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**NIXON, Patrick Michael (born 1 August 1944)**

**CMG 1989, OBE 1984**

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**BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

**RECOLLECTIONS OF PATRICK NIXON CMG OBE,  
RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS**

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**FCO, 1965**

SR: Good morning. This is Suzanne Ricketts. I'm talking to Patrick Nixon via Skype on 13 April 2021.

So Patrick, the first question, as always, is why did you join the FCO?

PN: Well, I remember that when I was about 12, I decided I wanted to be a television cameraman or Ambassador in Vienna. I told this to my step-great-grandmother, who was a fierce old general's wife next door. And she said, 'You realise you will have to have the gift of the gab, don't you?' Anyway, in my last year at Cambridge, I applied to the BBC to be a producer. And they sent back my self-addressed envelope with a rejection slip. By that time, I had already passed the exam into the Foreign Office. So I didn't think about anything else.

SR: Had you studied languages or history and politics at university?

PN: I did classics and history, but I had time to prepare myself by spending time learning French in France, Italian in Rome (rather ineffectually) and German in Austria during vacations. None of which was any use.

SR: Yes, but as we will see later, you went on to become an Arabist, so you clearly had a talent for languages.

PN: Then I discovered in learning Arabic that I did not!

SR: So they sent you to Far Eastern Department. What was the Foreign Office like in those days?

PN: Well, I arrived there aged 21 and one month to the Third Room which consisted of David Wilson occupying my job while he was waiting to move to the next desk, the China desk, and another splendid man called David Timms, another Sinologist who left quite soon afterwards. Of course, sitting next to David – I realised later – was a pretty formidable start. He was very kind and long suffering. I was the Nepalese desk officer, but with that went responsibility also within the Foreign Office for the entire Indian subcontinent. And that is where I really found it extraordinarily

difficult, because I was shadowing an entire Department of the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) at that time.

SR: So why was that?

PN: Because the Foreign Office was separate from the Commonwealth Relations Office still, until 1968.

SR: Of course, yes.

PN: So there were many such anomalies. But I think mine was the biggest.

SR: Indeed, that's a huge empire you had!

PN: The people on the desks in the CRO didn't think much of it. I was found out very early on. I started during the Indian Pakistan war of September 1965. The Shah of Iran wrote a letter to Her Majesty the Queen, his dear sister, about it which landed on my desk to provide a draft reply. Of course, I hadn't a clue what to do with this! Luckily, I went to see the Iran desk officer, Michael Burton and he took it off me. So I was really no use at all.

As for Nepal, it didn't really occupy much time and attention. But I was completely flummoxed by the first communication requiring a reply to come from the Head of Chancery in Kathmandu. He wanted me – or rather us – to authorise payment for the first set of traffic lights ever in Kathmandu, or in Nepal. I didn't know what to do with it, I did nothing for about three months! And then eventually, I wrote quite a simple letter, saying, okay, you can have it. But my most memorable moment was the Ministry of Defence, where they were planning to abolish the Gurkha regiments, or at least slim them down enormously. And, oddly, it fell to us in the Foreign Office and me in particular to draft a paper opposing that, saying they should be kept on. I did my draft and it went up to the Head of Department, who complained that he hadn't had enough time to read it. Nevertheless, it went through to the Cabinet Office and we won the case.

SR: Who was the Head of Department?

PN: It was Eddie Bolland, later Ambassador to Bulgaria.

SR: What was the Office like at that time? Did you send your drafts off to be typed, and got back the carbon copies?

PN: Yes. The Third Room had a secretary called Ruth. You had to dictate to her, which I found completely impossible. Everything, yes, came in five copies.

I should add at this point that the Foreign Secretary at the time, Michael Stewart, gave a drinks party in his office for a selection of new entrants from different grades and I was one of the ones chosen. So was a secretary from South East Asia Department who had joined at about the same time. She and I used to pass each other in the corridor. Later she got posted to the Embassy in Beirut, just after me, and she is now my wife, sitting in the next room!

SR: Aha – another Foreign Office romance!

### **MECAS (language training), 1966–68**

PN: So anyway, after a year, I was one of 6 of the 1965 intake selected to go and learn Arabic. Not really my first choice, but that was it.

SR: Did you do an aptitude test?

PN: Yes, we did.

SR: So what was your first choice then?

PN: Well, I didn't really know what I wanted. But I put down Hindi and Persian. But there was more demand for Arabists.

SR: Right. So off you went to MECAS? Was it still in Shemlan then?

PN: Yes. I drove there in my brand new Ford Cortina in a convoy with Andrew Green and John Shepherd. We went through Europe, down the Yugoslav coast and round Albania into Greece and Turkey. We spent a couple of days in Istanbul and then eventually arrived in Latakia in Syria, our first night in the Arab world. And then down to Shemlan. So that was a very good start.

SR: Yes. What was the regime like? Were you living with a local family or did you live over the shop, as it were?

PN: The bachelors all lived in a mess. There were 20 of us.

SR: Were they all from foreign services?

PN: There were 11 or 12 of us from the Foreign Office at the time and there were bankers and oil people and Japanese. It was like a club.

SR: Was it a pretty intensive regime because you were starting from scratch?

PN: Yes, we had classes from 9 to 12 every morning. And then we were supposed to put in another three hours afterwards, learning our words by ourselves. Some took it with quite a pinch of salt.

SR: Were you one of those?

PN: I was a naughty boy. I used to get told off by the principal instructor who thought I was badly behaved. But so were others. It was hard to take school discipline.

SR: Absolutely. And how long were you there?

PN: It was a total course of 15 months for those who got through the first stage of 10 months. Our year was interrupted by the war between Arabs and Israelis in June 1967. And after watching the aerial skirmishes over Lebanese territory, when the Lebanese Hunters were shot down, we were evacuated to the Army School of Languages in Beaconsfield for two months.

SR: Right. Not quite as exotic!

PN: No and even more disciplined. Also what we lost after this break was that we could no longer travel to Syria which had been one of the great joys we discovered. Going to visit Syria and Jordan, which we had done in the first year, down to Aqaba, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Damascus. My favourite place in the whole Middle East is – was – Syria.

We had two language breaks during that time when we were sent off for two weeks at a time. I went first to Bahrain where the political agent, Tony Parsons, took me to have dinner with the king of Bahrain. Actually he wasn't the King then, he was the Emir of Bahrain, which was quite an excitement. You had to wear black tie. But the dinner lasted about ten minutes because everybody got up when the Emir got up. And then the second time I spent two weeks in Saudi Arabia. I stayed at the beginning with one of the Foreign Office's great eccentrics, Hugh Leach. He lived in what was formerly the Turkish Embassy and it had 17 rooms – he had a gun room and a boot room. He was a bachelor. But that didn't teach me much Arabic. So I went off by myself to Riyadh, which I thought was so awful that I turned straight back the next day and went to Ta'if in the mountains.

SR: Why was it so awful?

PN: It was a mud brick village at the time. An indescribably awful place!

### **British Embassy, Cairo, 1968–70**

SR: So then you got a posting to Cairo. Did you go straight there?

PN: Yes, I went straight off to Cairo. The Embassy was in changeover and we were all new because diplomatic relations had been broken by the Egyptians when Rhodesia declared its UDI in 1965.

So I was the dogsbody in Chancery, the Third Secretary, under Patrick Wright. I couldn't have asked for a more wonderful boss.

SR: Was it a big Embassy?

PN: Yes, it was. There were three of us in Chancery and also in the commercial section, three attachés – the works. We used to have to listen every day to the Air Attaché talking about the cocktail party he'd been to the night before.

SR: Were you able to do much travelling as your movements were restricted?

PN: We were restricted. We weren't allowed to travel except on the desert road between Cairo and Alexandria - and then as far west as El Alamein on the coast where there was a lovely beach rest house we could go to.

But I was sent on assignment to various places. The first of these was to go to Port Said to inspect the ruins of the Consulate we used to have there to see if there were any secrets lying about on the floor and safes that should be removed.

SR: And were there?

PN: No. Well there was a safe, but it was not a problem. Anyway, having done that, I thought it would be fun to take a ferry across the canal going from Africa to Asia. It cost about a penny to go. And so I went across, a journey of five minutes, walked around for five minutes and then I came back. I didn't think any more about it. But, six weeks later, the Counsellor in the Embassy, Robert Tesh, was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explain why Nixon had been on the other side of the canal without permission. So they had their spies. But they weren't very effective! They also bugged Patrick Wright's house because his next door neighbour, the Administration Officer, could pick it up in his house!

We didn't have much contact with Egyptians, real Egyptians. We had contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – they were quite sociable with us. And the journalists were sociable and would come to meals with us. Otherwise, it was a fairly restricted life. My job was, supposedly, to decipher from Nasser's speeches what his policies were.

SR: But was it fun being a Third Secretary, the lowest form of life in the diplomatic food chain? Didn't you get all sorts of interesting things to do to deal with?

PN: I think we were very lucky that almost every big country in the world had an Embassy in Cairo, maybe 100. There were some very bright Third Secretaries and we used to have good parties with

them. One colleague very quickly became the Bangladeshi Ambassador to the UN, only 10 years later.

### **British Embassy, Lima, 1970–73**

SR: In those days, there weren't post preference forms or anything, were there? You went where you were sent, didn't you?

PN: Yes. That's what happened for 37 years!

SR: So was a posting to Lima with a new language and a new continent a shock? How did you feel?

PN: Well I'd asked not to be posted back to London, as I was only just 25. I thought if I went back to London, I would get a lousy job. Better to go abroad again. So I volunteered to go abroad. And when Patrick Wright got the telegram that told him that I was going to Lima, he had to go and look it up on the map to tell me where I was going!

I felt bewildered but happy. I was by now married and about to have my first son, so it suited us. And as it turned out, Lima for the family was a very good posting. Enjoyable. But professionally it was dreadful.

My posting was, I think, really due to the report by Sir Val Duncan, in 1969, on commercial work in the Diplomatic Service. He recommended that everybody who was going to get to the top must early on have done export promotion work. So that is what caused it. But when I got there, I found that it was an overstaffed little Embassy. There were three of us, three UK-based officers in Commercial Section and two useless locally engaged people. And this was for a market where British exports had shrunk from about £20 million a year to £10 million after the military took over in a coup in 1968. So there was nothing to do really.

SR: Who was your Ambassador?

PN: Hugh Morgan. Very kind, with a lovely wife who was Bulgarian. They took me on a wonderful trip (my wife could not go because she was pregnant). We went over the mountains to Ayacucho and down into the Apurimac Valley, which was later closed off for years by the revolt of *Sendero Luminoso* guerillas. But then it was peaceful. We went to visit a remote monastery of Benedictine monks from Worth and Downside, which is where I went to school. That was a really thrilling and special expedition. And, apart from that, we used to travel all over the country. I even went to Machu Picchu at Her Majesty's expense, because a Minister came from the ODA to inspect a

proposed aid project. And he required to be taken to Cuzco and Machu Picchu. So I had to go with him!

SR: What about the language? Did you just pick up the Spanish as you went along? It must have been quite a change from having to speak Arabic.

PN: Yes. I was starting from scratch. I did have a few lessons before in London and then I used to have lessons in Lima. But after I had been there about three weeks, my immediate boss, who had actually been in the job I was doing, told me to go and see the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs to discuss the aftermath of the earthquake which took place on 31 May 1970, a horrific event in which 70,000 people were killed. I was assured that he would speak English. He didn't speak a word. It was a complete disaster! I did get better after that.

We were able to make friends with the young aristocratic old guard in Lima which had been swept aside by the military.

SR: For how long were you there?

PN: Nearly three years.

### **Near East and North Africa Department (NENAD), FCO, 1973-75**

Then I was told I was going back to NENAD to be the Egypt desk officer. Very appropriate, I thought. At the time, James Craig was the Head of Department, my revered boss. Nigel Williams was a wonderful Assistant, an enormously clever but modest man. It was a very steep learning curve doing that, especially as the first test came in October 1973 when I had been back for five months or so with the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war between Israel and the Arabs. David Gore-Booth was the Arab-Israel desk officer and he had the limelight of course.

I was given a specific task of administering for the Foreign Office an arms embargo on both Arabs and Israelis. The Prime Minister, Edward Heath, decided that he would impose an arms embargo, having not done so at the outset. The reason why he was prompted to do it was that Harold Wilson, the Leader of the Opposition, had asked him not to impose an arms embargo; and the reason for that was that the embargo caught a consignment of Centurion tanks which Israel was very keen to receive immediately.

SR: Was there a sort of crisis centre? How did that work in 1973? Did you deal with the Resident Clerk?

PN: I don't remember it being like that on that particular occasion. It didn't involve me. But I know what you're talking about, because in 1974, I was sent off to join the crisis unit after the invasion by the Turks of Cyprus and I spent a week or so doing that.

That was my first experience of these crises. So many!

SR: Yes. There are some people in the Office who really seem to thrive on crises and have a reputation as good crisis managers. Did you enjoy that? Or did you find it stressful?

PN: I didn't like it. I never did. I had too much of it!

SR: How long did you spend in NENAD?

PN: About 18 months or so.

### **Western Organisations Department, FCO, 1975**

And then it was time for me to do something different. Andrew Wood in Personnel Department (who featured in my personnel moves three times) despatched me to Western Organisations Department, a glamorous department at the time, led by Crispin Tickell with Paul Lever and John Kerr as desk officers. I replaced Paul Lever, who replaced John Kerr and I was doing Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) and was NATO political desk officer working to an Assistant who had no other job than to look after me and MBFR. That was Terence Wood, another good friend.

It was very strange because these negotiations were among the Allies. They had been going on for a year or two, without making any progress. But in my time the Allies agreed on an offer to make to the Soviet side about the withdrawal of some of their troops from Eastern Europe. So that was months and months of work to come up with an agreed plan. It was presented to the Russians – or rather the Soviet bloc, the Warsaw Pact countries. And on the next day, they rejected it out of hand because, of course, they had known all about it for a long time beforehand. They had been following the negotiations through their espionage. So the whole thing to me seemed utterly pointless.

That is the first of the jobs I had which I did not like in the Office. I was lucky to be rescued from it after less than a year.

### **Latin America Department, FCO, 1976**

What happened was that Michael Palliser, the PUS, was on his first ever visit to South America. He went to a Heads of Mission Conference in Lima, at which the Ambassador in La Paz waved a dog-

eared despatch in the air and complained that he has written this despatch and sent it to the Department six weeks earlier but had not had a reply. Michael Palliser then decided that South America was important and the Department needed beefing up. He sent a telegram saying he wanted three capable desk officers by Monday morning.

The desk officer who was supposed to be preparing for a very controversial visit by President Geisel, the military dictator of Brazil, was shifted and told to go to a post in Northern Europe in six months' time. So I was told to arrive there by the Monday morning. I never worked so hard as I did in the following six weeks. There were a lot of parliamentary questions, MPs letters, briefs, guest lists.

SR: Yes, state visits are always a nightmare in terms of the planning, aren't they?

PN: Nothing had been done about it! It was very controversial. Anyway, I ended up with a Brazilian medal because my Head of Department, who had a Brazilian wife, said to the Brazilians that he thought that I should have one. So they gave both of us medals, breaking normal precedents!

After the visit, I was allowed to give up covering Bolivia and Paraguay. Actually I got told off by the Ambassador in Bolivia, Ronald Hope-Jones, because I had written that there had been 100 coups in the last 125 years or something like that. And he wrote back furiously saying I should not be allowed to be the desk officer for Bolivia because there had not been a coup for five years! There was one pretty soon afterwards...

Anyway, I was given Venezuela to deal with, which was much more stimulating at the time, especially as there was an official visit by the President which I had to arrange as well.

SR: Did you get to go to the country?

PN: Yes, I had a week's tour of Brazil and Venezuela. Venezuela was awful because, at that stage, it was super rich from oil. And the inequalities were very evident everywhere. They were very arrogant in their contempt for the North, as they called it, in North-South relations. Not nice at all. Brazil however was very stimulating.

### **Head of Chancery, British Embassy, Tripoli, 1977-80**

SR: Then they moved you to Tripoli of all places.

PN: Yes. I had no wish to go! I knew it was awful.

SR: So how did they make you go?

PN: By not telling me! I was on a course. They didn't contact me but got my Head of Department to tell me because I'd already made clear I did not want to go there. But I went anyway.

SR: It's not a good idea to say no to Personnel, really, is it?

PN: No, so off I went. We had almost no contact with the Libyans. We had one friend we made, sort of ... The one person we had a normal, everyday relationship with was a farmer who grew oranges and kept chickens. And we used to go and buy both our eggs and oranges from this chap. He was perfectly normal but most people wouldn't have anything to do with us. And we hardly had anything to do with the Libyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We had no business to transact, so it was quite lonely in that respect. But it was quite a nice place to bring up small children: there were lovely beaches and ruins to go and see near Tripoli.

SR: Were you allowed to travel quite freely?

PN: No, we weren't at all. We had to notify the Ministry whenever we planned to leave Tripoli. So every week we sent the same note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saying that every member of the staff would be driving East, West and South on the three ways of leaving Tripoli! When we had the Queen's Birthday Party, the only Libyans who came were the Protocol Department representative and the agent for Land Rover.

We did have one asset which was the Libyan Navy, because most of the naval officers had been trained at Dartmouth before the 1969 revolution and some of them had foreign wives. So we smarmed up to the ones with foreign wives, and invited them to come and have a drink with us. We gave them gin and tonic, which worked!

SR: Did you come across Qadhafi?

PN: I did once, yes. The diplomatic corps were invited to fly to Benghazi and then to go up into the mountains near Cyrene to see the Great Leader hand out 1,011 tractors to 1,011 peasants – a bizarre ceremony in which he gave a rambling speech. I went with the Russian and the Italian representatives. We were put up in a hotel in Benghazi and we decided to have a drink that evening before dinner: I produced a very small flask of whisky, the Russian produced a bottle of vodka and the Italian produced a Parmesan cheese.

SR: Not sure whisky goes very well with Parmesan cheese, but there we are!

PN: Qhadafi was at his maddest. He spurned everybody and everything. He closed down the shops completely and then started building warehouse shops, state warehouses, so there was a distinct

shortage of places to buy basic necessities for quite a period of time. And he spent all this money, which was very considerable because the price of oil doubled again in about 1979. So he had plenty of money and he imported 2,000 tanks from the Soviet Union: we used to see them trundling past from the docks. He wanted to have a parade for his 10th anniversary on September 1 1979. It took an army of Czech technicians four months to wind up the tanks so that they could parade through the streets!

### **British Information Service (BIS), New York, 1980–83**

SR: So Personnel realised you finally needed some sort of reward then, after Tripoli? And they actually offered you a choice.

PN: Yes, that was really quite surprising. I was asked whether I would like to go to Rome or BIS New York. I said ‘Snap!’ Either would do. And so it turned out to be New York, which was wonderful and, in a sense, was a sort of making of my career, I thought.

BIS New York was quite controversial at the time, because Peter Jay, when he was the Ambassador in Washington, did not see a need for any information officers. He reckoned he could do it all himself. So he halved the size of BIS New York. He sacked the head of it or had him sacked. And, by the time I got there, it was much reduced and rather demoralised, I think. I had the job of Head of the Policy and Reference Division under the Head, Peter Hall. That meant I was supposed to deal with politics and the press but also to supervise the reference division, a very large library which was servicing the United States press in checking and providing facts about Britain. Their biggest customer was the New Yorker magazine which checked every article thoroughly before printing it. And they also had a large amount of COI material from the Central Office of Information about Britain. I found, when I looked into it, that they had boxes and boxes of dusty, unopened reference books. And I asked why. I was told by the very loyal head of the division that we always asked for 100 of each publication, because if we didn't ask for 100, COI wouldn't be able to publish them at all. I said in future we would have two. They did not like that at all.

I'm afraid the COI was very unsatisfactory. We asked them to produce publicity material to help our campaign on Northern Ireland. Invariably, the stuff they commissioned had been knocked off hurriedly by somebody and then nobody in the United States would take it.

SR: This was a very difficult time with the hunger strike and the dirty protest, wasn't it?

PN: Yes. It started in early 1981. Until then, my primary task was supposed to be to try and explain away the appalling state of the British economy which I didn't find congenial at all. But then we had

the hunger strike and things changed dramatically and immediately. I had not been given any radio or television training before taking up my post. But I did go and visit Northern Ireland for three days. I did all the things that people do like visiting a police station at 10 o'clock in the morning and being given a very big gin and tonic! (Only once do I remember something like that, which was George Brown in Cairo, no longer the foreign minister, doing the same to me in a Cairo hotel at ten in the morning!) Anyway, I went to the Maze Prison where the prisoners were smearing their walls with excrement and wearing blankets. So I saw that and I had lunch with the Governor, where we were served by a lifer who had murdered somebody. It was a bizarre experience. Very helpful to the job.

But when it came to television and radio interviews, I was completely stuck. I started by being interviewed by local TV stations in the street. And that was good because they were recorded. So if you muffed it, they could do it again. They were only short gobbets, which was perfectly all right. It all changed on the night that Bobby Sands died. I got a phone call from ABC, a programme called Nightline, which was broadcast about 10 o'clock. It had only started when staff at the US Embassy in Tehran had been captured and taken hostage. So this was a new programme. I did not realise that it was broadcast nationally. They said to me, 'If you can get down here in 15 minutes, we'll put you on with two Irish blanket men.' I said I would come if they put me on after them. I phoned up Peter Hall, my boss, who was now living in Washington, because he had been moved there by Nico Henderson. I said I was going to do this and Peter told me he had turned it down. So I felt some trepidation. Anyway, I got through it. And a couple of days later, I was asked to go on ABC's Good Morning America as well, after Bernadette Devlin. After that I found it much easier to do these things and frequently gave interviews on television and radio. Especially with CNN, which was then only in its infancy.

SR: It's a case of practice makes perfect, isn't it, once you have your lines straight in your mind?

PN: Yes, the first couple of times can be very stressful. Well, anyway, I don't think we made much impact on public opinion. We never have and never will on the Irish question. You can see it even today. In New York, just like in Boston, the Irish fundraising group Noraid, is very effective and well received. But we kept plugging away. What we did as a technique regularly was to get people from Northern Ireland – politicians and others – to visit and we would arrange lunches for them to talk to a group of journalists. Meanwhile from the start of the hunger strike Noraid held a noisy demonstration outside our offices on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue every evening, chanting a litany – from “Butcher Thatcher must go” down the line to “Liar Patrick Nixon must go.”

The thing that I found most useful in my job, on whatever subject, was my contact with the chief leader writer on the editorial board of the New York Times, Karl Meyer. I came across him very early in my stay in New York, because of an incident in the summer of 1980, just after I arrived, between the US Navy and the Libyan Navy, in the Gulf of Sidra, where the Americans were challenging Qadhafi's claim for a 200 mile limit. When he discovered that I had just come from Libya, he consulted me about his article. And then afterwards whenever he was writing about Britain, Argentina or whatever, he would always get in touch first. You cannot ask for more than that. I used to get blamed, nevertheless, in London if he wrote the wrong things. But you cannot win!

I should also mention that we had a visit from Prince Charles, six weeks after the death of Bobby Sands. He came alone as he had a longstanding commitment just before he got married to see the Royal Ballet perform Swan Lake at the Met. It was very unfortunately timed. Mayor Koch and Nancy Reagan accompanied him. Mayor Koch behaved appallingly.

SR: In what way?

PN: By saying rude things publicly about Britain and Northern Ireland. There were hecklers and protesters wherever we went. 1,700 police were put out to control the visit. During the performance of Swan Lake, protesters interrupted the first act and had to be taken out. The whole thing was a complete disaster.

When the Falklands invasion happened in the following April, it was a complete contrast to all we had been through in 1981. The whole of the US press and media were very much supportive of us. Nico Henderson, the Ambassador, became a television star, appearing frequently on the early morning breakfast shows. And we scored a real hit later in the story when the Prime Minister came to New York on a visit and we got her on all three breakfast morning shows on the same day, which was unprecedented. I went on an enormous number of phone-ins and TV appearances during that period as did our colleagues at UKMIS New York. It was just so different from dealing with Northern Ireland.

### **Assistant Head, then Head, NENAD, FCO, 1983-87**

SR: So the next thing was going back to the Foreign Office, back to NENAD, first as Assistant. You had a few problems to deal with there, too, didn't you?

PN: We certainly did! I spent four and a half years in NENAD the second time and became the Head in October 1985. The main focus, then as always, was on the Arab-Israel dispute and its

ramifications affecting Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. That was a regular part of everybody's work all the time. It meant a round of parliamentary work and also international discussions within the European Community political cooperation mechanism as it was then. I found the regular EU political cooperation meetings very useful and helpful, especially as they were then held in the capital of the country holding the Presidency. I used to go to most of the meetings of the Middle East working group.

The interruptions to the normal flow were fast and furious, starting with the shooting of WPC Fletcher outside the Libyan People's Bureau at Easter 1984. That was a very serious crisis which led to the eviction of the Head of the Libyan People's Bureau and all their staff when we broke off relations. And then we broke relations with Syria in April 1986 when a Jordanian, Nezar Hindawi, was arrested for persuading his pregnant Irish girlfriend to carry a suitcase containing a bomb on an El Al aircraft at Heathrow. In the same month, US aircraft flying from bases in Britain bombed targets in Tripoli following the bombing of a Berlin nightclub frequented by US servicemen. Spain and France had refused permission for overflights of their territory and the attack caused a lot of controversy within Britain.

Throughout this period the civil war in Lebanon was hotting up and becoming very unpleasant with regular and prolonged attacks and occupation by Israel. Several British hostages were taken. In January 1987 Terry Waite, the Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy, went there to try and rescue the hostages and was himself taken and held in captivity for four years. Earlier he had negotiated the release by Libya of four British hostages.

SR: So you were dealing with issues that every day were on the front cover of all the newspapers?

PN: Yes, they were. We had to do a lot of statements to Parliament. I found it quite stressful at times.

SR: Presumably you worked very long hours and you didn't see much of your family?

PN: I used to try and leave the office by eight. I found it very difficult doing more than that. I remember briefing a group of newly elected Members of Parliament in 1987 after the election, and I described my job as damage limitation. I have always felt that about work on both parts of the Middle East. I could not say I ever liked my clients: they weren't a very likeable lot! We were not making positive gains in my time.

SR: But wasn't it stimulating being there at the nub of things which were really on the international radar screen?

PN: Yes. At that time, I saw a lot of Geoffrey Howe and admired greatly his way of doing his work. He was very thorough. The only trouble was that we would have a meeting in the afternoon with him which might go on for a couple of hours, because he looked into every nook and cranny. And then I had to go away and produce a draft letter to Number 10 before going home.

SR: Howe famously only needed four hours' sleep. You can get a lot done if you're working 20 hours!

PN: He was very sympathetic. Nice boss!

### **Ambassador, Doha, 1987-90**

SR: It's 23 April 2021 and I'm talking to Patrick Nixon once again via Skype. We finished our last discussion when you were Head of NENAD. What came next?

PN: Well after being in NENAD for four and a half years, I was appointed Ambassador to Qatar. I had been expecting it to be Bahrain, but the vacancy for Bahrain came up sooner. And so I got that and John Shepherd, my friend, got Bahrain. Qatar was a very strange place.

SR: Was it very underdeveloped in those days?

PN: Yes, Doha was a very simple village. The country's population was 300,000 of whom 100,000 were Qataris and 6,000 were British. We had a very prominent place in this village life because of the semi-colonial past. Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, who was the Ruler, had overthrown his cousin in 1972 and taken power. But by the time I got there 15 years later, he was really rather a reclusive and ineffective Ruler, though no one would dare defy him on anything. He didn't make many waves. As far as I could see, he used to drive from his home palace on motorways (that were not motorways but dual carriageways) that were closed off while he was on them. So he would drive a few miles to his office complex and then drive back again. But he never appeared in public or promoted himself: he did not need to do that. He was almost reclusive. But he received me at will, more or less, as the British Ambassador. I don't think that happened to other Ambassadors, of whom there were approximately 20 at the time. It was all right, but talking to him wasn't very productive for either of us.

We had the British community which dominated trade and social circles at the time. We had British schools. But my main difficulty was that Qataris were very slow at paying their bills. They had plenty of money, though they were not anything like as rich as they were shortly about to become. BP and Shell were running the oil side of things, both onshore and offshore: they had been there

from the beginning. But they were very fed up and withdrew from the competition to exploit the newly discovered North gas field, which Qatar shared with Iran. They withdrew because they found the oil company and the government just too difficult to deal with. The first gas from the North Field was exported in 1991. That is when the wealth of Qatar became obscenely large and enabled them to go and buy half the real estate in London and football clubs in Paris and I think in Italy as well. So it was a very strange place in which to be Ambassador, but we had an amusing time.

One point of difficulty was that Bahrain got a much better press and a much better share of distinguished British visitors. That was partly because the RAF had a base in Bahrain and so all VIP flights for the royal family and ministers always stopped off there on the way to or from the Far East. The Qataris had no time for the Bahrainis at all – they disliked each other mutually as a result of conflicts in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This caused difficulties for me, because the Queen and other members of the royal family were always passing through Bahrain and going to see the Ruler. But we did not get those sorts of visits and the contrast seemed to rankle.

We did very well in getting visits by the Foreign Office ministers of state, William Waldegrave and David Mellor. Indeed, David Mellor accepted an invitation from the Crown Prince, Sheikh Hamad to bring his family for a week's holiday. That meant a week's holiday in my house ... Peter Morrison, Minister for Energy, came three times with groups of businessmen. Anyway I persuaded London that they should look for an opportunity to get the Prime Minister to stop off not in Bahrain for refuelling but in Doha. And that did happen. Mrs Thatcher came for four hours, on her way back from a CHOGM meeting in Kuala Lumpur. And that was the highlight of my time in Qatar which did an enormous amount of good. Later, we had a visit by Sir Geoffrey and Lady Howe which also helped. I also went to London with Sheikh Hamad, the Crown Prince, on an official visit. But I didn't ever get close to Sheikh Hamad.

SR: Had you kept up your Arabic, Patrick?

PN: Well, my problem was that I served three years out of every ten in the Arab world. In each case, I always had to confront a completely different dialect for the next posting! That was made worse in Doha because in 1987 I judged that everybody under the age of 55 spoke English because they had been to school and educated in English. Everybody over the age of 55 was incomprehensible in any language! When I went to Abu Dhabi 11 years later, the same problem occurred, but worse. I thought that it would be the over-65 year olds I'd have a problem with but it wasn't – it was still the 55 year olds because, believe it or not, the Emiratis got education very much later than the Qataris, because Qatar had oil at an earlier stage and built schools.

SR: Tell me a bit about the Embassy. How many staff did you have?

PN: We were total of ten UK-based staff. And we had we had visiting attachés who came from Abu Dhabi.

SR: Did you enjoy being an Ambassador and running your own show?

PN: Yes, I did like that enormously. Throughout my time there, I was the youngest Ambassador in the Service. We had quite a lot of informal time and were able to travel. After the stresses of being a head of a geographical department, it was a great relief.

### **Head of Permanent Under-Secretary's Department (PUSD), FCO, 1990**

SR: And then you moved on, back to London.

PN: Yes, I was recalled to London to be the Head of the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department (PUSD), which meant that I was the Foreign Office advisor to the Chief of SIS. Clearly quite a one-off job. I did not enjoy it. It was the second of my jobs that I didn't like, which lasted less than a year.

SR: Can you tell me why you didn't like it?

PN: Well, I found that they did not really want any advice. The Chief was very friendly and used to talk to me privately frequently. But his colleagues further down, with whom I was supposed to work, tended to ignore me. What they did was have a policy meeting to decide what they wanted and then they would draft – not very well, often – something for me to sign. And they would present it to me at the last minute saying, 'This has got to go now!' And I would say, 'No, I have to rewrite this.' That did not go down very well. So it was an unhappy relationship. It surprised me because I think others who have done that job did like it. But it did not suit me.

### **Head, Middle East Department (MED) and Crisis Centre, FCO, 1991–94**

I was therefore really very pleased when, out of the blue, I was asked to go and be Head of Middle East Department just before the fighting broke out in the Gulf, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. I started on 1 January 1991 and the fighting began on 17 January. For the next six weeks, I had the toughest time I have ever had running the emergency unit which poor Rob Young had been running since the previous August.

After the fighting was over, the most interesting thing that was happening was that we had declared a no-fly zone over Iraq. We were protecting the Iraqi civilians, the Shia from the south and the Kurds

in the north from the wrath of Saddam Hussein's regime when they fled their homes to get into the no-fly zones. Soon after this started, I flew with Lynda Chalker, the Minister of State at the time and in charge of the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), in an aircraft of the Queen's flight on a terrific tour which took us to Turkey, Kuwait and then to Iran itself for the first visit by a British minister since the revolution in 1979. In each case, we flew in helicopters with the RAF, from Diyarbakir to northern Iraq and from Kuwait, again with the RAF and finally in Iran with the Iranian Air Force and we flew into Iraqi airspace. I remember asking the pilot of the Iranian helicopter how this was going to be, and he said, 'It's perfectly alright. I've been flying against these people for the last ten years. They're not going to come out today!'

SR: Lynda Chalker was very well regarded, wasn't she?

PN: Yes. And in Africa, too, which is what I found when I was in Zambia.

Well, there's not much more to say about being Head of Middle East Department, except that it was a constant struggle to handle Iran and manage the consequences of the UN embargoes on trade with Iraq. We came quite close, I think, to breaking off diplomatic relations with Iran. We had, of course, broken off diplomatic relations with Iraq. But most of the action in my time was trying to enforce UN sanctions against Iraq. We were leading the charge in that respect. Gradually the sanctions against Iraq became increasingly unacceptable to moderate Arab opinion especially to Shaikh Zayed of the UAE who was concerned about the effect on children.

### **High Commissioner, Lusaka, 1994–97**

SR: Interesting. So you did that for three years. And then off you went to Africa, of all places.

PN: Well, this was a surprise. Not a welcome surprise to my wife, in particular, because we'd never had anything to do with Africa and this was going to be difficult. And the circumstances were difficult as there was a gap of six months before I got there. The person appointed to the job backed off because his wife said she wouldn't go there for a second posting, having already been there once. That put my wife off.

Once we were there, it was more interesting but challenging in a different way to my previous postings. It got better once the trade with South Africa opened up, as it did after Nelson Mandela's election victory in April 1994. The shops became better, life in general became much easier. But we found dealing with Africans quite difficult, in the sense that they weren't interested in our normal ways of socialising and we had to fit in with their way of doing things, of course.

By the time I arrived in Lusaka AIDS was rampant. It was estimated that 40 per cent of members of the Armed Forces and secondary schoolgirls were infected. It was my predecessor plus two, Kelvin White, who had alerted Whitehall to the emergence of this terrible disease nearly 10 years earlier. We were very impressed by the heroic work done by many British nuns and other religious and various charities which were working among the poor in Lusaka and the provinces.

As the largest bilateral donor to Zambia and the former colonial power, we had a very strong position there. And Zambia, at the time, was the third largest recipient of British aid after India and Bangladesh, despite the fact it was a much smaller country. President Chiluba had won an election in 1991, beating the previous incumbent, Kenneth Kaunda who'd been in power since independence in 1964. It was a somewhat fragile situation, because the new President Chiluba was a trade unionist and not used to dealing with foreigners. And he was determined that Kenneth Kaunda would not ever be able to return to power, to which end he changed the constitution so that in future only people whose parents were born in Zambia were eligible to be President. That ruled out Kaunda whose parents were born in Nyasaland. (The irony is that Chiluba himself came from a province in the north of Zambia, right next to Zaire. It was widely believed that he was only born in Zambia, because his mother came across the river into Luapula Province to give birth in the hospital as there wasn't a hospital in that part of Zaire.)

Anyway, I made a point of going to see KK as he was called (he's still going strong at 96!). I went to see him quite frequently to make the point that he deserved respect as a former President and he shouldn't be cut out of everything.

Well, my big problem came quite quickly because the IMF had imposed on the Zambian government stringent economic conditions for the receipt of aid, because the Zambians were in deep debt and had really no alternative but to follow the measures proposed by the IMF: this meant privatising state companies, particularly the state-owned Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines, which was the biggest element in the economy. They became slow about this and were backsliding. Eventually, I told the President that we were going to be withdrawing our budgetary support which was worth £25 million a year. When we did it all the other donors followed suit. That caused an explosion by the Zambian Government and I was put into Coventry for the best part of a year. I used to have regular breakfast meetings with the Finance Minister. But that stopped and the President also stopped seeing me. I was blamed personally and denounced in Parliament and in the state newspapers as an enemy of the state. All very uncomfortable. Greatly to her credit, Lynda Chalker came to my rescue and came on a visit to Lusaka, specifically to see the President to tell him that I was carrying out her policies on

instructions. It didn't make a lot of difference to me, in the sense that they still shunned me most of the time. Eventually they relented somewhat, but it meant, of course, that my posting was prolonged by a year rather than being shortened which is what Chiluba had wanted.

SR: Interesting that they didn't break off diplomatic relations or send you back.

PN: No, they didn't dare to do that because the consequences would have been much worse. They probably hoped that instead of being backed up I was just withdrawn.

Our treatment of Zambia was in stark contrast with the government's attitude to Zimbabwe at that time. President Mugabe paid a state visit to London in 1994. When I suggested that we were being excessively harsh towards Zambia by comparison I was told that Zimbabwe was progressing in the right direction!

There's one interesting point, I think, that after Labour won the election in 1997 they created DIFID (Department for International Development) and proclaimed it was entirely independent from the Foreign Office. And that had an immediate impact on my team, because my First Secretary for the aid programme simply refused to consult me any more. He said he did not need to. Since the whole point of me being there was to manage the politics of our aid programme, this didn't make sense. So I complained to the PUS in the Foreign Office, who managed to hold off the separation of the aid programme from the High Commission until after I'd gone. But it did go through and I remember David Gore-Booth telling me that he had the same problem in Delhi at that time.

### **Special Representative for International Drugs Issues, 1997**

So, at the end of 1997, I made my next return to London for a short posting. In 1996, Michael Howard, the Tory Home Secretary had set up a post in the Foreign Office called Special Representative for International Drugs Issues. Derek Plumbly was the first incumbent, but he was then moved to be the Director for the Middle East and I was put in his place. But I had only been there for three months, when I was told that Robin Cook was abolishing this post as a much publicised measure: he had decided to cull three older men at my level in the Foreign Office to show that they were making economy measures. The other two people affected by this were the Chief Economist (whose rank seem to go up and down every few years) and the person occupying a temporary post of managing the Presidency of the G7 and other heads of government meetings. So it was a bit of a farcical idea, but didn't exactly help me in my morale in this job.

The next blow that came was that the Labour Home Secretary appointed the retired Chief Constable of West Yorkshire, Keith Hellawell, to be the drugs czar in the Home Office. So we were both

trying to do the same sort of thing in different spheres. Keith Hellawell took a fancy to travel abroad. He thought that was one of the perks, so my job became less and less attractive.

SR: Did you manage to do any travelling?

PN: Yes, I went to Colombia. I was taken by US drug enforcers on a helicopter trip into the jungle to witness destruction of crops. I went to Cuba and had talks with the Cuban authorities about drugs matters. And, most interesting of all, I went to with two colleagues from the High Commission in Islamabad, on a trek that took us first to Quetta and then to Kandahar in Afghanistan where Osama bin Laden was said to be tucked away in the airport. I met a so-called Deputy Foreign Minister of the Taliban, to urge them to stop growing poppies – I got a pretty polite brush-off, but it was a very interesting visit to make at a time when all foreigners had been evacuated.

I was given responsibility after doing the job for about four months to take on counterterrorism but in fact, that was a relatively small part of the role at the time. In the end I stayed in this post for about 11 months before it was abolished properly and not resurrected.

SR: And not really one that you enjoyed?

PN: Not at all. I was very lucky in my career that none of the three jobs I disliked had lasted longer than a year!

### **Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, 1998-2003**

SR: And so you were appointed Ambassador to the UAE. Before we get into that, I think you wanted to say something about your experience of working in former colonies?

PN: Yes, thank you. I think that in these three places, which have been parts of our Empire, we did have a very special place. Qatar and the now seven Emirates forming the United Arab Emirates were really like the last stepchildren of the British Raj, since they had been run from Bombay and Delhi before Indian Independence. So there was something very special about them. And I felt that in all three posts our earlier role was remembered by people today with pride and admiration, mixed with twinges – especially in Zambia – of resentment. We continued to occupy a distinctive position of intimacy, though that was beginning to decline. There was an exaggerated respect for our supposed influence and blame for the distant shortcomings of previous generations - often excuses by the Zambians and Emiratis and Qataris for indigenous problems that have been left unresolved. More is expected of the British representative in these countries. And we had to deal with a lingering sensitivity about memories of our patronising ways. There was a strong representational role as a

result of the past, especially the need to meet the expectations of the large British communities which had built up in times when we had a monopoly of goods and services. These postings were a special kind of challenge. And I recommend them to people, apart from the need to attend dinner dances of the British tribal societies, which are such a feature of expatriate life abroad!

Back to the Emirates. Sheikh Zayed who had been the Ruler since 1966 was semi-retired by the time I started and he wasn't as accessible as he had been. He had devolved a lot of the administration to his 19 sons, but he kept them on a tight leash. It's very evident since he died how that leash has gone. Abu Dhabi was challenged by Dubai to be top dog by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's ambitions. And it was only really while I was there that the ambitions of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid became apparent. I remember taking Peter Hain to see him once. He outlined his plans to set up a Dubai International Financial Centre and said, 'That's only the beginning!' And of course it was.

But actually I think that as long as Sheikh Zayed was still the Ruler, there was a sort of cohesive control ultimately exercised over the other smaller Emirates because he was held in very high respect. And he tried to stop the extravagances which we have seen since he died.

One of the most testing times for me was a five-day visit by Prince Charles. It was an absolute nightmare to try and coordinate a five-day programme, including a weekend, with the protocol officials of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, none of which would talk to each other. The leading sheikhs did not show much interest in Prince Charles's visit, apart from the Ruler of Sharjah, where we started a day's tour. He decided that he would give Prince Charles a guided tour of his university in his own car: this was not part of the programme at all! He just sped off for an hour with the result that we then moved on to Dubai an hour late. It was not an easy visit.

We were somewhat let down in my time by the Labour government's attitude towards the Gulf. Robin Cook, when he became Foreign Secretary, said he would not have anything to do with the Gulf countries.

SR: Was this part of his 'ethical foreign policy'?

PN: Exactly. So he didn't come. We did have ministerial visits at a lower level. But while I was there, there was no visit by a cabinet minister apart from the Minister of Defence, who came more than once. Now that was a different problem, because Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, who was the Chief of Staff for the armed forces and is now the strong man of Abu Dhabi, got fed up with these MoD ministers coming as they did for the Dubai Air Show or the International Defence Exhibition

(IDEX) in Abu Dhabi. These were trade shows. They kept coming and they all wanted to see Sheikh Mohammed and bend his ear about buying Hawk jet trainer aircraft. I remember my predecessor's dispatch from 1997 stating he thought the Hawk deal was bound to come right the following year. But it still hasn't. And the salesmanship, I regret, of these ministers from the Ministry of Defence, was so crude that after one encounter Sheikh Mohammed avoided one of them completely on the next visit. Worse I didn't have any appointment with Sheikh Mohammed for the Secretary of State for Defence on one visit so I phoned Sheikh Mohammed when meeting the visitor at the airport and said, 'Please can we come and see you now?' so he allowed us to go straight to him.

SR: Very impressive that you had him on speed dial!

PN: If I hadn't there would have been an acute embarrassment. So this was a big handicap.

Then there was a worse *faux pas*. Just before Christmas one year, I was telephoned by the Office to say that the Blairs were planning to have a Christmas holiday in Oman and Mr. Blair would like to call in to see Sheikh Zayed one day just after Christmas. So, within the hour, I had obtained an enthusiastic 'Yes', only to be told the next day that they would not be going to Oman or the UAE, but that they were going to have a holiday in Sharm El Sheikh with President Mubarak of Egypt. That was acutely embarrassing set against the energetic activity of very senior four star American generals in cultivating Sheikh Mohammed, flattering him and getting their way. We were very much let down by this.

#### **Regional Coordinator of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), 2004**

SR: So then you actually retired, Patrick, but they asked you to go on and do another role.

PN: Yes, it was quite unusual and came out of the blue. In November 2003, having been retired for seven months, I was asked if I would go to Basra on contract to succeed Hilary Synnott as the Regional Coordinator of the Coalition Provisional Authority(CPA) for the 4 southern provinces of Iraq, where our armed forces were in charge.

I got there at the beginning of February, by which time it was already decided by the Americans that the so-called occupation would cease on 30 June. So that was less than five months away and put us in a very difficult position because the team of people that I was in charge of consisted of 120 experts in many different fields from the United Kingdom, of course, from the United States, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the Czech Republic. The experts I had with me included the Governor of Pentonville Prison, a town planner, agricultural experts and two gender specialists. It's

clear from that description that the original design was for a much longer programme than it turned out to be: there was no scope for the town planner to plan anything!

By the time I got there, we had to decide how to spend the funds which had been allocated by the Americans and by DIFID to rehabilitate as much as possible of the services in the four provinces. Well we did manage, by the end of April, to agree among ourselves (with a bit of head bashing) how to spend the money and, in close coordination with the Royal Engineers, we contracted 890 projects, costing more than \$171 million and covering basic services, agriculture, rehabilitation of ports, health, prisons and courts. We felt quite pleased that we managed to do all this, despite a deteriorating security situation, especially in two of the provinces, Maysan and Dhi Qar. We felt that we had achieved as much as possible in the time available. But I think the Iraqis did not really understand how the electricity was still only on for three or four hours a day, because the damage in the war and fighting had meant that power stations needed to be rebuilt completely – and that takes years and years.

But we did manage to achieve quite a lot. It was a bizarre arrangement, because the four Provincial Coordinators, as they were called, of whom two were British, in the southern provinces reported not to me, but to the chief of the CPA in Baghdad. At the same time, we had a serious problem with the accountants in Baghdad who were completely tin-eared and kept saying to us that we had to go up to Baghdad – an 8-hour drive away – to discuss our accounts. That was when it was too dangerous for us to go anywhere except by air. So we refused all these kinds of instructions, but it didn't make for a very harmonious working relationship with the people in Baghdad. They were, I think, just strange importations from different ways of life in America.

My position was very strange, too because, as the Regional Coordinator, I was assigned a protection team, rather mirroring US Presidents. We had this three vehicle convoy of armed guards from the US Naval Criminal Intelligence Service. They were a very good team, excellent people. We got on very well, but it seemed rather extravagant that everywhere I went, there were three vehicles and nine men to take me there. One of the people who was working under me was Rory Stewart, who was the Deputy to the Provincial Coordinator in Maysan Province. On my tenth day, I went to visit Dhi Qar Province and decided that the man there needed to move on. I got agreement to move Rory Stewart there who was a great success. He was working underneath a feisty Italian lady selected because the Italian military were there. It was a strange but successful combination.

SR: What an unusual and adventurous way to end a long diplomatic career!

PN: Yes, it was a very strange way to end my career. Actually, one of the strangest features was a visit on my sixth day there of Prince Charles, who flew in to Basra. He had six separate engagements in the afternoon requiring three different changes of outfit! The army Brigadier in charge was one Nick Carter, who we all realised was going to go very far. He had to arrange for a portaloos to be lifted up into the top floor of the Basra palace where his headquarters were, so that Prince Charles could get changed properly!

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Looking back on my career I have no regrets about my choice or the way it turned out. There was a brief period when I wondered if I would be better off as a merchant banker, but I realised that the money would not make up for the variety and interest of my career in the Diplomatic Service. I was lucky to work alongside so many gifted and friendly colleagues. Although we competed for the better postings, I think that we had confidence that the administration acted without bias or favour in distributing the available talents. I never had the impression that there was a secret inside track for beating the system. This confidence enabled us to treat colleagues with respect and friendship rather than as rivals.

Export promotion came early in my career and featured prominently in my posts as Head of Mission, especially in the Gulf - the UAE was in the top ten of our export markets in my time there. I doubted whether we were better at helping British business than we were 30 years earlier. In my experience, not nearly enough British firms sought our advice and often came to us too late. I suspected that in the goldfish bowl of Third World capitals diplomats often appear to the business community as too clever by half or not half clever enough. I thought that bringing carefully targeted missions of Emiratis to brief British firms on their sectoral investment plans was better than sending subsidised and untargeted outward trade missions.

I spent more than half of my career either in the Arab world or dealing with it in the two FCO Departments covering the area. Too much of my time was spent on crisis management rather than the more agreeable task of cultivating friendships. So perhaps I can be accused of a distorted outlook. I remember that the last Libyan Prime Minister before Qadhafi's 1969 revolution when in exile in Abu Dhabi told me that Westerners will never understand Arabs: they can only hope to learn them like riding a bicycle. I find that comforting. We still need to train Arab specialists to learn them which means that there must be in our missions diplomats who have studied Arabic, available in the middle of their careers to return to the area.

I was fortunate that my wife Elizabeth was a member of the service before she met me so she was not a reluctant trailing spouse. After resigning on marriage she threw herself into the supporting role of spouse in all our postings. She was not allowed to work in the Embassy or elsewhere, but always found areas in which she could be useful especially in Zambia where there was great scope for charitable work. In London she worked in the Diplomatic Service Wives Association as Education Adviser and later as Vice Chair and finally Chair of the Diplomatic Service Families Association. We were fortunate that largely as a result of their work the administration improved overseas and travel allowances which enabled us all to see more of our families. This is in marked contrast to our first postings when we did not see family for up to two years.