a bar in Beirut. He never made it up as far as Shemlan, as far as anyone has been able to discover. I never met him.

Civil servants holding directorships in commercial companies

MM Just before we come to post-retirement, I see from Who's Who that you were a non-executive director of Vickers Defence Systems while you were still an Under-Secretary in the FCO...

OM ...Yes, that was a first, I think. There had been for a number of years, certainly 3, 4 or 5 years, a scheme in Whitehall by which serving civil servants were encouraged to take on jobs as non-executive directors of industrial companies in order to increase their knowledge of the way the business world operates and to create links between the Civil Service and the business world. The Foreign Office didn't get involved in this and I think I was told that the reason was that a particular Secretary of State thought it would lead to conflicts of interest. Now, who was that? We must be talking about 1988 or 1989, maybe it was Geoffrey Howe. When there was a change of Secretary of State the Foreign Office came in on this scheme which had already been operating for other departments in Whitehall. I volunteered and then I was told that a directorship was coming up in Vickers Defence Systems. The company doesn't exist anymore but its main activity, virtually its only activity, was building Challenger tanks, and the big issue at the time was whether they were going to get the contract to build tanks for the British army or not. In effect it was make or break for the Vickers company. I said, 'How can I possibly work for Vickers Defence Systems? There is an obvious conflict of

interest. If I work for the government, which is their main customer, then it is impossible.' I was told it was not impossible and that interesting things could be found for me to do at Vickers which had nothing at all to do with this contract negotiation. They could use Chinese walls.' And that is how it was worked out. And so for 2 years I was a non-executive director of this company. It was I think much less arduous than it would be today, in that the duties of non-executive directors were fewer, particularly as Vickers Defence Systems was part of the Vickers Group and was not itself a PLC. I was not on the board of a PLC and I didn't have to concern myself with any of the legal and other things that I would have been involved in if I had been a director of a PLC. I was really there as a kind of consultant, I suppose, but I used to go 4 times a year and I was punctilious. I always went. So I went to 8 board meetings. They used to meet alternately in Newcastle and Leeds because they had factories in each place which were equally important and they made a point of always meeting in one or the other. We spent a day in Newcastle or Leeds and I learned a lot. The main thing I learned of course, which you can't learn except by doing it, is that being on the board of a major company is no different from being on anything else. It is exactly like being a member of the local allotment association, or the parent teacher association, or a Member of Parliament. You sit down with a bunch of people in a room, you have an agenda and you try to hammer out some answers. There is no magic, and that was the important lesson for me, because I always thought there was some magic. They got the contract to build tanks for the British Army. If they hadn't I think the company would have closed down, but they did get the contract so my involvement was a bit of networking, getting to know some interesting people, a bit of technical stuff learning what a factory floor looks like and learning what a tank looks like and a bit of politics, trying to persuade them that their whole strategy for selling in Saudi Arabia was completely mad, which I think it was, and they could have made many more sales if they had taken a different approach. I didn't have enough clout really to get my ideas tested out in practice. That was the story.

Author of open letter to the Prime Minister signed by 52 senior former diplomats, widely published in the British press on 27 April 2004

MM Recently I think you got together this letter to the Prime Minister which was published

in the press and followed shortly thereafter by an American letter on similar lines. Were you the originator of that?

OM Yes, although my wife might dispute that, because it grew out of a conversation round the family television set. I don't know whether you want me to talk about the political background to it but initially we were shocked, I was shocked and my wife and my son Tom were also shocked, by what seemed to us to be a turn in British policy on Palestine which was really quite wrong, we thought. And this coupled with a feeling which we all shared that we had taken a wrong turning over Iraq. By about April 2004, the initial shooting war in Iraq was over and it was becoming more and more clear to me, and I think to my family and to many people in Britain, that the reasons for going in were wrong and that we had gone in without a plan and were wallowing in a mess, frankly. Perhaps that is putting it rather crudely in a one-liner, but that is the way we felt. And somebody said, I think my wife said, we must do something about it. What can we do? People have tried marching and lots of people have written to newspapers and I have written to the newspapers and Tom, my son, said, 'Dad and his mates could do something if they got together.' So I thought what could we do, write a joint letter to the newspapers? I went to bed that night and I always do my thinking whilst asleep, I woke up next morning and thought an open letter to the Prime Minister was the answer. I thought if I can get 6 colleagues to join me in signing an open letter it would have quite an effect. So I concocted a draft on the Saturday, the day after the television had shown the Prime Minister in the Rose garden with President Bush, and they had not said what they should have said about Sharon's latest plans with regard to settlements on the West Bank. So I concocted a draft, sent it off to about 5 maybe 6 Arabist colleagues, former ambassadors, and I said this is what I am thinking of doing, what do you think? One of them was away and all the others replied saying yes, we think it is a good idea. Naturally they didn't like my draft, and started messing around with it to improve it. That took up the whole of Sunday and then I said to them, I am committed to going to Libya tomorrow, Monday, and I shall be there for four days. I can read emails while I am in Libya but I'm not sure I can really handle this from there, and they said, well, if you can't it will just have to wait until you come back. It would be much better if we do it now. Of course one is always terrified in any operation like this that one is going to be overtaken by events. So I went to Libya and on the Monday evening I went to my usual internet cafe (50p per hour, but it

doesn't have broadband so very slow) and I soon found it was impossible to operate. I simply couldn't do the editing and so on in the time available. By this time I had approached a larger number, and I sent a circular round saying sorry, the letter will have to wait until I come back on Thursday night. I got back home, looked at my computer and it was full of emails from people saying they wanted to be involved. The big change was that by then it was not simply Arabists but an equally large number of people who weren't regional specialists at all but felt just as strongly as we did about the issues. I thought this is really exciting, and I set myself an artificial deadline and made it Monday midday. I started to send off emails to all the people whose addresses I could find saying here's the text, it's too late to amend it, yes or no, will you sign it? Or words to that effect, and my deadline is Monday midday. Luckily I had just joined the FCO Association, a kind of alumni association, and I had just received a directory with a number of email addresses but not by any means enough. Many people don't have email addresses. I also had a MECAS association list so I had a good set of email addresses for Arabist colleagues, but that would only be the ones who had studied Arabic. So I started feverishly sending off emails in all directions and I got roughly 80 percent acceptances. So on Monday morning I rang up Reuters and said what I was doing and managed to find somebody to take it seriously. It wasn't easy. At first they weren't interested and then somebody got quite interested and said, 'This is exciting, how many people are you going to get?' I said 'I don't know but I've got 25.' 'What! 25, this is sensational.' Then I rang them back and said, 30, 40... And by the deadline I got 52. We had a tremendous stroke of luck. Reuters said it was a slow news day, so we think it would be a good idea if our representative at the No 10 press briefing this afternoon asked a question about your letter. So I said that sounds like a great idea to me. So I bunged it through the letter box of the No10 web site, and got an acknowledgement to that. And then I sent it to the Foreign Office, to someone in my old department, NENAD, and said this is what I have just sent to No10. I've done it through the website, would somebody please ring up No10 and make sure that it has actually been delivered and properly received and somebody has realised what it is, because I am telling Reuters now. My friends in the Foreign Office didn't let me down. I got a message back that it had been received and they were aware of it. Reuters made a big thing of it and Reuters really enjoyed it. They had a wonderful time with it. It was the biggest thing they had done for months. They were very happy. So we were very lucky with regard to the publicity. As you will remember, it dominated the headlines for several days and it

gave probably half a dozen of us a kind of position in the media. I have done a lot of media interviews since then, which is something I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do before. The media were only interested in me as a Libya expert, but now it's different. So, did we have any results? I think the answer is we certainly did have some results. We got a statement from a Foreign Office minister about the legality, or rather illegality of settlements in the occupied territories, which is what we had missed coming from the Prime Minister the day before, so that was a real concrete step forward, or if not a step forward the cancellation of a step backward, if I can put it like that.

MM Recovering lost ground.

OM Yes. And then, as we said in the letter, our principal objectives were simply to set out ideas which we thought were widely shared and put them into the public debate, and particularly the debate in Parliament. And that happened, they have all been taken up and I think there has been much more informed debate about these issues, and agreement with us since then. Not of course from the government itself but from a lot of other quarters. Then as you say there was the American copycat operation if you like which was unlucky in that they published their letter just before the big row about abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq. So it got pushed off the headlines and didn't get anything like the same coverage that we got. But funnily enough there was another American, similar American effort some months later when a much more heavyweight group, not just ambassadors but defence and intelligence people, people from really the top brass of the Washington establishment, issued a similar statement. I think it was rather more party political. By this time the campaign in America was beginning to develop, but it wasn't entirely party political, a lot of people on it were people with Republican credentials. The Australians have done the same. A bunch of Australian diplomats and military and intelligence have put forward a very strong letter to the Australian prime minister. You will recall that Australia also has troops in Iraq, although only about a thousand, and they put a very strong statement to him saying in effect he had deceived the Australian people in the way he presented this operation to them. This was a stronger statement than ours. We talked about policies which were doomed to failure. We did not say that the Prime Minister had deceived the nation. I don't think we would have got 52 signatures if we had said that, we would probably have got 502. But anyway, we didn't

say it whatever the case. One other thing of interest to mention is that we discovered after the event that the Canadians had also done the same sort of thing, but they did it confidentially because in their case their Prime Minister refused to send Canadian forces to Iraq and they wanted to reinforce his position and make sure he wasn't pushed around by Bush. They sent a message which was similar to ours, it was a similar group, and it was actually sent two days before our message, but we didn't know about it at the time. It wasn't a copycat. So there were four public messages in the end, two American, ours and the Australian one.

MM So do we actually know precisely why the Prime Minister followed President Bush so closely?

OM In the Iraq war?

MM Yes.

OM No, I don't think we do.

MM There are suppositions aren't there. We suppose we know, and we know that the public classification was, well, not quite 100 percent.

OM Yes.

MM What was he really aiming at?

OM I can't answer that question with any kind of authority because I don't know. But I think, from every scrap of information I have been able to pick up, and of course I have talked to many people about it including some people who are still serving officials, who are discreet but will sometimes give you an idea, I think the Prime Minister probably came at it from the question of weapons of mass destruction. I think he was convinced, for reasons which I don't really know, that the question of weapons of mass destruction was one that had to be taken with the utmost seriousness. And I think he came to Iraq from that, so to speak,

rather than the other way round, whereas the Neocons in Washington were obsessed with Iraq, and to them weapons of mass destruction was really a pretext. I think with the Prime Minister it was quite the other way round, he was obsessed with the question of WMD and somehow convinced himself that the Iraqis had them, which was an easy thing to convince yourself of, because a lot of people actually believed that.

MM Well, everyone who signed up to the UN Security Council Resolution 1441 must have believed that.

OM Well, they knew there was a problem which had to be thrashed out and they knew the inspectors had to go in and find these things but already the inspectorate were saying, and some defectors were saying, that in effect there weren't any weapons in Iraq although there were the remains of weapons, there would be weapons programmes, there might be plans, there might be materials, but not weapons. And the only weapons that ever turned up as far as I am aware were the missiles which Saddam Hussein agreed to hand over just before the war started. If you remember he was in the process of handing over to us some actual live missiles which were technically in breach of the UN regulations because they had been modified to fire a bit further than was allowed, but actually not very much further. Be that as it may, maybe it's not surprising the Prime Minister was convinced there were weapons of mass destruction, but I think it was that that set him on the track for war. With the Americans it was different. I don't think Bush, as far as one can make out, certainly the people who were the driving force of the neo-conservatives were more concerned about Saddam Hussein and they had this, to my mind, quite ridiculous idea that making war in Iraq was somehow going to introduce democracy to the Middle East.

MM Very optimistic.

OM Very optimistic. If there was one way you don't introduce democracy I would have thought it was by going to war with somebody, but there you are. And to his credit Tony Blair never said that. They do now. They say that really was the reason. One of the mysteries is where did the Tory party catch all this from as well? They are just as bad as Tony Blair.

MM They were hot air.

OM Not Robin Cook, not Malcolm Rifkind, not Douglas Hurd...

MM Not the sensible ones...

OM No, but they are against the war. But Michael Howard and IDS and I see there is a piece in the Spectator by the shadow defence minister and they are all... he is actually having the audacity to say at this stage that there was a link between Iraq and the attack on the World Trade Centre. I thought only President Bush ever said that now. Certainly it's a long time since anyone on the British government side has said that. It is pure fiction.

MM Well, it shows the risks that are taken when we elect leaders who don't really know in detail what goes on in foreign affairs.

OM Yes, you are bound to do that and one hopes that politicians who are heading to be Prime Minister will pick up here and there a bit of this and a bit of that, but you can't really expect to have experts. What you can expect to have, I think, is people who are in listening mode. If I can invoke the name of the dreaded Mrs Thatcher, I remember Peter Carrington when he was Foreign Secretary used to come back from his weekly meeting at No10 tearing his hair out and saying that the bloody woman doesn't listen to a word I say. And then he would come back tearing his hair out saying I gave her a lecture last week and now she has pinched all my ideas and is telling me she believed it all in the first place. And in fact she was in learning mode but her way of learning was to contradict everything you said and see whether you could defend it. And he found that quite hard to take but he persevered and it worked. And then we ended up with a Foreign Secretary...

MM ...Usually

OM ...Usually, yes. Not always.

MM Oh well, all experience I suppose.

OM I will tell you one Mrs Thatcher story just to end up with from my time in NENAD. Princess Anne was going on a Save the Children tour of Africa and she announced that she wanted to end up going to Beirut. This was in the middle of the Lebanese civil war, understandably there was a lot of sucking of teeth in the Foreign Office, was it sensible for her to go in the middle of a civil war? But nobody wanted to take the decision, nobody except me, of course. Nobody wanted to take sides too early in this great game. Eventually the Foreign Office concluded that the one person we could rely on was the Prime Minister, and my seniors thought that if we put a piece up to Mrs Thatcher she will blow it out of the water, and that would be the end of the matter. She had already made it clear she didn't want people taking risks in Beirut and she had very strong views about the Royal Family not getting involved in anything which was too risky, so we thought we knew her mind. Eventually a submission went up in due form and was sent across to No10, it said on the one hand,.. on the other hand,... this mad fellow who is the Head of NENAD thinks she probably could go but we wiser heads think that she shouldn't. Then we waited to see what would come back. But what they had forgotten was that it was the Tuesday or Thursday evening when Mrs Thatcher had her weekly meeting with the Queen. And the following morning back came the message across the road from No10: The Prime Minister has instructed me to say that she sees no reason why the Princess Royal shouldn't travel to Beirut, provided the security assessments are reasonably all right. I would have loved to be a fly on the wall when Mrs Thatcher said to the Queen, now I am making this up: 'Can you imagine what those bloody idiots in the Foreign Office are suggesting now, they are actually trying to send your daughter to Beirut.' To which I presume Her Majesty replied, 'Well why shouldn't the girl go to Beirut if that's what she wants to do.' 'Yes Ma'am.'

MM Well, thank you very much for all that.

OM That story went on and on because David Roberts, the ambassador in Beirut was then invited to send a security assessment. By this time the Princess Royal had made most of her trip round Africa and was heading towards Beirut and things were getting a bit urgent. And he sent back a security assessment which read a bit like this – "today I walked the course. I

went down Rue Hamra where Her Royal Highness will go and I am glad to report the security situation is better than it has been for months. There is scarcely any heavy shelling to be heard and machine guns can hardly be seen, except in the side streets off Rue Hamra. So I strongly endorse the recommendation that Her Royal Highness should come. It will do no end of good for British prestige in Beirut." So you can imagine what we thought when we saw this. It was circulated around and then the wise decision was taken that Inspector Knacker himself should go out and walk the Princess Royal's route to make a final assessment. And the personal police officer's assessment read a bit like this – "Well, I have talked to some of these Lebanese Johnnies and they seem to me to be white men and I can't see any problem at all. They tell me everything is fine." So we thought, 'Oh my God!' But she went and David Roberts did walk down the Rue Hamra with her and he said his French colleague was green with envy.

MM He made a coup. She didn't cross the Green Line?

OM Not quite, no.

Transcribed by Ann Drew

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