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PARSONS, Richard (born 14 March 1928)

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This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Sir Richard Parsons on the 20th of June 2005.

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Education and entry to the Diplomatic Service in 1951

MM Sir Richard, before we get down to your diplomatic career could we just go through your education? You went to school at Bembridge in the Isle of Wight and then on to Brasenose College, Oxford. Did you go straight from school to college?

RP Yes I did.

MM And what did you study there?

RP Modern history.

MM And did you decide at that stage that you would like to go into the Diplomatic Service?

RP Well, I had always been intrigued with it but I remember, before the war, as a small child at Arnold House School my mother explained that I wouldn't be able to join the Diplomatic Service as, at that time, you had to have a private income, but I could have entered the Consular Service. But by the time I had left Oxford that had changed. After Oxford I went for two years into the Army to do military service and, while I was there, I saw that you could try for the Foreign Office and I did and I got in. So when I left the Army, I went straight into the Foreign Office at the age of 23 in 1951.

MM And that was into Branch A?

RP Yes.

African Department of the Foreign Office 1951-53

MM And so what was your first posting?

RP It was a very fascinating one. It was to the African Department and we had about 8 people there doing the whole of Africa. Of course a lot of it was still run by colonial officers in those days, but we did have the Foreign Office Administration of African Territories. That was Libya and Eritrea and we had Ethiopia and we had the Sudan which we were actually ruling, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. And then we had above all our relations with Egypt which were in a state of great difficulty because the Egyptians had unilaterally torn up their 1936 treaty with us, and we were in a stalemate. We had 80,000 men in the Canal Zone so of course it was a very fascinating desk to be on. It was run by 2 men and a boy, and I was the boy. So it was a fun job, though very busy.

MM Were there any military aspects which engaged your attention?

Turf Club riots in Cairo 1952

RP Yes, very much so. I always remember the disaster of the Turf Club riots when the Egyptian nationalists rioted and started to murder the British nationals and other foreign nationals in Cairo who had taken refuge in the Turf Club. We had a meeting with Eden. I was not at the meeting myself but it was described to me. Anthony Eden was the Foreign Secretary and he directed that our Army should immediately march up from the Canal Zone to Cairo to rescue the British nationals who were being murdered. The Army said they couldn't. They had made no plans for it. It would take them at least three weeks. You can't move an Army on the spur of the moment. And Eden was absolutely furious. And I have little doubt that one of his motives in 1956 at the time of Suez was at least his subconscious determination that this time the Army should do what he wanted.

MM So did the Army fail to react at all?

RP Well, they didn't react to the Turf Club riots, no, they stayed in the Canal Zone, perhaps wisely. You can't just move men around like that. We eventually moved our troops out of the Suez Canal zone in 1954 and of course put them all back again in the Suez operation in 1956.

MM I recall that there was a garrison in Libya during my time there and they were considerably reduced after Libya became independent in 1952. I think most of them went down to the Canal Zone in 1952 although I think a small contingent remained in Libya. They were there to guard the Canal.

RP Yes. Because you see all this was based on the assumption that the Egyptian pilots would not be able to manage the Canal. The Canal was then considered still vital to our interests. Of course it was years after Indian independence, but we had a lot of interests in the Far East, as you know, and certainly Anthony Eden was very preoccupied with the idea that we must have proper control of the Canal Zone. But at that time I was instructed to prepare a paper on what we should do if the Egyptians did nationalise the Suez Canal. During my time in the department there had been a revolution. The Wafd civilian government had been chucked out, the military had come in, General Neguib first and then Colonel Nasser came and was in control. They of course were a good deal more aggressive than their predecessors and there was a fear that they might nationalise the Canal. You have to remember that the Attlee government in Britain had done a great deal of nationalisation so it was not really feasible to pretend that we were totally opposed to the concept of nationalisation. Anyhow I consulted our Foreign Office lawyers. They really wrote the paper but I sort of edited it. We produced the paper which said that in this event it would not be really possible to do anything legally because the Egyptians would have a right to nationalise the Suez Canal...

MM ...A legal right with compensation.

RP With compensation. When this happened I had by this time gone to Washington. But a girl I knew in the CRO was summoned to some emergency meeting at Number 10. By this time Eden was Prime Minister. She produced my paper and Eden looked at the paper and said, 'This is no damn good', and threw it across the room. Of course with the knowledge of hindsight you might say that the Foreign Office legal advisers were right and Eden was wrong.

MM Yes indeed. But this girl from the CRO, where did she come from? What was her input into this?

RP She was a girl friend of mine and, probably to impress her, I had told her about this work so she knew it existed.

MM And she discovered that...

RP ...she was a Resident Clerk, or whatever they called it, there was one at the Foreign Office, there was one in the Commonwealth Office, and so she was summoned to this emergency meeting. She realised there was a paper dealing with this very eventuality and that is what she produced but it didn't do any good.

MM Interesting.

RP And I was there at the very time when, as you say, Libya was becoming independent.

MM Going back to the Turf Club riot, were many people killed?

RP Yes, quite a lot. I can't remember now, it wasn't a vast massacre but a substantial number. Although the Canal Zone was so important in our relations with Egypt, I myself was actually more occupied on the Sudan. We of course were running the country, although there was the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium but the Egyptians weren't doing anything...

MM ...so we were doing it?

RP So we were doing it. We had a very good, highly trained Sudan civil service. As they used to say the Blues ruling the Blacks, the old joke. And we had an impressive governor-general, Sir Robert Howe, who was a Foreign Office man and of course he ran it. But so far as there was any link with the Foreign Office, because there was the minister's responsibility, it was through me. So it was quite interesting. One day he sent a telegram saying that he would be home on extensive home leave throughout the hot period, he would be at home in

Cornwall. He received a reply saying, 'Pray tell me why, at this critical moment you are deserting your post?' And of course there was only one man in England who would have sent such a telegram, and that was the Prime Minister, Churchill. What happened was that Churchill, who had served at the battle of Omdurman in 1899 had always had an extensive interest in the Sudan and he had lost confidence in the Foreign Office and said that he wished all telegrams from and to Khartoum to be submitted to him. We said we presume you only mean policy telegrams and he said no, all. All telegrams had to go through the Prime Minister, and came back initialled WSC. On one occasion he dictated a speech he was going to make in the House that afternoon about the Sudan, and he sent it over to us for clearance. So we got going, and managed to find 40 or 50 factual errors in the speech. So with great satisfaction we sent it over to Number 10 and we received a charming reply saying that the Prime Minister thanks the young gentlemen in the Foreign Office for the work they have done, we didn't have any young ladies at the time, but he was going to make the speech without any alterations.

MM Nothing very substantive.

RP No, but I mention it to show the degree of his interest and it is an important policy point because he feared that we were going to sell the Sudan down the river. And I think you can argue that we did. Of course we all hear the dreaded name Darfur today. Actually we received numerous visits from peppery looking colonial gents, governors from places in the south of Sudan, who called on us to warn us that the people of the south, Christian black negroid people, were quite different from the brown Arabic people of the north, and we should not give independence to the whole Sudan but exclude the Christian south which could have gone south to Uganda or to a separate country. We were always conscious of this but I think at the end of the day ministers, that would be Eden really, felt that the important thing was to reach an agreement with Egypt. They didn't try to alter the boundaries of the Sudan unilaterally. That would have been yet another difficulty. I think the Sudan suffered because of the Egyptian problem and I feel some regret now because I feel in my humble way that the first thing I ever touched really proved to be a considerable disaster. Because at the end of the day we did hand over all those southerners to the tender mercies of the north and you know what has happened.

MM Yes indeed. All over Africa I'm afraid.

RP Yes. Our colonial boundaries weren't always a success, were they?

MM Well, there is the question of premature independence, I'm afraid.

RP Yes, that is true, certainly in this regard.

MM Is there anything further you want to say about Egypt?

RP No, I think we have covered the main points, the foreign policy interests.

MM So actually that was your first 2 years in the Foreign Office?

RP Yes, very interesting.

Posting to Washington 1953-56

MM Then in 1953 you went to Washington.

RP Yes. And there I was a 3rd secretary, it was a very good job. There was one ambassador, there was one 3rd secretary and scads of counsellors and 1st secretaries in between. And so I was employed as a kind of errand boy, unpaid footman and ADC, which was of course a wonderful position from which to get into direct contact with lots of famous people, whereas the 1st secretaries were beavering away in their offices. I was considered so unimportant that my time was of no value so I could go and meet people at the airport.

MM Who was your ambassador?

RP Sir Roger Makins, later Lord Sherfield. He was a very good ambassador. Not only was he an extremely clever man but he had a tremendous entree into Washington life, he had

served there before. His wife was a Davis, that is the same family as the Davis Cup, and his brother-in-law was actually governor of the Federal Reserve Bank. So he had a tremendous entree into Washington official life. But you can argue that this was dangerous because as soon as I arrived in Washington I realised that everybody in Whitehall, from the Prime Minister downwards, grossly overestimated our pull and influence in Washington. I have a feeling it happens today. That was 50 years ago. And of course it was all very favourable to us. The president was Eisenhower who of course had lived in England and was known to many British people at the top level as the supreme commander of the allied forces in Europe and the other embassies of course were at a very low posture. The German and Italian embassies were only re-constructed in my day. They didn't exist before then. The other countries were in a much lower position so that the British embassy was the undisputed number one embassy. Even so some of the telegrams from London were quite unrealistic: telling the ambassador to go and say this and that to the President, but even then you couldn't just get in to see the President of the United States at a moment's notice. Not even Roger Makins. But I think he did do awfully well, and I think in a way that helped to foster the illusion of the special relationship. I think the one great mistake we made was to underestimate Eisenhower and overestimate Foster Dulles who was the Secretary of State. I knew Dulles. He was a funny old boy, Presbyterian, a great anti-Communist, a cold-war man of course, and very successful in that way in building up the alliances against the Soviet Union which was of course then a very dangerous state. When I went to Washington Stalin was still alive. But in fact at the end of the day in America the shots are called by the President, not by any of the appointed officers, even the Secretary of State. That is the fundamental thing you have to realise about America, and I don't think that was fully realised in London.

MM Wasn't Dulles also the FBI...

RPit was his brother, Alan Dulles, who ran the CIA. I think at the end of the day, Foster Dulles, who understood our point of view over Egypt, was sympathetic but he couldn't really deliver and at the time of Suez (I had left by then), he became ill and at the end of the day it was Eisenhower who called the shots. We underestimated Eisenhower. He was thought to spend a lot of his time on the golf course but of course the job of being President in America

is not the same as the job of the British Prime Minister. The President can afford to go on the golf course.

MM Yes, I think the vital task of an ambassador in Washington is to understand how the American system works.

RP Roger Makins did that all right, he cultivated the Congress...

MM ...yes, and he knew all the different angles...

RP ...yes, of course it was a completely different Washington in those days. I lived in Georgetown, in a nice part, and Foster Dulles lived round the corner. He used to walk round the block every night, taking the dog out. I used to greet him. And Colonel Lindbergh lived at the other corner, that famous Lindbergh. You could always get access. When I was travelling across America I called on ex-President Truman; you could do it in those days. I was rather more bold than I would be now. I was received by Betsy Truman, the ex-President's wife, who gave us coffee and cookies and said that the President would love to receive you but he was having his nap. I give that as an example of what could be done in those days. It's a completely different world now.

MM They certainly wouldn't walk in the streets.

RP We were in a very strong position. When we had a visit from the Queen Mother we had a dinner party with four presidents present. Eisenhower was there, Nixon the vice president, Johnson was the majority leader in the senate and we had a young Democrat senator called Jack Kennedy, they were all there at the embassy.

MM What a coup. So, that was Washington.

RP Should I mention one or two interesting people that I met?

MM Oh, yes.

RP Well, in my unpaid footman capacity I was instructed to stay inside the building to greet any late arrivals when the ambassador was giving a Queen's Birthday Party on the terrace, and in the garden were all the liberal intelligentsia of Washington, and as I waited who should appear but Senator Joe McCarthy, the famous McCarthy, the anti-Communist man, the one who said the nasty things about the State Department, and many of the Liberals. Like many really wicked people he was completely charming. I took him out on the terrace and there was a tremendous intake of breath and it was rather like arriving at the christening of the sleeping beauty, and bringing in the bad fairy. It was a dramatic moment. He was much hated at the time.

MM Was he really a wicked man?

RP Well, I don't know that he was really wicked, he was thought to be wicked by his enemies. He was hounding them out of their jobs. But you have to realise it was the cold war, and there was an element of hysteria about it all.

MM But at the time how was he viewed by the Americans?

RP Well, I think he had quite a lot of support in middle America. But of course again in Washington you tend to mix with what now you would call the foreign policy élite, and they are not really representative of the country as a whole. Another person I met was Hugh Gaitskell who was then the leader of the opposition. I was instructed to take him round and look after him. He had a rather cool reception by the Americans. They thought of him as a socialist, almost a communist, and he had quite a hard time. The interesting thing was he was in the middle of his battle to get rid of Clause 4, that you may remember referred to the nationalisation of the means of production. Years and years later, we knew Mr and Mrs Blair. We lived near them in Islington, and I was actually at their house in Islington on the night that Blair got the New Labour Party to drop Clause 4. So I told him that I had gone round Washington with Gaitskell, trying to make them understand about Clause 4 and Mr Blair who was then the leader of the opposition, he wasn't Prime Minister at that time, said well, I thought of Gaitskell today. So I was glad to think that he had been remembered.

MM Rather charming.

RP On another occasion I went to the Soviet embassy. This was rather a mistake because actually they were going to show a nasty anti-British film about India, and our people had been instructed not to go, but the minute containing this instruction reached me too late. I hadn't got it so I went. I was rather surprised to find none of the usual Commonwealth people there but after the film I was actually escorted down the stairs by the Soviet ambassador himself, in person. Rather a compliment, you see. As I walked down the stairs I said, Oh, I see your big picture of Stalin has been removed. The ambassador became very embarrassed at that point and shooed me away. So next day I realised I had made a mistake and so I had to own up. I sent a minute saying I had been there and, incidentally, there had been this episode about the picture of Stalin. And our counsellor dealing with Soviet affairs rushed into me and said, are you sure about this? In fact it was the first indication that we had received in the West that Stalin was going to be denigrated and pulled off his perch. So I felt that I had played a tiny part in international affairs.

MM Bringing them up to date. Wonderful. Is that Washington?

RP Yes, I think it is, yes. Just one final point about Washington. We did find you had to be extremely careful with your language in America in those days. We were negotiating with them on a whole range of subjects. One of them was Israel. It was not considered believable that Israel would have to live at enmity with their Arab neighbours for all that long. We always assumed we would find some way of bringing them together. We also had to do a lot of negotiations over China, because the two Chinas were in a very hostile frame of mind and indeed there were rumours of a world war over the off-shore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. We had to do all this with the State Department at all levels including my humble level and on one occasion the State Department said we gather that if we do this you won't really mind. And I said, Oh, I have seen the telegram and we would mind very much. He said, No, your Minister, that is the number 2, has been in this morning and has given us the impression that you wouldn't really mind too much. So I said, can we look at the record. They always got the record back very quickly and the record of what the British Minister had said was that if

the State Department, the Americans, did this the British would find it a bit of a bore. So I said well, you don't understand, it's a language barrier, and 'a bit of a bore' means a near declaration of war.

MM Yes, that's amazing really with the Americans, it just shows.

RP Well, I think we have probably covered that more or less.

Posting to Vientiane 1956-58

MM After Washington you were posted to Vientiane.

RP Yes, that was a bit of a change. From our biggest embassy to one of the smallest. Selwyn Lloyd was the Foreign Secretary and I had been deputed to put him into the embassy Rolls Royce and as I did so he shouted to me to open the door and I realised I had managed to crush his hand in the car. So he said, young man what is your name. Of course I very foolishly, instead of giving one of the others' names gave him my own name. So my enemies thought it was due to that. I think it was just a joke really. But it was an interesting post because that was the lead up to the Vietnam war. Laos had only just become independent of the French and it was very much a Shangri-La type of place, as you know. Luang Prabang the up-country capital was even more of a Shangri-La than Vientiane. It was wonderful scenically, fascinating politically, but the politics were important because there was really considerable disagreement about what should happen to Laos and Cambodia. The Americans wanted to bring it into a defensive alliance and we went along with the Americans, but the Canadians and others, certainly the Indians, did not agree with this. I personally always thought the Canadians were the most sensible. They were involved because there was a Canadian commissioner there, in an international commission. These were the arrangements that were set up in 1954 by the Geneva Agreement, as you know. There was this great argument and I think we would have done better to let them go their way and just drift off as neutral countries, but it was a considerable dispute. While I was there agreement was reached with Prince Souvanna Phouma and his cousin, or half-brother, Souphannavong, who was a leader of the Pathet Lao. The two of them had been educated at the Sorbonne in Paris,

spoke perfect French, but Souphanavong was the leader of the Pathet Lao, who were thought to be communists. Personally I think one should describe them as strong nationalists. I don't think they were really communist but of course they were supported by China. While I was there the two Princes did a deal and the Pathet Lao came into the government. Now it so happened that my ambassador, Gilbert Holliday, was on leave in Hong Kong when this happened and he would have taken a very dim view of this and would have egged the Foreign Office on to object strongly, but I did not and I thought we should not object to this move, but should acquiesce. I got authority from the Foreign Office to go to Souvanna Phouma and say we accepted this. Needless to say, to the complete fury of my ambassador when he returned. I was chargé d'affaires at this critical moment. Years and years later I went back to Laos, when I was the head of Personnel Operations Department and I visited our ambassador, Alan Davidson, and went up with him to Luang Prabang to say au revoir to Souvanna Phouma because this was on the very verge of the country going communist. What happened in Laos was tragic really and of course, as you know, they suffered a great deal from American bombing in the Vietnam war. But they were harmless people.

MM Did you get up to the Plain of Jarres?

RP Oh yes, and right up to Nam Tha and Muong Sing on the frontier with Burma and China. We were marching on through these forest paths and I said when do we get to the Chinese frontier? They said, Oh, that was about a mile back. I immediately turned round. It was the very time when the Chinese had just arrested some wretched man who turned out to be a radio operator, and kept him in a prison for years.

MM What was his name?

RP His name was Robert Ford. I met him later. Anyhow, I didn't want to have that fate, but the boundaries of course were not marked, and still aren't.

MM That's right, it facilitates smuggling.

RP I got the impression in that part of the world, that they were not ideological at all. I don't

think that was only the Laos, I'm not sure that ideology isn't more of a Western thing. I'm not even sure that the Chinese are all that ideological. Anybody who studies South East Asia and the Far East would perhaps say that there isn't a lot of ideology.

MM They are all natural born capitalists.

RP Yes, I would agree with that. So they are in Africa too.

MM Yes that's right. It's amazing really. So that was a nice interlude there. How long were you there?

RP Two years. I was rather glad to get away, I have to admit. We lived in rather miserable conditions. The Foreign Office didn't have the experience that the Colonial Office did and that the CRO later developed, of setting up a shop in some new place in the third world. They just didn't know how to do it.

MM It had never been necessary in Paris.

RP The only thing that spurred them on was when the American ambassador was walking across the duck board to visit our office which was in the middle of a paddy field with water buffalo. The poor man slipped and fell off. He was rescued from the water buffalos, completely covered with slime, and had to go home and change. When we revealed this to London they did agree to try to build us a new building, which they built just in time for the severance of our relations with Laos.

MM So that was Vientiane, and then back to the Foreign Office in 1958.

Return to London, American Department, and a Resident Clerkship in the FO 1958-60

RP Yes, I had two jobs there, I was a Resident Clerk, one of the chaps who lived in the flats at the top of the office. I'll come on to that in a moment. But I had a day job too. I was in the American Department. American Department had been deliberately rather, I won't say

downgraded but put down a bit, because it was shortly after Donald Maclean had been head of the American Department so it had been necessary to say that the American Department was a really peripheral or unimportant Department, which of course it wasn't. Anyhow, I was on the Cuba desk and this was a very interesting time. This was working up to the Bay of Pigs and we spent a lot of time trying to persuade the State Department and the CIA not to invade Cuba on the grounds that the local people would not rise to welcome them. We were right and they were wrong. I think that one of the problems with the Americans is that they always believe they should be loved by people, as in Iraq, and once in Iraq the local people would rise to greet them. I think when we had our colonies we didn't quite fall for that one. Certainly the Bay of Pigs was the most dramatic miscalculation.

MM Where did they get the name The Bay of Pigs from?

RP It was just a place in Cuba with a name in Spanish.

MM Something to do with pigs.

RP I suppose so once, yes. Anyway they invaded, egged on by the Cuban exiles, the people did not rise and it was a disaster.

MM The Cuban exiles have always been untrustworthy guides to Cuba.

RP I think exiles always are. When I was in Budapest we had troubles with the BBC Hungarian service, relaying a lot of stuff from Hungarian exiles. You can't blame exiles, you have to realise they have got their own fish to fry. The same thing happened in Iraq. There wasn't much to do with Cuba so I was posted to the Antarctic desk and that was very interesting because we went to the Antarctic conference in Washington in 1959 and drew up the Antarctic Treaty which actually had been more or less drafted in our Department mainly by the Head of Department, Henry Hankey. That was all very interesting. We were represented at very different levels. The Australians had sent Lord Casey, who was their Minister of External Affairs, and the New Zealanders had sent their Prime Minister, Mr Nash. It shows how important they thought it was. We were represented by Sir Esler

Denning, oddly a retired ambassador from Tokyo with a rather pro-consular manner. We got through it and years later I was in New Zealand giving lectures on a cruise and what should I see above the harbour in Wellington but a whacking great monument to the Antarctic Treaty. So I feel of all my diplomatic activities that is the only one that has been the subject of a monument. It was quite a good Treaty. It has actually had the effect of preventing struggles in the Antarctic ever since.

MM That's remarkable really. Were any of the Latin-American countries represented?

RP Oh yes. There was Professor Escudero from Chile, and the chief legal adviser from the Quai d'Orsay was flown in, and the French were very cock a hoop about that. Until the day, we said, well tomorrow morning Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice will arrive. Fitzmaurice was the chief legal adviser to the Foreign Office. And the French knew that good though their man was, Fitzmaurice was even better. There was of course a lot of competition amongst the legal advisers, but we were negotiating a treaty.

MM You said that Henry Hankey was the Head of Department. Was he the son of the famous Hankey, who had been Cabinet Secretary?

RP Yes.

MM What happened to him?

RP He went on to be ambassador in Panama but he's dead now. His brother, Robin Hankey, was an ambassador in Sweden too, Lord Hankey.

MM Yes, a famous family really. So let's talk about your Resident Clerkship.

RP Yes, I can't go on to all the things there, but it was very entertaining because you had contact by telephone with everybody. You could have a Prime Minister, a Foreign Secretary on the line and they couldn't get to you. They didn't know who you were. They didn't know where you lived and at the same time they would instruct you to do something urgently. You

would put the phone down and the next call would be a little voice saying, this is Bloggins here; my son is lost somewhere in Italy, will you find him? Because we had to do the consular work too. It has changed now. There is a special consular duty officer. But then there were strong elements of absurdity, when you went from the sublime to the ridiculous. We had some very exciting moments. Just to mention two. One was the time in 1959 that Prime Minister Macmillan, just before the election, was going to go to Moscow. People will have forgotten it now but one of the main planks of the election campaign was that he was conducting a series of summit negotiations with the Russians and Macmillan was claiming that we could do things with the Russians that the Americans couldn't and he was trying to be a sort of negotiator between the two. It didn't really work out but it was essential to keep on terms with the Russians and what had happened that night was, it had been agreed that he should go to Russia, the timing was in connection with the forthcoming British election, and it had been agreed he should go but it was only at the last moment that it was decided in London to put out the information about the timing the following morning, with an embargo for, say, 9 o'clock. The information had already gone out to the press. They rang from Number 10 to check that the telegram had got through to Moscow asking the ambassador as an act of courtesy to tell the Russians we were going to do this the following morning. It would be discourteous not to. I rang up the cypher room and they said no, the telegram won't go tonight as Moscow has closed down for the night. It would go in the morning. Too late. So I rang up Number 10 and told them this and a minute later I heard the plummy tones of the Prime Minister on the line who said dear boy, this is a crucial moment in the history of the country. I thought to myself, history of the party more likely. He said you must get this through to Moscow tonight at all costs. So I had to ring up the ambassador and inform him. It was the middle of the night by then, and the poor man had to take it down in longhand in the middle of the night, much groping for pencil and paper, etc. He wasn't too pleased but he ...

MM Was the message en clair?

RP Well, it was en clair by this time, yes. I would like to say that this was the same ambassador who had had trouble with his chamber maid, and that he might have been in bed with the KGB, but that would not be true, and as this is a serious thing I must say it was not

that ambassador. But an exciting moment.

The other exciting occasion was when Selwyn Lloyd was in Paris negotiating, again in 1959, the arrangements for the independence of Cyprus with the Greek and Turkish ambassadors. They discovered that a leading EOKA terrorist was to be hanged in Nicosia jail the following morning. It could have been Nicos Sampson, but again I want to be absolutely correct so it might have been somebody else, one of his leading lieutenants. That can be checked. Both the ministers had asked our minister to stop the hanging. And so of course that was an exciting episode. It is easier said than done you know, to stop somebody being hanged in Cyprus when it is late at night and you are sitting in London. I had to get through to Number 10 and of course the Colonial Office to Alan Lennox Boyd and he had to get through to Cyprus. Again it was complicated by the fact that the hanging was all in the prerogative of the Governor. But a message was sent to the Governor, Sir Hugh Foot, later Lord Caradon, saying that if he wanted to have any more future in the British government service he would be well advised to stop the hanging. We had a rather tense night with everybody ringing in and saying what's happening. He drove to the prison in Nicosia and managed to stop the hanging 20 minutes before it was due to happen. So that was a narrow shave. Of course I was only a telephone operator but it was exciting. That was one of the things, as you know, that led up to the independence of Cyprus.

MM A narrow shave.

RP We had a lot of that kind of thing but I won't bother you with any more.

MM Well, that's very interesting indeed. Then after that period at the FO you were off to Argentina.

Posting to Buenos Aires as Commercial Officer 1960-63

RP Yes. Then I got married and we went off to Buenos Aires where I was commercial secretary. I did a tour of British industry, especially Yorkshire and Lancashire, before I went and they all showed me both their woollen trade and cotton trade, they all showed me their

machines and then they all boasted that this one had been invented in 1840 etc. I didn't think it was actually anything to boast about. I felt rather disturbed that they were all using these antique machines. I began to understand what happened later. But it was an interesting job because the commercial side was the most important side of the embassy. Even then the Argentines were trying to get back the Falkland Islands, the Malvinas, and indeed our office was actually situated on the street called The Reconquest, but it was frankly rather a dormant issue. The commercial side was by far the most important and interesting.

MM So how did you do that commercial work?

RP I think one of our main jobs was to be the representative of ECGD, Export Credits and Guarantee Department, because larger export contracts needed their support. My main job was negotiating the credit for the El Cadillal dam, up in Tucuman, and in fact it was complicated because it was being done for a state government but it was being guaranteed by the federal government of Argentina and also by ECGD in London. So we had to juggle a bit. Eventually it all came unstuck, and although the machinery for export had already been built, ECGD had to shell out a great deal of money. They were very annoyed by me but in fact they got all the money back later.

MM So what exactly were they guaranteeing?

RP Well, this was a hydro-electric dam.

MM So the generating equipment?

RP Yes. Generating equipment and the construction of the dam itself, all the equipment required to manufacture the dam. That was a sort of especially interesting thing of my time. I travelled all over the country and of course even then the Liebig's were very active, and Vestey's, these big meat people, and the meat was sent home on their ships and it wasn't frozen, it was chilled, which was more valuable. They always used to say that the first class passengers were on hooks in the hold.

MM Presumably things like the meat trade looked after themselves?

RP Well yes, they did, but somehow, I can't tell you why, there seemed to be plenty to do. We had a visit from the Duke of Edinburgh and that created quite a lot of interest. I got up to Quito to look after him there. The Foreign Office were not so strong on geography and didn't realise the distance between Buenos Aires and Quito is the same as between London and Cairo. We had a dinner at the embassy in B.A. The Argentine President, Frondizi, was there and after dinner we all stood out on the balcony in the summer evening. My arm was plucked by our chap in the embassy who knew about these things and he said to me, 'a word of advice,' he said, 'in South America never stand on a balcony behind the head of state.' Good advice.

MM Otherwise you might get shot.

RP There was a revolution whilst we were there and Frondizi was chucked out. So, that's that.

MM Very interesting too. So that's 1960. You are still a first secretary. You came back to the Foreign Office in 1963, what did you do then?

Return to the FCO and European Economic Department, 1963

RP I was in the Common Market Department, or whatever it was called, the European Economic Department, but this was rather in the doldrums because General de Gaulle had just put in the first veto. So nothing very much was happening but I was put onto the OECD desk. I had to extract the money for the budget from a very reluctant lady in the Treasury. I got my revenge on the Treasury because I was posted in an emergency to the Cyprus desk in the winter of 1963. At Christmas time Makarios unilaterally abrogated the treaty which had been designed to provide safeguards for the Turkish minority and this gave rise to a great danger of mass murder in the island. So it was a fascinating time to be posted to the Greek and Turkish and Cyprus Desk. But we didn't really control Cyprus because relations with Cyprus were conducted by the Commonwealth Relations Office. That wasn't very easy,

especially as our minister by that time was Rab Butler who was Foreign Secretary. The other Foreign Office minister, also in the Cabinet as Lord Privy Seal, was Lord Carrington, and I really can't say he got on awfully well with the Commonwealth Secretary, Duncan Sandys, whom we thought rather bossy. That was always an element of the problems. But we had to set up the UN Force in Cyprus, which of course still exists I think, and we did that out of the Sovereign Base areas. I remember ringing up the same Treasury lady I had had trouble with over the OECD budget and saying I need £10 million, a lot of money in those days, immediately. She said, 'That will require a lot of thought.' I said, 'Not at all, the Prime Minister has agreed it today at Cabinet with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign Secretary.' So I got my revenge on her.

MM I see, it was the budget for the OECD you were negotiating.

RP Yes. When we got to the UN Force money was no object really. Anything to stop the murders. Shall I tell you a little bit about Butler?

MM Yes.

RP Because he was a very fascinating man. He had been turned down twice as Prime Minister. Alec Douglas-Home was Prime Minister then, and when you got to know Butler, which I did because Cyprus was a major problem during his year in the Foreign Office, you can understand why. To some extent he had rather lost heart. He had always been a bit cynical and he had become more cynical. Just a little illustration of that. We had a meeting in his office and he kept leaning back on his chair and putting his feet on the edge of the table in a very dangerous way. The high command of the Foreign Office were all poised to rush forward and rescue him, if only for the sake of their careers. As we went out, I heard him murmur to Nico Henderson, his private secretary, 'keeps them on their toes you know'. That was very typical of Butler. I once went with him to The Hague to a meeting with Dean Rusk who was the American Secretary of State, and he said 'we have a young man in our Cabinet, Edward Heath, who is dealing with trade.' He said this in a very airy way, 'and he has got involved in some form of retail price maintenance. I don't know that he really understands it. You know what these young men are like, very impetuous'. It was an absurd remark,

because Heath was not a young man. He had been a brigadier in the army years before and had been Chief Whip at the time of Suez. And of course Butler knew this perfectly well, it was one of his jokes really. He was very likeable.

MM Would he have made a good Prime Minister?

RP Not by then. I think he might have done earlier. There is always a time and place for these things. Carrington was of course a delightful man to work for. He is one of my special favourites.

MM Which department were you in at this time, were you still in the Common Market?

Central European Department

RP No. I had been transferred in this emergency to the Central Department.

MM I see. Central was dealing with Cyprus?

RP Yes it was, Central European Department, and we were dealing with Greeks, Turks and Cypriots.

MM What was the general policy of that Department with regard to that area?

RP Well, we were guarantors of the Cyprus settlement. And that put us in a difficulty because if you are a guarantor of some thing you are supposed to make sure it takes effect. Of course we did not want to move out of the Sovereign Base areas where we had a lot of troops and deploy them all over the island, it was the last thing we wanted to do. So we huffed and puffed but it really wasn't a very satisfactory position to be in. And the whole thing was repeated 10 years later. By this time I was somewhere else. It was in 1973 just before the Turks invaded in 1974. I was in the Personnel Department. Going back to those rooms, there was Roy Hattersley, who by this time was a Labour minister, controlling the whole thing just as they had done 10 years before. I couldn't help smiling because when

Cyprus erupted in 1963 we were rather thrilled to find ourselves at the very centre of things and we summoned a conference in London and the Greeks and Turks came to London and we were the centre of the whole thing. Needless to say it hadn't gone on for long before ministers were deciding to wash their hands of the whole thing. Exactly the same thing happened 10 years later with the Labour government. I couldn't help smiling to hear the Labour minister say how pleased they were to be the centre of everything, and that everything to do with Cyprus was revolving round them, a sentiment which they did not hold for very long.

MM Why have we got troops in Cyprus?

RP Because we could, to some extent. We were the colonial power. We were able to negotiate that as a price of giving the island independence. And of course we were able to balance the Greeks and the Turks against each other. Because it wasn't just one country. And again the Greek Cypriots had been divided. At an earlier stage they had wanted ENOSIS, that is union with Greece, but later on they changed their minds and they accepted they would have to have independence. But the Turks had a different view of course. So we had managed to negotiate these bases and we wanted them really as a staging post to the Middle East. And also to the rest of the world. It was a tremendous advantage, and I think still is, to have these bases where the airforce could fly and refuel and go where they had to go. They were pretty important.

MM So we had still got bases in the Persian Gulf. We had lost the bases in the Canal Zone and Libya was no longer useful...

RP ...we needed the Cyprus bases; well we have still got them of course.

MM Yes we have. What for?

RP Well, I think they played an important part in the Iraq war, didn't they? I think they are considered an important role.

MM So that was Cyprus, in 1963-64.

Posting to Ankara, Turkey as Head of Chancery 1965-67

RP As a result of all this stuff on Cyprus I was considered at the Foreign Office to be an expert on Turkey, so in 1965 we were sent off to Turkey, again as first secretary. I was going to be Head of Chancery there. That was a very fascinating post too. We were there for 2 years until 1967.

MM As Head of Chancery what was your job?

RP Well, I was the head of the political section, but I was also the co-ordinator of the embassy. As head of chancery you are the only person in the embassy to whom the head of mission can turn to to know what is happening to the consular work, or the other work in the office. This is not always understood, I think. I think the job has now been changed. But I did consider it my duty to find out what was going on in all sections. That can be misunderstood. When I went to Lagos, which of course was a Commonwealth post, at first I had difficulties with the commercial counsellor, a very experienced and nice man. A Commonwealth commercial counsellor, who simply couldn't understand why I was taking an interest in what he was doing. He thought that was rather sinister. He thought I was trying to muscle in. I had to explain to him that I was operating in the Foreign Office way. I was operating in a way to co-ordinate the work of the various sections.

MM Was there a counsellor between you and the ambassador?

RP Yes, he had the rank of minister but he was a counsellor, yes.

MM So what did he do?

RP Well, a good question. What does the number two do in any mission? A lot of the actual day to day work, drafting of telegrams etc, would be done by the Head of Chancery, and so with the minister, the number two, you have to be careful. I found both in Turkey and in

Nigeria, that you have to make sure that he has plenty to do, and you have to make sure that you resist the temptation to bypass him and go straight to the head of mission. It calls for a bit of human relations. Of course he was a good friend.

MM Was it a big post, Ankara?

RP It was quite a big post. We had a lot of irons in the fire, various things, which I perhaps won't mention here. But we had, among other things of course, CENTO, that was the Central Treaty Organisation. We had a permanent military deputy there, an air marshal and his staff. They were quite active.

MM Were they on the embassy staff?

RP Not really, no. They were not working under the ambassador, although they were housed at the embassy.

MM And they were CENTO?

RP They drew on our facilities but they were a separate outfit. It was quite a high level thing. The secretary general, Khalatbary, later went back to Iran and became Foreign Minister. The poor man went at just the wrong moment. It was the fall of the Shah, and he had the misfortune to be executed by the revolutionaries. But of course Cyprus, again, was our main subject because the Turks had a very odd view of Cyprus. You could sum it up and say that from Cyprus you could see Turkey, but from Turkey you couldn't see Cyprus. Now that is actually physically true because the Taurus mountains in the south of Turkey are very high, so you can see them from Cyprus, but the Troodos mountains are lower and you can't see them from Turkey. But it is also metaphysical because actually the Turks found the Turkish Cypriot community in Cyprus rather a bore, really. When I say the Turks, I mean the Turkish foreign ministry and the Turkish government, because it couldn't allow the Turks to be massacred by the Greeks because public opinion wouldn't have stood for it. I think you might draw a parallel with the white community in Rhodesia at the time of the Ian Smith thing. It was a problem the British government had to be interested in, but really wished it

didn't exist. On one occasion I was with a friend of mine in the foreign ministry called Ilter Turkman, he became foreign minister later, and I was with him in a restaurant and he said, oh, God, don't look now, there is that dreadful fellow Denktash over there. I don't want to talk to him. Well Denktash was, possibly still is, for years and years the leader of the Turkish Cypriots, so that was the real attitude of the Turks. I remember being sent in the middle of the night to the foreign ministry because again you see it's a reincarnation of the same thing, we were still guarantors of the Treaty so we had to exercise some authority and tell the foreign ministry they must restrain the Turkish generals. So they said to me, have you ever tried restraining a Turkish general? And of course years later in 1974 they did invade.

MM So what was the system of government in Turkey?

RP Well, it was a sort of more or less democratic system in those days. The president, who we knew because we knew his daughter, was President Inonu, who had been a great hero of Turkey. He had been Ataturk's very loyal number two. He was a very fascinating elderly man, and we used to go to tea with him. He used to tell us about Ataturk and on the whole at that time it was a more or less secular Turkey, the Ataturk party who had done all these reforms and tried to make Turkey a not so religiously dominated country, was really in charge. I remember when we went on a cruise along the north coast of Turkey and on the ship we got friendly with a number of educated Turkish people, doctors and professors, and when we got off we saw they were building a new mosque somewhere in the northeast of Turkey, and they were disgusted. They said, 'a new mosque, that is the last thing we want. We should be building a new school or hospital.' That was their attitude. But of course since then it has changed a bit and the religious side has come up more strongly.

MM How did the system work?

RP The army really were in control to a considerable extent. There was an element of civilian government and there were elections. Of course there were other periods when they were under total military rule.

MM So of course when they said, 'have you ever tried controlling a Turkish general...'

RP ...Well, these were the diplomats, the civilian diplomats in the foreign ministry.

MM Yes, and the generals were actually running the country, it's not going to be easy is it?

RP No, when I said running the country they weren't actually running the country but they were there in the background ready to intervene. Of course it is important to realise, this is something British politicians don't realise, that in several countries, in Turkey, Nigeria, Argentina, it is considered the duty of the armed forces to move in if the politicians make a mess of it. In some countries it is enshrined in the constitution. We think that very strange but in those countries that is the norm.

MM That is constitutional?

RP That was considered constitutional at the time, yes.

MM Was it. That's interesting. In addition to the president and the army in the background was there a kind of bureaucracy, a civil service?

RP Oh yes. A very competent one. But again in Turkey there was an enormous gulf, and I think still is, but I won't say the upper class, it would be better to talk about the educated class, the professional class and the peasantry. Because you see what happened was, that under the Ottoman rule there was no real upper class. It wasn't like the Hapsburgs or anything like that. They were not aristocratic families at all. Everybody really held office at the whim of the Sultan and somebody might be very powerful, they might be a Grand Vizier, but when they died all their riches were confiscated by the Sultan so there were a lot of educated people in Turkey but there was no sort of aristocracy. There was nothing that we would call a middle class as such, and I think that has been a problem in Turkey right up to the present time. The diplomats were highly cultivated and educated and some of the best diplomats I have met anywhere. I think the best people in the country became diplomats. You can't say that of all countries.

MM No, that's certainly true. So that disposes of Ankara, or does it?

RP We had a watching brief on what the Soviet Union was up to in those days and I remember my aged mother came out to see me and was collared by the naval attaché who spent an afternoon going up and down the Bosphorus, she was sitting on the deck whilst he was taking photos of the Russian fleet. He said afterwards I was delighted to have your mother, she acted as excellent cover. That is the kind of thing that was going on.

MM He was part of the embassy?

RP Yes.

MM So did you also have a military attaché?

RP Yes, very much so. A keen butterfly hunter, but he had other roles too.

MM Like?

RP His job was to be friendly with the Turkish military, and he achieved that quite well. The Turkish military were not entirely easy. A little later there was a General Sunay who became the president and he and his wife came to England on a state visit.

MM So, 1967?

Posting to the Foreign Office as Assistant Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary 1967

RP Well, yes. One of the people who came to visit us was Michael Stewart who was Foreign Secretary at the time and I made the great career mistake of appearing intelligent to him. And he said he would like me to come back as his assistant private secretary in London. Which was all very well but for the fact that by the time I got there he had been moved and the job had been taken over by George Brown. So I worked with him for a bit. The principal

private secretary was Murray MacLehose, who became a governor of Hong Kong. That was an experience. George was a very strange man really. I became quite fond of him but he wanted to emulate Ernie Bevin. He wanted to be the boy from the East End who would be loved by the Foreign Office and by the diplomats and he didn't pull it off somehow. He was very thin skinned. He thought that we were all sneering and laughing at him, which was very far from being the case because he was a man of enormous ability, a very clever man, nobody was laughing at him. He got that all wrong, but he didn't understand us and we found it hard to cope with him. The Permanent Under Secretary at the time, Paul Gore-Booth, was a charming, gentlemanly Anglo-Irish Etonian with beautiful manners, etc. but of course he couldn't bring himself to speak firmly to the Foreign Secretary, 'with respect Foreign Secretary....' And George was a bit of a guttersnipe to be quite frank, and would have said so himself. And he didn't appreciate that kind of talk. I remember Murray was very much better. I remember one dreadful night we were there and I heard Murray mutter to him, 'George you are drunk, we are going home.' And that was actually the way to treat him. That wasn't the Foreign Office way.

MM I imagine Murray was a Scot, was he?

RP Yes, he was. A dour lowland Scot with a sense of humour. Trying to concentrate on policy, George actually had the potential to be a very fine Foreign Secretary. He was vitiated by what I have already said but also by his terrible relations with the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. The high minded mandarins kept putting things up to George simply on the strength of national interest, but they failed to spot that the thing was who had voted for George in the leadership election and who had voted for Harold. I can't remember which was which now but Healey was in one camp, Callaghan was in another, but it needed it a bit of care in presenting cases because George was delighted to swipe at the Department which he thought was run by an enemy and nobody could induce him to attack a Department run by a friend. This was an extraordinarily personal way to take a view of foreign policy which I think the high command at the Foreign Office didn't really fully understand. So they were difficult in that way.

MM It's ridiculous.

RP Well, is it?

MM Some hapless Whitehall Department loses an argument about a foreign policy issue because the political head of it is not on good terms with the Foreign Secretary...

RP ...It wasn't as simple as that. They would put up these high minded recommendations that we should oppose the Treasury, oppose the Ministry of Defence, these would be in all good faith, but the Foreign Secretary simply didn't want, in Cabinet, to argue against a friend. I think it would be the same now. Whether you are a Blair-ite or a Brown-ite, I think it would be exactly the same. But I don't know. I'm not there. But I don't think it would change. Human nature is such. I don't mean that they would go against the recommendation, but they just wouldn't push it very strongly. George's wife was Jewish, Sophie, and I always thought he was Jewish, but he never claimed to be or admitted to be. But it was that important point of policy because in 1967 he got very much involved, there was great tension, over the waterways leading up from the Red Sea to Israel, and he got very much out on a limb supporting the Israeli case. We were really rescued by the war in 1967. The seven day war. It was all subsumed in the wars and the UN resolution. So it got him off the hook. It was a danger. I remember also when he sacked the governor of Aden and we put in Humphrey Trevelyan in the last days. Aden was a very critical time. So we were dealing with some very nasty situations and Vietnam because Wilson, with considerable skill, was resisting American pressure to go in with them on Vietnam. And the left wing of the Labour Party was the opposite. They actually wanted to support the Vietminh. I remember going with George round constituencies in Lancashire where we were having to face mobs of angry people, who came to him and said you are too pro-American over Vietnam. It was a very tricky thing. The policy was to give the Americans public support but not to give them any military support. That was a tricky one.

MM What was the situation in Aden?

RP There was a lot of trouble in Aden. We were still ruling the place but the nationalists were demanding we got out quickly. And of all the British Colonies I have been to, it was

the only one where they have expunged all traces of Colonial rule. But George thought a more politically minded governor might do better so he sacked Sir Richard Turnbull, and put in Humphrey Trevelyan. Although very able, I don't think he could do very much. We pulled out of course. It was the time of Mad Mitch and all that.

MM Yes, I do remember that, and I remember the change of governor, and Humphrey Trevelyan came in. He had been an ambassador and had no colonial experience.

RP No, he had been in India hadn't he? He started in India.

MM Oh, yes. So perhaps that was quite a good move. What about George Brown's relations with the service generally?

RP Well, of course I could tell you hundreds of stories about that, but I won't. He was unpredictable. He was better if you stood up to him but it wouldn't be quite true. He wasn't a classic bully. He was a very tricky man and had his likes and dislikes. I don't think I minded so much his being rude to the men, because if you are a fairly reasonably senior person in the Foreign Office you are supposed to be able to take that, but I did object to his being rude to the wives, when he used to stay at embassies. He humiliated Lady Reilly in Paris, and he was rude to the wives. I thought that was rather unforgivable.

MM Yes, they are not paid to take insults.

RP They weren't briefed for it at all. It was quite amusing to see people who had been serving overseas go in to see the Foreign Secretary with a look on their face saying others have failed but I shall get through, and two minutes later George's strangled tenor would be heard shouting and screaming from inside and they would come out looking crestfallen and creep away.

MM What sort of relationship did he have with his wife?

RP Poor Sophie. Well, she was very nice. She had a calming effect on him. We had to help

her and she was rather a dear. I actually went to her funeral, very sad, nobody else from the Foreign Office was there, nobody from the Labour Party was there, not one single person. But of course George had left the Labour Party by then, but even so, he was a major figure in the Labour Party. I felt he was a kind of ruined archangel, really, George Brown, a man of very great abilities but there was something amiss, you wanted to shake him and say, calm down, we are on your side.

MM This could be a red herring, but I had the feeling that was also slightly true of James Callaghan.

RP Yes.

MM He was inclined to be very brusque, very distrustful, I think.

RP Yes, he was. But he was I think a faux bonne homme. He could be very jolly and jovial. Both Callaghan and Brown led us into personnel moves which were pretty disastrous. I don't think I should mention the names, but when we had to put a new ambassador in Bonn, instead of sending by far the ablest man, they sent a man whom George liked, because he was of more modest social origin. That was not a success. I objected, I didn't like that. And then later on with Callaghan he refused to have a man whom he thought had rather a Bertie Wooster type upper class attitude with the result he was assassinated. I won't go into more details but again in both cases I didn't really like the way they interfered with personnel, in a slightly unworthy way. But there we are, you have to put up with these things.

MM Yes, I fear so. Have you anything further to say about...

RP ... well, lots and lots, but I think I won't, because we have to get on. Actually I didn't last very long with George, he didn't like me or maybe he did like me but I think he didn't think I was enough in awe of him. I think he liked his secretaries to be a bit frightened of him and I don't think he liked somebody who saw the funny side of it.

MM And did you?

RP Well I tried not to, but I was not successful. He was very sensitive, George. He knew what was going on in my mind. I don't think he liked that. He said he wanted to have more the dead pan private secretary type. I saw him in later years. He was always very friendly and used to chum up to me in a very nice way, but he didn't want me, so I moved. I was moved sideways into the NATO department. The Western Organisations Department.

Transfer to Western Organisations Department of the FCO

RP It was a very interesting time because there again we had problems, then as now, with the French, of course. General de Gaulle was still there. Again we had a different view of NATO from him and NATO had recently left Paris and had gone to Brussels. We were always very conscious of the importance of the United States in NATO with all the armed forces that they put into it. The French rather pulled the other way.

MM They left NATO didn't they?

RP They left the military command. They never left NATO itself. They left the unified military command. That's why NATO moved from Paris. So it was at this time that we were trying to use all the various European activities, including the Council of Europe and NATO and everything else to advance our ultimate aim of getting into the Common Market.

MM Did you have anything to do with policy towards the Common Market?

RP Well, not specifically. I wasn't specifically involved. I had more to do with the other organisations, NATO and the Western Union, which was a hang-over from the war. The WEU used to have meetings. There were different departments dealing with the Common Market.

MM And you were in one of them?

RP No, I was in the Western Organisations Department. We had some exciting moments.

We had a naval review, we organised it at Spithead, and we forgot to tell the Queen about it. As soon as she heard it was on, she cancelled something else that she was doing and went. It was quite successful. We also went to Iceland which was an interesting experience, in the middle of the summer. I drove round all night watching the sights because you couldn't go to bed because it was too light.

MM Was there any glimmerings of the cod war at that stage?

RP No, not at that stage. The cod war came a little later.

MM Hostilities actually broke out...

RP ...It was more in the 1970s.

MM So were there any other crises?

RP No, I think nothing of general interest at that moment, no.

Promotion to counsellor and posting to Nigeria 1969

MM Did you get a promotion around about this time?

RP Yes, I got promoted to the rank of counsellor and I was sent off to Nigeria in 1969. It was the price to be paid for promotion, but I was quite happy to go, and in retrospect it was one of our most interesting posts. We were sent there during the Biafra war. The war had been going on for about a year I think. We were there in 1969 and the British government was committed to supporting the Nigerian federal side, Lagos against Ojuwku and the Biafrans. In retrospect I am not at all sure that that was the right policy. I am not at all sure that Nigeria wouldn't have been better by dividing into three constituent parts, the Hausa, the Ibo and the Yoruba, but that wasn't our policy at the time.

MM Well, Nigeria hadn't long been independent.

RP No, it hadn't. Independence was in 1960. The troubles broke out in 1967 and we went there in 1969.

MM So how did that manifest itself?

RP Well there was a military government. General Gowon had been at Sandhurst. I rather liked him. I thought him one of the best rulers they had. The war was going on, it wasn't exactly like a European war. We didn't really see anything of it. There was a tense atmosphere. We had a very good High Commissioner in Sir Leslie Glass. He made me understand something of relevance to Commonwealth posts, it was the first time I had served in the Commonwealth, and he made me understand the importance of personality in the Third World. I think at the end of the day the importance of the personality of the High Commissioner in Lagos is much more important than that of the ambassador in Bonn or Paris or even Washington. In the developed European countries, if the representative of any respectable country wants to see the Foreign Secretary, whoever it is, he is going to be admitted. They are not going to think 'do I like that man or not,' but the Nigerians weren't like that at all. I remember once having a jolly time joking with a senior man in the Nigerian ministry of external affairs and a little man kept putting his head round the door. It was obvious that somebody was waiting. So I said, 'I'm afraid somebody is waiting, should I go now?' He said, 'no, it's only the American ambassador, let him wait.' I was only number four in the High Commission; there was the minister and a counsellor above me. In no other country in the world could that happen. In the end I said, 'come on, I must go.' Actually I think that ambassador was a perfectly nice man but the Nigerians thought that he was stuffy. They just didn't deal with him and he had to be withdrawn. He had done nothing wrong.

MM Leslie Glass?

RP Not Leslie Glass, an American. Leslie was very good. He managed to combine being very clever with concealing it very well, which you need to do in Nigeria.

MM Of course this is all in the nature of the Commonwealth and perhaps it's why it has been

such a surprisingly durable institution.

RP ...Well it is very interesting, and this is all relevant, the Foreign Office people have always been trained to think more or less exclusively in terms of our British national interest. You may interpret that in its widest sense, free trade requires peace all over the world. But that basically is what you are aiming for. But I think Commonwealth people, especially in the early days, thought also, we must also help this country we are serving in. Because we had intervened in it, it had been a colony and we have a moral responsibility to help the people. So they had a dual role which I support actually. I agree with that. But some of the Foreign Office people didn't quite go along with that. There was always a certain amount of, I wouldn't say friction, but a different approach.

MM Well, I suspect we simply didn't understand the different approach but at the same time there were enormous advantages to be gained from fostering the Commonwealth attitude.

RP Yes, well we had a huge trade with Nigeria, and of course economic imperialism lasted much longer than political imperialism. But the Biafra war was very interesting. Lord Carrington came. It was the first time he had been to Biafra. The Conservatives were in Opposition when we first went to Lagos in 1969, and they were considering the possibility of reversing their support for federation, which in fact they didn't do. But he went to visit Ojukwu, of the Ibos, then he came on to us in Lagos. The second time he came, he came in a completely different capacity as the Conservatives were now in government, and he was their Secretary of State for Defence. This time he came to Lagos after the end of the war and I remember giving a party and Sir Louis Mbanefo was there. He had been the Chief Justice of the Eastern Region. He was one of the most respected of the Ibos. He said to Carrington, 'you remember I met you last year, when you came to visit Ojukwu, and there we were, there was Ojukwu sitting on the sofa and I was next to him and then there was you'. I said to Carrington afterwards, 'it's like going to Germany in 1946, and somebody says don't you remember, Adolf was here and Himmler was there and I was in the middle.'

MM That was more like 1944.

RP Anyhow, most strange. After the war a lot of well meaning people arrived and they all went to the Eastern Region and tried to set up orphanages. The Ibos said what a horrible idea; we don't like orphanages. We have taken all the orphans into our families, we don't bother with orphanages. Which made me feel that in some ways the Africans can teach us something.

MM I thought myself, I don't know how this struck you, that the Africans have got an uncanny ability to size a person up, and to decide whether they like him or not. And that is absolutely crucial to the relationship.

RP Yes, that is true. You can get away with anything if they like you, and make any sort of jokes about them, but if they don't like you, you might as well go home. Later on, long after I was there, we had a High Commissioner who was a very able man. He rather humbly invited me to come to his house before he went and to give him some advice on this subject. I said you have a sort of Socratic manner, you are very anxious to learn, so you subject people to a sort of inquisition. That is perfectly all right if they know their stuff. But to people in Nigeria, including the Governor of the Central Bank and to all the other top people, we are the ex-colonial power, and they are terrified that you are going to make them look a fool in front of other people. Don't do that. He didn't take my advice and at the first opportunity they chucked him out, and they declared him persona non grata. And he had to leave. That was Martin LeQuesne, but he was a good man, a very good man. But with Africans you have got to be very careful, and they hate to be patronised, naturally. We were the former colonial power. I remember once we went to a lunch party with our Nigerian friends and there were some American black people there and they completely misread the situation. They attacked me because the British government were threatening to sell arms to South Africa or something, and then we had a perfectly friendly talk. The Nigerians sat there and didn't say a thing. After the Americans left the Nigerians said to me, 'they are funny aren't they, they are not like us are they? They are funny those people, those Americans'. And I realised to them that the pigmentation of skin was not the point.

MM That is absolutely fascinating.

RP There was also a man who became a famous African pop star, Fela Ransome-Kuti, his son is famous now, he was the leading Michael Jackson type, really, and his brother was our paediatrician for our children and we used to go to his Afro-Spot which was a Nigerian night spot, he used to sing violently anti-white songs. As soon as he saw us he would stop, come down and give us seats in the front row and welcome us. So much of it was just sort of window dressing really. There was a point where we had a friend who would tell us everything that was going on in the Supreme Military Council, which was rather useful. Rather annoying for the chap whose business it was to know but anyhow, at one point...

MM ...this was a Nigerian?

RP A Nigerian friend, yes, and at one point they discussed what they could do against the British, to punish us for something we were doing and Gowon said, 'Oh, I don't know that we could do anything nasty to the British, I wouldn't like to upset Sir Leslie.' That was our High Commissioner. That is the supreme mark of diplomatic success. Not to be taken lightly I think.

MM What happened to Gowon?

RP He is still there. He stayed in England for some time and did a doctorate at the University of Warwick. He is back in Nigeria now. He is well regarded.

MM I remember him succeeding that very impressive Nigerian who ended up being killed.

RP Yes, I know who you mean, Tafawa Balewa, yes he had been the Prime Minister before. They hated to be patronised. You remind me of this question of corruption. One hears a lot about this. We had a friend who was very influential in the field of economic policy. He was the Deputy Governor of the Central Bank. He said, 'You may say I am corrupt, but of course I come from this poor village in the Yoruba country and I'm expected to produce a road from my village and a school and a hospital. I've done all that. I couldn't do all that on my salary'. It's a slightly different way of looking at things.

MM Well, I think that is absolutely the case, throughout Africa, and not only Africa, parts of Asia as well.

RP Yes, it's very easy in Europe to hold forth.

MM Yes, what is corrupt and what isn't varies according to the territory.

RP Anyway such money that was available to him, he spent it in a good way.

MM Yes. Well, I think quite a number of those chaps do that. And well done them.

RP So we were happy in Nigeria, we liked it. And of course the friendships you made were quite important because they would come and stay all night and dance to dawn. They were the leading people in the country.

MM To socialise was essential. Once again you had a counsellor there? No, you were the counsellor and Head of Chancery.

RP And there was a Minister. And then there was another counsellor, the one I mentioned, the Commercial Counsellor who was senior to me.

MM What, senior in the hierarchy? Within the High Commission?

RP Yes. But he was on commercial work.

MM So who was the Minister?

RP Kenneth East, a lovely man. I became a good friend of his. Edward Willan was there first.

MM So after your posting in Nigeria...

Return to the FCO as Head of Personnel Operations Department 1972-76

RP I was brought back to be the Head of Personnel Operations Department which job I did for 4 years. That was a very fascinating job as you know. At the same time we had a separate Department, Personnel Policy, whose responsibility it was to recommend what vacancies there should be, not which staff should be posted. We were concerned with who should actually occupy a given post. I suppose in a way I was an understandable appointment because I was a Foreign Office chap but I had just served in a Commonwealth post. And understood, I hope, both those Departments. Both services had been recently combined. You remember there was a period where there had been a joint administration with duplicate personnel departments but this time, at last, they had really got together as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. That was quite tricky because the Commonwealth Office had been the smaller service and were frightened of being swallowed up in the larger Foreign Service. So you had to make sure that their sensitivities were taken into account and they got their fair share. Not always easy because the best Commonwealth men and women had not served in foreign language posts by definition. And they might have started in India, they might have spoken Hindi or might have been in Africa and spoken Swahili, but that wasn't very useful. And then you get the kind of person who says, 'I have been all over the world and my children are growing up, my wife isn't so strong, I would like to go to Europe.'

And then you might say, 'well, yes you can go to Cyprus or Malta or Oslo where they all speak English, but could you really cope with Rome or Paris?' And that was not so easy, really. So one had to be very careful to try and be fair to everybody. One of the main problems, most of the work, - this is not of general interest because it is about individuals - but the main problem was a nasty habit of Ministers, and for that matter senior officials, I think Blair is doing it more than ever, of picking out their special favourites: saying this man would be ideal for this post. A charming man, let's make him ambassador in Paris, or this private secretary of mine, straight to Washington. But you had to point out the consequences. You had to say OK, you want to send this man to Paris: who do you think then is going to be our next ambassador to Japan in 2 years' time? He is the most senior Japanese speaker in the Service. If you lock him up in Paris, you have nobody for Japan. So consequently in a sense

my aim was to try to get about 85% correct, rather than have one that was 100 and one that was 60.

MM Very difficult.

RP Yes, it was difficult. But I was well supported by my seniors, by the Chief Clerk and above him the Permanent Secretary. Ministers on the whole were all right unless they got a bee in their bonnet. We had to cope with that.

MM So, how did you cope with that? Supposing some Secretary of State or other said, 'well, we want to post our friend to Cyprus.'

RP Well, we didn't have many people coming in and appointing people from outside the Service, but of course we did have one or two cases, notably when Sir Peter Ramsbotham was removed from Washington, and replaced rather rapidly by Peter Jay. There was that case. Of course what can you do, if the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary are determined on something? There is a limit to what you can do, since they have the political power. We didn't have much of that.

MM I think that was a fairly unique circumstance.

RP I think it more the tendency of the senior officials, the Permanent Secretary and the senior promotions board, the Deputy Secretaries to have some idea that somebody was a jolly good person. An ideal person to send to Lisbon, but they might not be the ideal person. Because you had to think of their languages and everything else. It was an interesting job.

MM So were most of your problems connected with this sort of fairly detailed analysis of what was required?

RP Yes. I was the secretary of the senior promotions board so therefore it fell to me for recommendations for the most senior jobs but on the whole the ambassadors didn't know that. They used to think of me as dealing with first secretaries and all that. And they would come

and see me and talk about their staff. That was all right by me.

MM It would give you a glimpse of them.

RP Of course it did. It was very interesting. I enjoyed it, I think it was my best job in some ways. A powerful job but of course, like all power, you have to exercise it with prudence, you must conceal it. Behind the scenes is the best way to operate. When I first started, I liked to let people down lightly and I didn't always tell them the whole truth. But I found that was not kind to people in the long run. There was one man who had to be brought back from Paris because his ambassador didn't like him and instead of telling him that I just invented some excuse, but of course it wasn't a good idea because for years afterwards he and his wife would come up to me at parties and blame me for removing them from Paris where they were so happy. It would have been far better actually to have warned him that he had fallen down on the job. After that I was a good deal more honest with people. I had to be. It was kinder in the long run.

MM Brutal perhaps but...

RP You do have a very real problem in the Foreign Service, there are a lot of people at the bottom. There is no room for everybody at the top so very often people didn't get as far as they should have done. It was inevitable really. I was always delighted to get people to resign.

MM You weren't there at the time of the sacking of the famous 30 senior officers, were you?

RP No, I was not. But that again wasn't a success. As you say, 30 were sacked but that was to encourage younger people. But it didn't really. I was one of the younger people and we thought, well, that could happen to us one day. Is this the work of a good employer?

MM Exactly, a disincentive for the young too.

RP In the old days you had lots of safe places where you could park people out. But with

modern communications, one of the problems is that any ambassador or consul, anyone anywhere, can suddenly find himself giving interviews to the world press, and you just pray that they will be up to it.

MM I do well remember that one of the ambassadors in Bangkok was extremely dissatisfied with his counsellor and used to fume about him. This counsellor was one of the 30, greatly to the relief of everyone concerned. How did you move from this position of power over the posting of Diplomatic Service officers to your own appointment as ambassador in Budapest?

Posting to Hungary as Ambassador 1976

RP Yes, I managed to negotiate that.

MM How was that done?

RP I managed to persuade the Chief Clerk and the Permanent Secretary to put me up to the board.

MM So it was a board decision?

RP Yes, the ambassador appointments, and other senior posts, would all have to be approved by the senior appointments board. The administration would put up the proposal, in this case not me but my superior, and then the board would have to approve it. Well, this was the first time I had ever served in a European post. I had been on visits but I had never lived in Europe, so it was nice to start that way

MM So how about the language?

RP Yes, that is a very good point. Hungarian is not an easy language but again you get far more kudos speaking a few words of a difficult language than trying to speak in a so-called easy language like French.

MM A so-called easy language?

RP ...there are no easy languages as you know, but I took lessons in Hungarian. I used to write out a simple speech in my childish Hungarian and our embassy translator would put it into proper Hungarian, but I would learn it. And then after dinner I would get up and make the speech. It was quite impressive to visitors from London. I don't know whether it impressed the Hungarians, but I didn't try and conduct any business in Hungarian.

MM They would no doubt be pretty efficient in English?

RP Some could speak good English and others had very good interpreters, they were used to that, it wasn't the main problem. The 1970s were the end of the Communist days. I went there in 1976. So it was still a Communist country but they were beginning to distance themselves from the Russians at the time, being intelligent people. I think we began to feel, at least I began to feel, that the Russians wouldn't last there forever, but one has to admit that the Russian system was not expected to collapse as quickly as it did. It was obvious that the Communist system was not an efficient system economically and didn't really work. The only way you could make it work was by keeping everybody down and for that purpose you had to have a huge secret police.

MM I was going to ask you to comment on the way the system worked.

RP Well, by this time you see they weren't executing people anymore or anything like that and putting them in prison; they didn't need to. They were doing everything in a much more sophisticated way. For example one Sunday we went to Mass in a part of the town that we didn't usually go to. We ran straight up against our doctor who was looking after one of our children who had an epileptic problem at the time, and he was very embarrassed to see us. He followed me out to the car and said, 'don't tell will you', meaning don't reveal that he was a Catholic because that was incompatible with membership of the Communist party. Two weeks later he came up to me at a party and said 'my son has just been admitted into medical school,' and he didn't say it but he looked at me as if to say, 'now you understand.' In other words if it was known that he was a practising Roman Catholic he wouldn't have got into the

medical school. But of course you can control people that way much more easily than sending them to prison. You could in England, or any country, once you had control of these things.

MM Well, I suppose that would presuppose that the party actually controlled the medical school?

RP They did, yes. They controlled it all.

MM How did they do that?

RP There would be a party member on the board, and they were everywhere. And of course the secret police were very busy. On one occasion there was a nasty lorry which used to park right in front of our gate in a rather troublesome way. And we knew our butler was an employee of the secret police of course, but he was a very sweet fellow, and I said, 'can't you get this moved?' And he made inquiries and said 'we can't, he is a party member. He won't move. He is a very nasty fellow.' Anyhow, Mrs Kepes, the Deputy Head of Protocol, arrived at one of our parties. I had known her for years because she had been the wife of the Hungarian ambassador when I had been in Argentina, and she was a little old lady, and she went outside and rang the bell and a huge great lorry driver came out. She was a short little lady. I observed her. She turned up the lapel of her coat and showed him a little badge. It must have said 'major-general secret police' or something. He immediately got into the truck and drove it round the corner. We never ever saw it again. That is how they did things in the communist states.

MM That is very impressive, really.

RP It is, it's lovely if you are on the right side, very unpleasant if you are not. That was the trouble. We had a woman who worked in our embassy and her son had fled off and gone to Germany. She used desperately to try to see him, but she had the utmost difficulty in getting an exit visa to visit him. She was allowed to go once every five years or something. But it was rather horrible to see the actual effect on a human being of this system. In a way rather a

horrible system really. Nice if you can benefit from it.

MM Yes. It was pretty intolerable. How about medical services? Were they good there?

RP Yes they were. They were better than in Vienna really. At the end of the war the Hungarians had to let the SS come in and start murdering the Jews. And they murdered the Jews in the countryside and they were about to start murdering the Jews in Budapest, who were very influential and dominated medicine and many professions. When the Red Army arrived, they drove the SS out. So that in fact Hungary had, and still has, a great many very influential Jews. It is the only area of Eastern Europe where that happens. They didn't talk about it much. It wasn't the thing to talk about it. But there were many very talented Jewish doctors in Hungary at that time for which we were very grateful.

MM And scientists and economists?

RP The economists, yes, they had gone to England hadn't they? But on one occasion the head of the academy of sciences, uniquely in Eastern Europe, was a Christian, which was very unusual. He was a Lutheran, and Dr Coggan, the Archbishop of Canterbury was coming out to preach in the Lutheran cathedral. On the afternoon of his arrival the head of the academy of sciences came to see me and said, 'for heavens sake get him to be careful,' because he had given a speech in East Berlin the day before in which he had attacked the Communist ideology and said, 'beg him not to say anything like that, because it will only make things worse for us.' So when Coggan arrived I took him for a walk in the garden, because we knew the whole place was bugged, and I passed this on, on behalf of the Lutheran church. And Coggan was very humble in a way, very impressive for an Archbishop of Canterbury, and said, 'well, what shall I talk about?' So I gave him a few thoughts, and he was very grateful and they gave him great applause the next day. He was very tactful. He didn't do a head-on attack on the Communist regime. All depended on skirting round it. The churches were on the whole led by people who were willing to do that. Cardinal Lekai, who was the cardinal archbishop of Esztergon, had been the successor of Cardinal Mindszenty, who had been a great anti-Communist hero. Not all Catholics liked him. I became more of a friend with him. On one occasion he gave me a tremendous speech in Italian, which he

decided was the language we both spoke together, defending himself. And he said, 'you must realise, it is not like Poland. In Poland the hierarchy are associated with the national struggle, but in Hungary we are linked with the Hapsburgs, so you can't expect from me what the bishops have been able to achieve in Poland.' Well, this was when the Archbishop of Cracow had just been made Pope. And two days later I saw in the paper that he had flown to Rome for his first interview with the Pope. And it was obvious he was using me as a rehearsal. They had a difficult role there.

MM Was there any commercial work there?

RP Yes there was. The Communists on the whole were quite good to deal with because they had got everything sewn up. They were hard bargainers, wily bargainers, but once you agreed something it happened. It was done. But it involved a lot of inter-governmental work. So it wasn't so much me as our commercial department. We tended to be very much involved in all the projects in a way that you wouldn't have been in a capitalist country.

MM That's obviously something of considerable value under those circumstances.

RP When I was there I was deputed to have talks with the Deputy Foreign Minister, Janos Nagy, about the Helsinki Final Act, that had been the result of the European Security Conference set up as a European security mechanism at Helsinki. Under the Final Act they had to have a review every year on how it was operating, in other words an opportunity for each side to point out to the other where they were failing. They were about to embark on the first review, and it was going to be at Belgrade. We were instructed to go and talk to the Ministry and so I had a day of talks with this Deputy Hungarian Foreign Minister. I pointed out all the ways in which they were misbehaving and they pointed out the ways in which we were misbehaving. Such as we were supposed to be promoting knowledge of the less well known languages. What had we done to translate and publish Hungarian books in English? Answer, absolutely nothing. Then I would say, well, why are there all these restrictions on travel? He would say, well, we will remove them but then you would be in more physical danger here. The Foreign Office had been going to send a chap who had a sort of bellicose exchange in East Berlin but the Foreign Office got trepidations about all this and decided

they would like to send somebody more emollient so they changed his appointment and sent me instead. So I was sent as the leader of our delegation to the European Security Conference in Belgrade. There was no direct air travel between Belgrade and Budapest. I kept doing the journey by car for the whole winter of 1977 to 1978. We had our instructions. The Labour Prime Minister was Callaghan and the Foreign Secretary by then was David Owen. On the one hand they wanted me to push for human rights, in other words to tell the Russians off where they were not doing the right thing. On the other hand, they also didn't really want too much of a row with the left wing of the Labour party who wanted détente. So it was another balancing act and I had to do my best. It wasn't very easy because the American delegate, a gentleman called Arthur Goldberg, was very high level. I became quite fond of him. But he didn't think I was nearly tough enough in my attacks on the Russians and even went to London to complain about me. It didn't do him any good. The Foreign Office rather liked that. Then Mrs Thatcher came out to try and do me down. She was the leader of the opposition and had heard I was a poor feeble creature. She thought this would be a good opportunity to smack at the Labour government who were in power at the time. I managed to stage manage that a bit and I had arranged, when she appeared at the Conference, that I would speak. So I made a formidable attack on the Russians. It was rather spoilt by the fact that the Russian ambassador, who I knew well, gave me an enormous wink, which I think she missed. She seemed to approve of my speech anyhow. That was quite a successful visit for her in a way. She was quite fun really. She wasn't then Prime Minister.

MM Had you tipped off the Russian ambassador?

RP Not quite, no, but he knew what I was at.

MM He knew what Mrs Thatcher was all about?

RP Oh yes, he knew what she was all about. On one occasion I had a jolly lunch with him. When I went back to the Conference to make some remark that he didn't like he said, 'that comes well from the ambassador of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, I repeat, Northern Ireland.' So then the Irish ambassador, who was a good friend of mine got up and said come on Richard, let's go and have some tea, and we walked out together. Vorontsov

the Russian ambassador came up to me afterwards and said, ' sorry, sorry, instructions from Moscow.' We were introduced to Tito. He kept the lid on that country; he wasn't a very nice man but Yugoslavia was worse after he died.

MM Tito?

RP Tito, yes. He kept the lid on Yugoslavia, they were our hosts in Belgrade of course. Well, he had murdered quite a lot of people in his time.

MM That was well known, was it?

RP Oh yes. In his early days he had been battling against Mihailovich.

MM They both killed off lots of people.

RP Yes, but you can argue that Yugoslavia was happier under Tito than it was afterwards. When you have got a lot of very nasty people it's best to have a nasty person to control them.

MM Like Saddam Hussein.

RP By implication, yes. So it was quite interesting. On one occasion the Hungarian ambassador, Petran, got up and I had proposed that we should have a recess at lunch time on a Friday, because I wanted to go home, so he got up and said in very fulsome tones, 'that was a very wise, sensible remark made by the British ambassador,' and went on at some length saying how very sensible my idea was, what a good idea. I said to him afterwards, 'you were rather over-doing it.' He said, 'the truth is I have been instructed by Budapest to say something nice about all the representatives here who are also ambassadors to Hungary. But you have been talking such nonsense the whole time, it's the first time you have said anything at all sensible. I had to act.' There was an element of show business about it all, shadow boxing. In a way I think it was one of the elements that helped to loosen the Soviet hold on Eastern Europe.

MM When you were talking to this conference you were talking in English?

RP Yes.

MM They would have their own interpreters?

RP They had interpreters. But we used to have a caucus, a European caucus, and a NATO caucus, and in practice we nearly always spoke in English, but the French spoke in French.

MM So really a quite fruitful period?

RP Yes, I think so. I enjoyed it. The cultural side was very good in Hungary of course. That was an area where we really could do something because the Hungarians weren't frightened if you entertained the leading musicians. If you had entertained admirals and defence experts they would become a bit worried.

MM What about the British Council?

RP They were very active and helpful.

MM And they had a representative there?

RP Yes. We had a good man there. It was one of the most active sides of course.

Posting to Madrid as Ambassador 1980-84

MM And so from that you went to Madrid.

RP Yes, I was promoted then and went to Madrid.

MM So a completely different change of scene.

RP Yes it was indeed. All one can say was that we had learned some Spanish in Argentina.

MM Yes, so you brought that out of cold storage. Was there an interval between...

RP ...only a month or two. We just had to rush there.

MM Not really long enough...

RP ...no, we did our best. I suppose professionally that was a very interesting time to be in Madrid. We went there in the very beginning of 1980. Very sadly my wife died there. I left in the middle of 1984, after four and a half years. These were the very years in which Spain passed from having a hangover from the Franco regime to becoming a democracy and it was very interesting to observe. Just to make some general remarks about that. The King played a very important part. They had thought he was rather a sort of stupid young man but he was pretty wily, really. He operated very well. I was lucky because I could always go to see him. He talks perfect English. He is partly English. His grandmother was English, a Mountbatten Princess, daughter of the favourite daughter of Queen Victoria, she was born and brought up in Balmoral. Of course they were in exile for years so he is really bi-lingual in English, indeed when he was first married to Queen Sophia of Greece, the language they used to speak in the family was English. So it was nice to be able to go and talk to him. I got to know him very well so that was a good plus. Then he had prime ministers who all did rather well, Arias then Suarez, Calvo Sotelo, they managed to achieve this transition. They managed to work within the Franco movement, because you have to remember the King had taken an oath of allegiance to the Franco system. Not very easy to demolish a system which you have sworn in public to defend. So there had to be window dressing. I think they were helped, because the leaders of the other parties all went along with this. This included the left wing party, including people like Felipe Gonzales, the socialist leader who subsequently became prime minister for many years, and even Santiago Carillo, the communist leader. They were all on their best behaviour. I remember Felipe Gonzales saying to me, 'it's all very well; you know in your country that the leader of the opposition can attack the government robustly. But our democracy is very fragile.' He was the leader of the opposition. 'I can't do that. You have to remember that when I oppose the government I have to do so with great delicacy.' So it was

a kind of gavotte, in a way. We were very lucky that everybody behaved themselves very well, including the leader of the armed forces and the church. They were all determined at all costs not to have a civil war. Civil war is such a terrible thing. When you have had that you don't want it again. The other thing is they were determined to have no revenge. When Franco was dying his wife kept him alive artificially because she thought that the other side would come in and murder them all as soon as Franco was dead. Not so. They were determined that there would be no more trials or prosecutions. They buried the hatchet. You have to understand that some of the Chileans felt that about Pinochet. So it is all very well for people in England to hold forth about war criminals. They do the same in Yugoslavia and also in Iraq. If you have actually lived in these countries, pursuing the war criminal is not your main aim. Your main aim is not to have another war.

MM Above all no civil war.

RP No civil war.

MM Hadn't Franco got schemes afoot to replace himself?

RP Well, that is the interesting thing. The answer is no. He had put into power at the end of his time a number of ministers like Fraga, for example, who had been ambassador in London. He was the minister of tourism. He has only just been ejected from his position of power in Galicia, where he had been in power for many, many years. He was the leader of the right wing. I knew him very well, and people like that who went in for the apertura, the opening in Spanish, and they were determined to bring about a peaceful transition. The King told me that on one occasion he said to Franco could I not come and sit in on your cabinet meetings? And Franco had said, no, you don't need to do that. When I am gone you'll be doing things quite differently. So I think that Franco had accepted there would be change after him and that it was better to be helpful. The father of a very good friend of mine, who was a marquis, a right winger and an aristocrat, had been murdered by the left during the war. The father had been picked up in Madrid and taken to a quarry, where a young communist leader called Santiago Carillo had had them all shot and the bodies thrown down into the quarry. This is a well known atrocity. At one party I saw my friend coming towards me, but he suddenly

stopped and went away. He told me afterwards, that he was coming to see me but couldn't when he saw I was talking to Santiago Carillo, the leader of the communist party. He was the man who had murdered his father. Of course I quite understood, but I give that as an example of the sort of thing they had to do. He wasn't going to insult Santiago Carillo or attack him, he just wasn't going to talk to him. Not easy.

MM Very civilised.

RP Well, they had to be. I could give many other examples but it had to be.

MM Now how about the Gibraltar dispute?

RP That was a plus and a minus for us. One the one hand, we simply had to solve something because Franco had shut the gate so that Gibraltarians for 12 years, or whatever it was, had been unable to get into Spain and there was great pressure on us to open the gate. But it eventually occurred to us that the only way to do this was to embark on negotiations with the Spanish. That was the price we had to pay to get the gate opened. We started to negotiate and are still negotiating to this day. Not long ago I was on a train and I met Mr Straw, the Foreign Secretary. On that day an article in The Times had carried the headline 'Cabinet locked in struggle over Gibraltar.' So I said I am the one who negotiated the agreement that is causing you all that trouble. But in fact it was a necessary thing to do because but for that we wouldn't have been able to accept Spain into NATO or into the European Union, European Community as it then was. That was an essential part of bringing Spain back into Europe. So we were very much involved in the whole thing and we had to make ourselves available to people.

MM Can you explain that a little further. Spain had this dispute with us, wanted to come into the European Community and into NATO.

RP Well, that is more complicated. The socialists got into power whilst I was there under Felipe Gonzales and they were committed to opposing NATO but actually Felipe Gonzales was secretly in favour of their joining NATO. He sent a message to Perez Llorca who was

the non-communist foreign secretary before him, who was a friend of mine, and he said for heavens sake go ahead and get us into NATO as fast as possible. That was a secret and it hasn't been generally published, and in fact they conspired together to bring Spain into NATO and then once they were in NATO he couldn't get out, he didn't want them to get out.

MM But what was the bearing of this on Gibraltar?

RP It would have been unthinkable for Spain to join the European Union and NATO so long as they kept the frontier shut, because you couldn't have part of the EU or NATO shut off, it would be ludicrous and the British public opinion wouldn't have tolerated it either. So in a way we had a veto, but we had to deploy that very carefully because we wanted the goodwill of Spain.

MM We wanted them into the EU.

RP Wanted them into the EU and into NATO and they wanted to be in. They wanted us, I'll tell you something about that in a minute. It was an interesting time. Another thing they were struggling with was the autonomies because there was a great problem in the Basque country especially. More than in Catalonia, but the policy was to give as much autonomy as possible to the whole of Spain. So they eventually ended up giving autonomy to everywhere and the whole of Spain and the islands, the Balearics and the Canaries, are all autonomous areas now. That was very necessary. It worked in most of the places but not in the Basque country, which remained a thorn in the side, and still is. There are still problems.

MM Why didn't it work there?

RP Because the Basque country is quite different from anywhere else. They are a very idiosyncratic people, they speak a very peculiar language, there were a lot of very violent nationalists there, they were oppressed by Franco, they really weren't ready to negotiate and of course there are still some who aren't, so it is always a great problem for the government.

MM They are like the Bretons.

RP Yes only more so. I suppose the nearest comparison would be with Northern Ireland.

MM How about the situation in the Falklands?

RP Well that was one of the thorns in our side. We had the Falklands war and that was very tricky. Public opinion was very much against us in Spain because they saw themselves as the mother country of Argentina, although more Argentines are Italian than Spanish. Calvo Sotelo, the prime minister, told me that actually they were on our side. I said, 'Why are you on our side?' He said, 'Well because if the Generals win in Argentina that will be a great boost for the right wing Generals here. That's the last thing we want, so we are secretly on your side.' So I said, jokingly, 'Would you mind saying that in public?' 'No,' he said, 'I'd rather not.' I used to go to the Foreign Ministry in the lunch time and normally when you arrive you are received by a tremendous flunkey as you went into the grand building. I used a side door where a little door was opened and a face would look out and it was the Foreign Minister in person who would admit me. They didn't want the country to know that we were working with them as much as we did. They were very helpful in the Falklands war.

MM Were they? In what way?

RP On one occasion Perez-Llorca, the Foreign Minister, rang me up one afternoon and said, 'Is Gibraltar all right?' I said, 'What do you mean?', he said, 'Well, is everything all right?' I said, 'As far as I know, have you got any special reason for asking?' 'Oh no, I just thought I would ask.' You take that seriously so I immediately reported and they immediately put the Rock on a state of maximum defence. It transpired that that afternoon the Spanish had arrested a team of Argentine commandos in the south of Spain on their way to blow-up the Rock. Afterwards I used to wonder whether I dreamt this because your memory can play tricks but I was rather reassured when in the Sunday paper the other day I read an article about it by the Argentine leader of the team who confirmed exactly that, that they had been arrested by the Spanish. This of course made a very favourable impression on Mrs Thatcher and actually was a very shrewd move because in the long run the Spanish needed the British far more than they needed the Argentines. They knew that.

MM What was the Spanish position over Ceuta?

RP The Spanish liked to say that Ceuta was not the same as Gibraltar, that it was an integral part of Spain. Of course that's nonsense, it's a very comparable situation. Reverting to Gibraltar, I must tell you of the time when we had a great meeting at number 10 on this subject. This was just before we were about to sign our agreement, agreeing to negotiate all outstanding issues. I had come back for this meeting. Calvo Sotelo, the Prime Minister, was coming to meet Mrs Thatcher at number 10 and when I arrived at number 10 she was already having a meeting with Lord Carrington and the Foreign Office team. I took my place at the end of the table. She really followed the dialectical method. She liked to argue a thing out and I don't really blame her. Carrington and the Foreign Office team were trying to defend this. I gave a sort of snort, a sort of laugh, as a way of making my presence known, it's no good being frightened in front of these people. She turned and said, 'what is that ambassador, what is that noise you are making?' I said, 'I am laughing, Prime Minister.' 'Oh,' she said, 'what are you laughing at?' I said, 'Well, only this morning I saw the Spanish Prime Minister off at the airport in Madrid and I heard him telling his people, that he was very worried about the situation, he didn't think the party would stand for it and he thought it was a great mistake to give away a Spanish national right. 'Oh,' she said, 'the Spanish Prime Minister is worried. That's the first piece of good news I've had today.' And the situation markedly changed.

MM At the thought of somebody else

RP Yes, Carrington, you see, knew very well how to do it all. At one point in the meeting the Spanish Prime Minister made some request to our Prime Minister and the Prime Minister turned to Carrington and said, 'Peter, do we agree?' And then he turned to me and said, 'Richard, do we agree?' Very incorrect really because he should have turned to the Foreign Office man, but he turned to me. So I said, 'yes.' So he turned to Margaret and said, 'yes.' So I said afterwards to him, 'Well, that was a good boost to me you know, it made them feel I have your confidence. So he said, 'Well, that was the object of the exercise, wasn't it?' It was a good way to behave. He had the sense to see that if he encouraged his ambassadors it would make life easier for him rather than more difficult. Not every Foreign Secretary has

done that.

MM One can see that. That is very revealing really. What about your relations with the public in Spain, did you have much public speaking?

RP Yes, I did a certain amount of speaking and of course there was the British community all over the country. We had consuls all over the country and lots of work. I had to say to the consuls, if you'd done something wrong, made a mistake, for God's sake tell me, I've a better chance of extricating you if I know what really happened. They were pretty good really. The demands on the consuls were very great.

MM I'm thinking in terms of the Spanish public.

RP I did make some speeches. I remember during the Falklands war I was encouraged, as you were, to make speeches and I went to the Foreign Ministry to consult them about that. They said, well, there's one of you, but there are over 20 ambassadors from Latin American countries. They all speak Spanish better than you do. If we are going to give you time on the television, we shall have to give them 20 times as much. I think it would have not been a good idea. It was better to work with them privately.

MM So that's the way you went.

RP Yes. We did have a time, a crucial moment, when we heard there was an aircraft on the runway at Las Palmas, about to go off to Argentina with a nasty Exocet to attack our troops and couldn't we get it stopped, they said. It was the middle of the night. But when you are an ambassador you have always to know the telephone number of some little person, male or female, who has access to the number that rings beside the bed of the prime minister. And there would be some small person in the private office and if you have them to dinner, they are very pleased to be entertained, and they are an important person in the country for you. I was able to get through to the prime minister and we did get it stopped.

MM Was it a Spanish Exocet?

RP No, I think it was a French Exocet.

MM A French export?

RP Well, I can't remember the details...

MM ...I know the French made them...

RP ...I can't remember at what point but anyhow the runway was Spanish because it was in the Canary Islands, Las Palmas, and the Spanish did what we asked, they helped us but of course they never revealed that in public. All this really played a great part, it made the Thatcher government conceive the idea that the Spanish were our allies in a secret way. And whatever one may say about Mrs Thatcher she was very loyal to her allies. Perhaps too much so in the case of Pinochet. But in the case of the Spanish it was helpful. Just two other things if I can say. While I was there we had Tejero and the civil guard taking over the congress, you remember that. They took over parliament. The civil guard were armed police, and they made all the MPs kneel on the ground with rifles at their necks. It was a very dramatic thing. It was on world television while I was there. Felipe Gonzales was put in a separate room with the communist leader, and he told me afterwards that he thought his last hour had come. They all went down on the floor as they were instructed but Felipe Gonzales told me afterwards that he would have been braver if he had known they were on national television, because in fact the television was still on and everybody saw it at the time. That is very human. He would have been prepared to risk his life if he had known the whole world would have seen it, but he wouldn't do it in private. I think that is very natural.

MM It is. What was all that about?

RP Well, this was the last gasp of the old right wingers, General Armada, who was behind it had been the head of the King's military household and I think probable the King had made some remark like, 'to hell with all these politicians,' which the general had taken literally. And this was an attempt at a military take-over of the country.

MM Oh, it was.

RP A last gasp, but in fact it failed. The King came out of it very well. Because he stood up for democracy and that was a plus, in the end. We declined to comment which was wise, I think. The Americans rather foolishly said it was an internal Spanish affair. Mrs Thatcher then spoke up and said she was for democracy which was the right thing to say. In that respect it worked out but it was frightening at the time.

I think being an ambassador is like piloting an aircraft, you are only paid for what you do in an emergency. Most of the time it is routine. Anyhow, that's it.

MM Well, that is a very thrilling moment.

Ambassador to Sweden 1988-

RP It was interesting, yes. And then after that they offered me a posting back to London, but I had problems looking after my family as I was on my own then and I said I really must go somewhere else abroad, so they sent me to Stockholm, which was of course professionally a much less interesting place, but not without interest. The point there was that Sweden was a neutral country. But they are only neutral as a result of history and geography. In fact they were a robustly capitalist country with big industries, trading all over the world. They are not the descendants of Vikings for nothing. And of course Norway was in NATO, Denmark was in NATO. NATO would have been the natural place for them. There were only not in NATO because they had been neutral in the war and also because they were the neighbours of Finland and they had to think of Finland's position having a very uneasy position on the Russian frontier. Really cold war. But I in fact saw a lot of the armed forces in Sweden because they were very anxious. If you can envisage a situation in which Britain went neutral, you would actually find the heads of our armed forces would do their very best to keep up liaison with the American embassy in London for obvious reasons. I used to do all sorts of things. I went out to visit the ice breakers with the Swedish navy in the Arctic and I drove tanks with the army in the Arctic, and I went up into the Arctic with the air force. I

was very much involved with the Swedish armed forces. We had a visit from Lord Carrington, who by this time was Secretary General of NATO, and I told him, 'do you realise these people are more on our side than some of the people in the alliance?' I was thinking of Greece actually. He said, 'yes, I know, I can see that.' They were completely on our side. But they had to be neutral.

MM How about the fact that Sweden is a sort of icon for the Labour party?

RP Yes, an interesting point. They had social democracy for years and they have associated with that very high taxation, but of course you get a lot back for the taxation in Sweden. That is the trouble possibly here in the UK with high taxation. I visited old people's homes. You could perfectly well have put your aged mother into a State geriatric home in Sweden. She would be well treated, perfectly all right. Here you have to pay twice for everything. So they were getting a lot back for their taxes. They still have excellent hospitals.

MM Of course it's the high standards that they are able to maintain in things like hospitals that are so envied by the Social Democrats in this country. How did the Swedes do it?

RP They had advantages. First of all they came to it late. In the 19th century they had been a very poor country, as all the Scandinavian countries were. So they didn't make the mistakes that we did. They weren't pioneers of capitalism as we were. By the time they went into capitalism things had rather evolved and they did very well. They had quite a good system whereby there were very heavy taxes but there were exemptions for big companies. The company would do a lot for their employees. Every year they would summon them all to a conference which somehow just lasted for a week. It happened to be at a first class hotel in a very nice part of the country. There were a lot of freebies, a lot of benefits. They had ways of mitigating the effects of taxation. It was interesting because it was the first country I had ever served in where people in Britain recognised what you had just said. They were ahead of us in many ways. Most places I have been to have had patronising British people who come out to tell the natives how to do things. There it was the other way round. We used to have whole ministerial delegations even, and top experts would come out to study Swedish expertise in things like cervical cancer, or disposal of nuclear waste, where they were streets

ahead of us.

MM And how about education?

RP Yes, they are good on that. Of course it's almost entirely a middle class country and so therefore they are able to have a high standard of education for the whole country. They did a lot to try and keep the whole country going. I was very friendly with a number of musicians. Elizabeth Söderström, the singer, informed me that she was sent up to the Arctic every now and then to go and sing in remote homesteads in the Arctic. Every artist considered it their duty. Well, I don't hear of any great stars being sent off to the Shetlands or Outer Hebrides, but they made a great effort to bring everybody in.

MM Why didn't they have an easily identifiable underclass? This country is loaded with substandard...

RP ...they are getting one now, they are getting an underclass of immigrants. They get quite a lot of immigrants from all over the world. So they are importing an underclass. Which may or may not be a good thing. One of them murdered Olav Palme, the Prime Minister, which was a great scandal whilst I was there. They had great trouble trying to find the murderer. I don't think they ever did. I knew Palme quite well. He was what you might call a Hampstead socialist. He was an aristocrat but rather a funny man.

MM A nice man?

RP Yes, I quite liked him. He didn't deserve to be murdered certainly. And the monarchy improved a lot while I was there. The King had been rather unpopular but he has a very good wife. The Queen is very good and they are pretty well established now. One uses phrases like bicycling monarchies, but not there. In my opinion people like the Swedish monarchy as also in other countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, have found a very good way of being a monarch, without bringing all their relations into the thing. I think we could learn from them.

MM So an admirable country then?

RP Yes, a bit boring sometimes.

MM Really? No foreign policy issues there?

RP They were always sticking their nose in. I remember once the Foreign Minister, who had been an old trade union hack, saying he was going off to Vietnam. I knew why he was going to Vietnam; he was going to annoy the Americans. But I pretended not to know, and said, 'why Vietnam?' He said, 'Poor little Vietnam, they have suffered terribly from the Americans.' So I said, 'You know, if you have ever lived in South East Asia, that's not the way that the Thais and other people view Vietnam. The Vietnamese are very thrusting people, and I would call them the Prussians of South East Asia.' At that moment I noticed that the German ambassador had joined us and he said, 'Quite right, I couldn't agree with you more.' He was a Bavarian. The Swedes had a habit of holding forth on subjects that they knew very little about.

MM So you enjoyed your time there.

RP Yes, nice people there. But you know the two countries in the world where there is the highest per capita suicide rate: Sweden and New Zealand. Both completely lovely sensible countries, I have been to both. Full of the most wonderful nature and the most wonderful forests and lakes and lovely sensible people but the trouble is there is something in human nature that finds that boring. Don't ask me why, but that is the case. When I used to come back from Stockholm to London I would fly back and perhaps go to a pub and it was like going straight back into Hogarth's London. All the vitality, the evil, the wickedness, the dirt of London.

MM And rather enjoyable. Have you got any further points to make?

RP No, I wonder if I could just conclude by just giving you a few comments, unless I've overstayed my welcome.

Concluding comments

RP First, in my many years, it is now 50 years since I started, I saw a huge difference between what you might call the old Diplomatic Service and the new Diplomatic Service. The old Diplomatic service was more of a family unit. My ambassador in Washington wouldn't hesitate to instruct me, as he did, to go and hang his coat up at a party, but equally I could have borrowed money from him. When I left he gave a dinner for me. You couldn't imagine an ambassador giving a dinner for the 3rd secretary when he left Washington now. It was all much more personal. I was treated not as a young civil servant but more like a nephew in a family and told to run errands but basically knowing that you had a kind uncle in charge. It has all gone now, completely changed, and not necessarily for the worse, but you have got completely different people. On the whole, probably cleverer than the old diplomats, and probably linguistically more talented but of course you can't hope for the same family atmosphere.

MM And better relations, or better pursuit of British interests?

RP Oh well, you can argue both ways. You can argue that the old diplomats were better geared to be in touch with aristos and the ruling few in the country, perhaps not so well geared to be in touch with the population as a whole. But then again, is it the job of an ambassador to be in touch with the population as a whole? Hardly feasible is it? In every country you are really targeting just a small minority of people.

MM The opinion formers, whoever they may be.

RP Yes exactly. Most of the ambassadors in London don't do that at all. They invite a lot of posh old people, Dukes or former ministers, who have no importance at all. That is the first point. Secondly there has been a big difference in the behaviour of ministers. I think you can say, I am not suggesting that ministers in the past were any better, nicer or more moral, but

they had a different code. When Churchill and Eden came to Washington they came across on one occasion in the Queen Mary, and they were both sick men. Churchill was old and sick and Eden was just sick. When they arrived I remember naively saying to somebody, 'Why couldn't they have brought their wives?' And the person said, 'They couldn't afford it.' That is not a problem for Mr Blair, is it? And his wife. It is all quite different now. There is more a feeling of getting what you can out of it, I think, to be quite honest.

MM On the other hand this country is relatively richer now than it was.

RP Yes, perhaps they can afford it. But I do see a difference in attitude. But more important, a third point, really more important, but I think we have now got to a stage where the politicisation of the civil service, including the foreign service, has become a problem. That has been going on all my time of course. Ministers have always had somebody they particularly liked, a favoured private secretary, and one has to accept that for certain jobs like a private office or maybe a job like ambassador in Washington or something, they must feel there is somebody they can personally feel they have confidence in. But I think it has gone too far that way and both political parties are guilty. Mrs Thatcher was always talking about one of us. Is he one of us? And of course Mr Blair too has got his clique. They are surrounding themselves with their gang. It is linked up with the fact that ministers are more inaccessible now than they ever were. When I joined, Mr Attlee was the Prime Minister. I remember seeing a middle aged gent walking across the Horseguards carrying a very heavy suitcase with another man with him. The man was the protection officer and the one carrying the suitcase was the Prime Minister. It was a different world. I think they pay a heavy price. You can't get into Downing Street now. When Bush came to London on a so-called State Visit the whole of the Mall was filled with trusties and they are not allowed to get anywhere near ordinary people. You can't entirely blame them. They want to remain alive. But they pay a heavy price for that. I think it explains some of the strange mistakes made by political leaders not understanding what the country really wants. That's my personal view. Next point, people sometimes get shocked when foreign affairs are being run from number 10. But actually that is not historically correct. They were run from number 10 in the 19th century, by Palmerston and people like that. There is nothing strange about that because foreign affairs is the one area where the Prime Minister feels he can have a bit of fun. But I think in

the past the Foreign Office have managed to control what is going on in number 10 by putting one of their trustees in. Mrs Thatcher had Charles Powell, before that with Macmillan we had Philip de Zulueta, with Churchill we had Jock Colville, and all these people, and then at least we knew what the Prime Minister was up to, and he knew what we thought. We have now got a new type of people who go there and never come back. They become Blair trustees, so they really become part of the number 10 group. I think that is a big difference.

MM Their loyalty lies to the Prime Minister and not to the Foreign Office.

RP Also of course, and this is a side point, the Foreign Office made a frightful mistake in being out-manoeuvred on the JIC and allowing an MI6 man, John Scarlett, to take over the JIC. The JIC, as you know, receives information from all sorts of fronts. The Foreign Office has never been an originator of secret intelligence. They have been a user and not an originator. But once you get somebody who naturally has a special interest in one particular lot, MI6, GCHQ and MI5 or anybody else, it is only natural that they might be a bit pushed that way. And I think that has changed now but it is one of the things behind the Iraq war disaster. Then I think if you can criticise the Foreign Service and me in my time I would say that we were pretty good at presenting things and doing things in the correct way. But I don't think there was ever really enough fundamental questioning of policy. I think partly the well educated, senior chaps that we had in the past, who had all gone to very good schools and shared a similar outlook, whatever their political views, had not really been brought up to be questioners. If you had a very seamless academic career at Winchester, New College or something you tended to go with the flow. I was shocked from the very beginning that nobody seemed to sit down and say is this policy actually right? I think that has been a fundamental problem throughout my time and I would just revert to three things that I have already mentioned. One was the Sudan, where I think we should have considered hiving off the South. Secondly Nigeria, I think we should have considered the dismembering of Nigeria; and thirdly where I think we were slow to realise that communism was dying, the Russians would soon be out of Eastern Europe. I think we allowed the cold war to drag on longer than it should have. I think always of course in a cold war you are very much influenced by the political and military complex. There are people who want these conditions to continue to exist. But I think we should have done a bit more fundamental

thinking, but there we are.

MM But going back to 1956 and the Suez fiasco, the Prime Minister then conspired to do that in the teeth of obvious opposition from the Foreign Office.

RP Yes, but not public opposition.

MM No, no. The public were just kept out of the loop.

RP But that's an interesting thing. At that time a number of people were disposed to resign and the Permanent Under Secretary at the time, I can't remember whether he sent a circular round, or maybe just let it be known that we should not resign because this was an aberration, a one off. We could be pretty confident that no such thing would happen during the rest of our working life, because that wasn't what happened in Britain. That advice at that time was good advice. It held the fort and it was accurate. The other day I was able to ask our present Permanent Under Secretary whether he felt like giving such advice about the Iraq war. And of course when you become Permanent Under Secretary you are very good at parrying these questions, and he said, 'Well, at the present time, if I were to issue such a circular it would immediately be out in next morning's press, so I couldn't,' which was a very good reply. I agree. That is part of the problem. You can't fight these things in the open unless you get out of the Service altogether.

MM Well thank you very much indeed. It has been an excellent interview. I'm most grateful.