

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF JEREMY VARCOE CMG

These recollections are an edited version by Suzanne Ricketts of the transcript done by Lesley Mattos from recordings made by Jeremy Varcoe, with some supplementary material added by him in March 2021.

Joining the FCO

I didn't follow the usual path of joining the Office straight after university. First, I had a spell in the Colonial Service in Swaziland and then decided to continue my legal studies and take the Bar exams. This led me to the Midlands where I was first a legal assistant in a company and then a lecturer at Birmingham University in company law.

During my second and third years of teaching at Birmingham, I became aware that I was not happy to make this my life's work. I therefore started considering other options. I had been offered pupillage in one of Birmingham's top barristers' chambers, but I had a rather jaundiced and inaccurate view of barristers as well as the need for some financial support during the first two or three years of practice. My parents could have afforded to provide this, but they did not offer and I was too proud to ask.

Instead, more in hope than expectation, I responded to an advertisement for a limited number of late entrants into the administrative grade of the Diplomatic Service. I heard that there were some 600 applicants. I was therefore extremely fortunate to be one of the seven actually appointed. There were three rounds of tests and interviews, virtually the same as those used for the general post-university entrance into the Civil Service. I gave my notice to the university and finished teaching just before Christmas 1969.

FCO and the Pearce Commission, 1970-72

Final confirmation of my appointment was delayed because of extensive security checks. The security clearance necessary for my formal appointment took ages. Possibly not helped by the answer of my friend and referee, Tom Otley who, when questioned about my politics, replied that I made him feel like Genghis Khan! Also, I was told that a security report on me from Swaziland written by a police inspector who was a South African Special Branch plant

had reached London. It had categorised me as Communist sympathiser. I said this was nonsense but, given the politics of RSA at the time, this was to my mind a compliment. I was believed.

On 2 January 1970, I reported to the Foreign Office. I was to become a First Secretary in the Rhodesia (Political) Department. In November 1965 what had been Southern Rhodesia within the Central African Federation and effectively an internal self-governing territory, had unilaterally declared independence under the all-white government of Ian Smith. The British government regarded this as illegal if not treasonable. The job of the Department was to handle all aspects of this difficult relationship and to end the state of illegality. It was a good place to start because, although it related only to one small country, the degree of political interest at the time was high and a number of Conservatives supported Ian Smith's action.

Since I knew nothing about the Foreign Office, my predecessor got away with a perfunctory hand-over, something I was soon to regret. I reported to Philip (later Sir Philip) Mansfield, the very nice Head of Department, a former political officer in the Sudan Political Service. He was highly intelligent and experienced. I was supposed to write briefs on developments and prepare submissions on how to deal with specific problems such as whether the Chief Justice of Rhodesia should be removed from his membership of the Privy Council or how to relate to irate African governments berating us for not ending the rebellion. I also had to prepare draft answers for ministers, sometimes the Prime Minister, to answer parliamentary questions. After about a month of my struggles Philip called me in and said, "Jeremy, I don't think you know what you are doing." In a sense relieved, I replied that this was quite true because no one had actually explained or trained me in what was required. We got on much better after that and Philip gave me a lot of help.

It was all a big change from academia, but the work was stimulating, even though I found it difficult and I was too slow at times. It was really extraordinary that I received no training other than a day's general introductory talk about the Office. One lesson I learnt quite quickly was that it seemed important how well you could write rather than what you actually wrote. Having done science at A level and then read law, I was not good at writing concise, fluent English. I was always more effective dealing with people face to face than on paper.

At first, I used to have lunch in the canteen, but it was a dingy cellar and the food was not very exciting. As a consequence, I took to having sandwiches and, when it was fine, I would

eat these in St. James's Park. Many of my colleagues ate in the Travellers' Club in Pall Mall, nicknamed the 'Foreign Office canteen', but I was not that clubbable.

I also had my first taste of diplomatic entertainment. The Japanese were particularly interested in trying to establish just how serious the British government were about the enforcement of sanctions against the illegal Rhodesian regime. Although we had a separate department dealing with sanctions, it was known that at the political level our department held the key. A senior Japanese diplomat therefore invited me out to lunch. He took me to a very swish Japanese restaurant in the West End. He suggested that we should eat Japanese style, that is without shoes seated on a kind of low-lying couch with our feet sticking out. This was unfortunate, since I had a large hole in one of my socks, putting me at an immediate disadvantage. I also soon learnt that I was to be plied with copious quantities of sake in an effort to loosen my tongue. I hope I managed to stay sober enough not to reveal any state secrets — not that there were very many at that time to know.

Early on my diplomatic career, I was asked by a very senior member of the Foreign Office what I regarded as the most important aspect of diplomacy. Trying to think what he might like to hear, I replied that I thought that probably it was essential to try to establish compromise solutions to problems between states. "Quite wrong!" barked my colleague. "It is quite simple. It is our job to do the other bugger down." Whilst I am not sure this is quite as simple as he suggested, certainly it is important to remember that our primary responsibility is to promote the interests of the United Kingdom. Sometimes, like other diplomatic colleagues, I would be so involved in trying to find solutions that we did not always put first the need to get the best possible deal for our own country. There was also the danger of 'going native', becoming too identified with the interests of your host country.

The work was varied and I soon learnt to assemble draft answers for Ministers to give in parliament, together with possible follow-up questions that might be put together with appropriate responses. There were an increasing number of contacts between the British and the white Rhodesian administration. I think I was regarded as having some value simply because I was the only member of the Department to have actually visited the country. This of course did not equip me in any way to deal with the key issue of how to reconcile white obstinacy and African political ambition. This took 16 years to resolve.

From mid-1971 onwards, the pace of attempts to reach a settlement between Ian Smith of Rhodesia and the British Government gathered pace. Eventually the Tory Foreign Secretary,

Sir Alec Douglas Home, and Smith agreed on a complex formula for constitutional progress which would have given the Africans eventual majority rule but not for a long time. This was 'sold' both nationally and internationally on the assurance that the terms would only be acceptable to the British Government if all three major racial groups in Rhodesia, namely the Europeans, the coloured community and the Africans, found them acceptable. Since I felt that they were not really at all satisfactory from the African point of view, I tackled Philip Mansfield, saying that I found it difficult to go along with this. The ground was cut from under my feet when he replied that if I was part of the Commission which was to go out to Rhodesia to test opinion there and I was satisfied with the outcome, would that not make a great difference? I immediately said that of course I would be thrilled to be part of what became known as the Pearce Commission and that I would be more than satisfied if I could see for myself what the real opinions were.

The next six months were hectic. They were among the most interesting and exciting time of my twenty-two-year diplomatic career. Edward Pearce had been chosen because he was the Law Lord who had written the judgement in a Privy Council case involving the legitimacy of the Rhodesian regime, pronouncing that Ian Smith's Government was the *de facto* but not *de jure* government of the country. Possibly ministers did not grasp that Lord Pearce was an impartial judge to his fingertips. Three Deputy Commissioners were appointed to support him: two former colonial governors and Lord (David) Harlech, a former Ambassador to the United States and a close political confidante of the leading Conservatives of the day. My superior officer was Harold (later Sir Harold) Smedley who, as a junior diplomat, had served in Southern Rhodesia as well as being Private Secretary to a former Commonwealth Minister of State. He was liberal, friendly and extremely helpful to me. He assigned various tasks and then left me to get on with them.

I was fortunate that Lord Pearce, also an old Carthusian and of course a very senior lawyer, treated me rather like a private secretary. Certainly, for the first ten days or so, I was very close to him in helping to plan, together with Harold Smedley, how things would work. The two ex-colonial Governors also contributed in a major way to the planning.

One day I was in the office overlooking Green Park that was temporarily occupied by Lord Pearce, who had gone to call on the Prime Minister, Edward Heath. On his return, Lord Pearce, said, "Do you know, Jeremy, I believe that Ted was trying to bend me. He indicated that he would be pleased if we could produce a favourable outcome to the test of opinion in

Rhodesia so that the settlement could be implemented. I was told that there was strong political pressure within the party for this. I was already determined that we would do a thorough job and I am now even more convinced that we must do everything within our power to reach the truth and to tell things as they were.” This impressed me enormously. And he kept that pledge.

Answering to the two ex-Governors, I contacted a number of former District Commissioners from different territories as being best suited to act as the Commissioners to explain the proposals to the Africans and then to listen to their reactions and opinions. We used academics to advise on the history and politics of Rhodesia as well as helping us to produce a readily understandable, translated version of the proposals for wide distribution once in Rhodesia. Another diplomat, previously with the BBC, was brought in to ensure that we had good communication with all races once in the territory. Initially, Rhodesian broadcasters were reluctant to broadcast everything we wanted, but eventually they agreed. The playing of the resounding opening bars of Haydn’s London Symphony would identify our broadcasts. Almost as memorable as Liliburlero on the BBC World Service.

I had little time off over the Christmas holiday and on 4 January 1972, accompanied by an Administrative Officer and a senior member of our Research Department who had been a District Commissioner in Kenya, I arrived in Salisbury as the leader of the advance party for the Commission. We had a very busy week. I was mainly involved in discussing with the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister (Ian Smith) and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs how our Commissioners were to operate. We had a number of disagreements, such as where they should stay and the extent to which their itinerary and work should be supervised or even accompanied by the Rhodesian District Commissioners. We could not agree on everything and some of the issues were left to be resolved by Lord Pearce and his colleagues with Smith himself when they arrived. This was a week later.

Lord Pearce, the Deputy Chairmen, Harold Smedley and I all stayed in the very comfortable Meikles Hotel. I was privileged to be a member of the ‘top table’ as it were, so I dined with this group every evening. There was always a good South African wine. By day, I was involved in continuing negotiations with the Rhodesians over the meeting places for our Commissioners in the provinces and planning visits by the Deputy Chairman to various groups, factories and other organisations. I also took part in discussions over problems such as how to respond to suggestions by the Rhodesians that the African politicians had grouped

together to intimidate the population to reject the proposals or whether, during the first fortnight, in the face of outbreaks of unrest and one or two deaths among rioting Africans, we should temporarily withdraw from Rhodesia. Quite correctly, Lord Pearce and his colleagues decided that we must soldier on. Things gradually got easier and generally our Commissioners were well received and meetings well attended. It was a serious operation carried out with sincerity and considerable skill by the Commissioners. As former District Commissioners, they had the necessary experience and proved to be the ideal people for their difficult task.

In all, the Commission were in Rhodesia for two months. After about a month, it was becoming increasingly clear that the minority ethnic groups, the Europeans, the coloured community and the Asians generally favoured the proposals but that the African majority were firmly against them. They considered that the prospect of majority rule was just too distant and, in the meantime, they totally distrusted the white Rhodesian Government. Undoubtedly there was intimidation, something that became endemic in the country after independence as well as before. However, our Commissioners, as well as the Chairman, were satisfied, as indeed was I, that there was sufficient understanding among the Africans for them legitimately to reject proposals that did not really favour them. The terms agreed between Sir Alec Douglas-Home and Ian Smith were far less favourable for the majority than those Harold Wilson had failed to negotiate successfully with Smith on earlier occasions.

Lord Pearce called on Mr Smith and broke to him the news that the outcome of his Commission was likely to be that the proposals were not satisfactory to Rhodesian opinion as a whole. Mr Smith took this fairly well, since obviously his own intelligence services had come to a similar conclusion.

He then made what was one of the few generous gestures he ever made. He offered his own personal plane, an ancient Viscount, to Lord Pearce to take him and a group of us down to Victoria Falls. Mr Smith told Lord Pearce that he should see something of the beautiful country while he was here. As well as admiring the wonderful Falls, we took the opportunity to hold informal discussions in our hotel about the form and shape of the report when it had to be produced. Here I had a disappointment. I was asked to write certain passages of it but, frankly, I was not up to the task. I had no experience of report writing so, although I did contribute, I have always regretted my failure to make a larger input.

The report precisely carried out Lord Pearce's stated intention of telling the story exactly as things happened. Senior UN officials regarded it as the most honest report of its kind that they had ever seen. I have a little memento today, which I greatly treasure. Lord Pearce was quite a gifted amateur artist and on several occasions his oils, mainly of mountains and skies, were displayed at the Summer Exhibition in the Royal Academy. While we were at Victoria Falls he had sat one day by the Zambesi painting the scene before him. After his death some years later, his daughter generously offered to let me have her father's small oil painting of the Zambesi. It hangs today in our hall.

British Embassy, Ankara, 1972-74

Back in London, I was told that I was to be posted to Ankara as the First Secretary for Press and also aspects of CENTO. The Ambassador there was calling for me to come out as quickly as possible because the person I was replacing had already left. However, before leaving, Harold Smedley and I were summoned to the august presence of the Permanent Secretary, Sir Denis Greenhill. He asked us about the Pearce Commission and then proceeded to be highly critical of the delay before we had got on the ground, saying that Smith and his British supporters were blaming the delay for the ability of the African politicians to intimidate the local population. Harold Smedley, being wiser than I was, said little, but I was not prepared to accept criticism I considered wholly unjust. I therefore explained all the complex preparations. Sir Denis looked somewhat surprised at my temerity, but did not respond.

For some unknown reason, we were still allowed in 1972 to travel to Ankara by surface transport rather than air. Thus we travelled first class by train to Venice, where we boarded a comfortable ferry which conveyed us to Istanbul.

I remember nothing of the journey itself except we went through the Corinth Canal and that arrival by sea is by far the most dramatic and satisfying way of arriving in Istanbul. Staff from the Consulate met us and, after the necessary formalities were completed for the duty-free import of our car, we set off. The initial drive through Istanbul, where there were no signposts, was a nightmare, since the Turks did not take hostages when driving. Having crossed the Bosphorus by ferry, the road to Ankara was at times frightening, because of the speed of the large number of buses competing with each other. Once in Ankara we were shown to our apartment which was near the top of the built-up area. This was important, because all the central heating of the many apartment blocks in Ankara used lignite or brown

coal. This gave off clouds of choking, toxic sulphurous smog. Given that the city was in a bowl, the result was temperature inversion and, in winter particularly, lower parts of the city were often shrouded in foul-smelling and potentially lung-damaging fog.

I soon learnt that I was more suited to, and much preferred, life in an Embassy to being a Whitehall bureaucrat. I quickly realised the importance of the social side of Embassy life. We had an old-style Ambassador, Sir Roderick Sarrell.

My work was interesting but, although my wife Wendy and I had a number of Turkish lessons at home, I was still unable to translate or even read the Turkish press. Since this was my main responsibility, I was at a disadvantage. I had as assistant an Englishman who had lived all his life in Turkey and would earlier have been called an Oriental Secretary, based in Istanbul. At first, he was suspicious of me and resentful of the fact that I was getting overseas allowances, whereas he had been ruled ineligible for these. As time went on, I gained his confidence and he was extremely useful. What I did not know at the time was that he was also passing the more interesting of his titbits to our 'friends', the euphemism used until quite recently for members of MI6 or SIS embedded in our overseas posts.

I had to visit Istanbul, where the media were largely based, fairly frequently and the Consul General there, with whom I stayed, and his staff always made me very welcome. I loved this city, indeed one of the world's most remarkable. Sometimes I travelled by road or air but, if I could, I took the overnight sleeper train.

As part of my PR work, I used to take film shows into remote rural areas. The films, provided by the Central Office of Information, were documentaries, but, of course, they were in English. Together with a member of my staff and our equipment I would call on the Governor of the area and obtain his approval to hold the show in the town square. These events were well attended, but this was due more to the lack of any rival entertainment than any particular respect or admiration for the United Kingdom. Quite what the audience made of these films I do not know, but in one there was a tractor driver, somewhere in Africa, bouncing up and down on his machine and this roused roars of laughter.

In addition to my specific work with the press and my efforts to project as positive a reputation for the UK as possible. Cultivating both important journalists as well as opposition politicians I was pleased to be able to make a useful contribution to the political reporting. I enjoyed the daily meetings involving all sections of the Embassy, including the Defence Attachés, discussing recent events and their assessments. Royal visits, especially for

the Queen, involve a great deal of preparation. My only taste of this in Turkey was a visit by Princess Margaret. My twin roles on the evening of a grand reception were to gather a group of prominent Brits for HRH to chat with. Then I had to ensure that her glass was constantly topped up with her favourite whisky, Famous Grouse.

I also recall another exciting occasion, the grand opening of the first bridge over the Bosphorus linking Europe to Asia for the first time. Although built by a combination of German and Japanese contractors, the designer of this beautiful structure was a Scot. As Press Secretary I accompanied the Ambassador to the opening. The President cut the tape and then led the march across the bridge from Europe into Asia. The Janissaries band struck up a rousing march and inevitably the crowd strode across in step. After a couple of minutes, the Scottish designer rushed over to me and said that, although the bridge had been tested to stand the weight of a number of heavy goods vehicles, a huge crowd in step could set up a fatal resonance which could cause the bridge to collapse. I immediately found the Chief of Protocol to explain the problem. Within about thirty seconds he had asked the band to choose other, non-martial music. The bridge was saved!

As the UK representative on a CENTO Intelligence committee, I had once to travel to Tehran for the annual conference. I joined my American colleague from the CIA to travel by train from Ankara. It was a fascinating journey involving the train being put on a ferry to cross Lake Van in Eastern Turkey. In our sleeper the American offered me tomato juice and tabasco as an awakener. Unknown to me it was a strong Bloody Mary. I was soon singing like a canary as I wobbled down the corridor to the dining car for breakfast.

At the Iranian border, a doctor boarded the train demanding yellow fever certificates. I had not been pre-warned of the need for this. Despite my diplomatic status the doctor insisted on inoculating me on the spot, using a needle which had clearly been used before. In Iran we were under the care of the Shah's secret police, SAVAK. Horrible. However, we were treated royally with visits to the Persian Crown Jewels, which made the Tower of London display look like Ratners, then on to the architectural glories of Isfahan and Shiraz with Persepolis. I suspect the sightseeing was more memorable than our conference – certainly more enduring.

British Embassy, Lusaka, 1974-78

We were sad to leave Turkey after just two years but, given that I needed as wide an experience of diplomatic life as possible, I was delighted to be returning to Africa as First Secretary, Head of Chancery in Lusaka in Zambia.

Strangely, even in 1974, the FCO encouraged us to travel to Zambia by surface, so once again I had the pleasure of a week's voyage on a Union Castle Ship to Cape Town. This time we travelled in more comfort. On arrival, the British Ambassador and his wife very kindly put us up in their delightful Residence in the best part of Cape Town. Once our Range Rover had cleared customs, we set off for Lusaka. Because we could not travel through 'illegal' Rhodesia, we had to use the old hunters' trail through Botswana. At the time, this was being upgraded and tarred. Nevertheless, there were still difficult stretches where we nearly got stuck. Arriving at Kasane, the crossing point where five countries meet over the Chobe River, we found the car ferry in the middle of the river describing slow circles. There had been a firefight between Rhodesian forces and either Zimbabwean or SWAPO guerrillas and a chance shot had severed one of the aerial cables carrying the ferry across the river. As a result, we had three bonus days with the elephants in the Chobe National Park, waiting for the ferry to be restored.

Lusaka was my favourite posting, for several reasons. Although in the Tropics, the climate was good as the city is at over 4,000 feet and so the winters were quite chilly while bright and sunny, and summer temperatures were moderated. Most of this large country is boringly uniform, but the edges have attractive features such as Lake Tanganyika, the Zambezi, Lake Kariba and Victoria Falls to the south. And wonderful national parks, notably South Luangwa in the East. The one thing Zambia lacked was any coastline, but Lake Malawi was in reach. We had a comfortable house with a colourful garden. Above all, my job was the most fulfilling, and possibly the most successful, of my career.

My responsibilities were challengingly varied. As Head of Chancery, I was tasked with liaising with the various African Nationalist movements based in Lusaka at the time, notably the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), elements from the (South) African National Congress (ANC) and the Namibian Resistance Party, SWAPO. There was also the internal political reporting. This was necessary because of dissident elements, despite the fact that President Kenneth Kaunda was in firm control. During my four years in Zambia, the hitherto intractable question of somehow bringing Rhodesia to full independence under African rule

without undue bloodshed dominated events. I was also required to ensure that the Mission functioned smoothly and to meet as many of the movers and shakers as possible. This included two of President Kaunda's special advisers and some of the senior British Directors of the major copper mining groups, this being the country's major source of revenue.

There was a sizeable European population, mainly aid workers and business or professional executives. We met a number of these and I played golf on the nice course adjacent to our house. We enjoyed an active social life. Asked to dinner by British academics at the University, we were given caterpillars as a first course. They were revolting; tasting as they looked, green and slimy. I am sure this was a test for the effete diplomats by left-wing enthusiasts. So, I asked for a second helping. I noticed that no one else joined me. I felt this was a one nil victory for the diplomats!

Finally, as the colleague responsible for the UK's relatively large aid programme to Zambia had a gammy leg and did not like to venture outside the capital and I had a Range Rover, I travelled widely, visiting all fifty of the country's districts. I went to check on the British teachers, agricultural experts and the like, all there under the UK Aid Programme, as well as missionaries and isolated old 'colonials' who both needed and appreciated contact with the High Commission. Many of these people, and especially the missionaries, were good sources of grass roots information.

I also visited local rulers. Once in a backward area near the Kariba Dam the Chief welcomed me fulsomely, thanking the British for again coming to rule the country. I had gently to disabuse him, but not before he had thrown a coin on the ground, spat and remarked that it was now worthless but when the British were there "half a crown meant half a crown".

My most fascinating trip was a call on the traditional Paramount Chief of the Lozi, called the Litunga in Barotseland, the huge area west of the Zambezi. The incumbent, Godwin Lewanika II, had been to Cambridge. Although the Government did what it could to diminish his influence, his subjects still regarded him as almost divine. He had two palaces, one for the dry season and the other on higher ground. We had a long conversation and as a gift I had arranged a subscription to the London Times for him. He seemed genuinely thrilled, though I can only guess how late he received his copies.

I was fortunate to be able to establish good relations with the senior ZAPU representative resident in Lusaka, John Nkomo (no relation to his leader, Joshua Nkomo) and with the older, and later, Vice President of Zimbabwe, Simon Muzenda, the ZANU representative in Lusaka.

At this time, ZAPU, formed only from the minority Ndebele tribe, was involved in small-scale guerrilla fighting against Ian Smith's white regime, mostly in the Zambezi valley. It was still separate from the rival ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) Party, led by Robert Mugabe and drawn entirely from the majority Shona tribe. Later the two parties united both politically and militarily, but the ZANU forces still fought from their bases in Mozambique, whereas ZAPU was confined largely to a few areas of Zambia and within Zimbabwe itself.

As always, entertaining was a valuable tool. In Lusaka it was not always easy as Africans have a more relaxed attitude to time than we do, so buffets were wiser. For a Minister, however, we laid on a sit-down dinner. On the night another of the guests brought along two cousins without letting us know in advance. I faced the humiliating task of having to wind the table open and insert another leaf whilst the embarrassed guests waited to sit. Plenty of wine and beer soon restored the usual gusts of laughter, the characteristic of any function with Africans. On another occasion, a senior Foreign Affairs official failed to appear. Days later I met him and said, "Joseph, we missed you the other evening", to which he responded, "Oh yes, Jeremy, I am sorry but I just was not hungry that day". I could not think of any reply.

During my time in Lusaka we had a number of interesting visitors, including James Callaghan, who was then Foreign Secretary, and later several visits from his successor, David Owen. There was a great deal of toing and froing over the Rhodesian issue and, on occasions, I was summoned – once from the depths of the golf course – to convey messages to various Zimbabwean or other nationalist politicians from the British Government.

I had one memorable exchange with Robert Mugabe, who was at the time staying at the best hotel in Lusaka. I had earlier first seen him when he was in Salisbury prison during the Pearce Commission. The message I had to convey was that the constitutional proposals then under discussion, involving power sharing, offered a good deal for the African majority. I found Mugabe in his suite, fully dressed but with his breakfast tray still on the table. Over this, I tried to explain that power sharing would of course lead to eventual majority rule. Mugabe, not convinced, said that power could not be shared. It was either in white hands or in black hands. Without really thinking, I picked up the pepper and salt from the breakfast tray, poured out first some salt and then some pepper and mixed them up. I said, "No, power

can be shared". What I believed to have been my wonderful demonstration fell flat. Mugabe snorted, saying that the British always distorted things.

I also spent time with the top men of ZAPU, including leader Joshua Nkomo, who was based in Lusaka. He was a big man with a belly laugh and fond of his food. On one occasion at my house, rocking with laughter, he broke our chair and ended on the floor. I got to know his chief of staff better; he was an able administrator who later became Minister of the Interior in the new Zimbabwe. This went to his head, and he became as venal as most of his colleagues.

In addition to the nationalist leaders seeking independence, my High Commissioner, Stephen Miles, and I several times met with Jonas Savimbi, the highly-intelligent maverick leader of an anti-communist faction fighting for independence in Angola, but also having to fight against rival nationalist organisations. He was fascinating to talk to, but London, although nominally supportive of anyone who was anti-Communist, did not seem to attach importance to our reports. Among my travels on behalf of the High Commission inside Zambia, I had the great pleasure of getting to know very well a former Zambian High Commissioner in London, Elias Chipimo. He came from the north of Zambia and he kindly invited Wendy and me to his home area. Seeing things interpreted from a Zambian angle was a rare treat. He was at the time Chairman of the Standard Bank of Zambia, so when he got to his own home area, everybody assumed he was made of money. He told me that he had recounted this to President Kaunda who had smiled and said, "Well, how about my position? Because my head is printed on every bank note, people in my home area assume that I own all the money in Zambia". It was, and still is, the case that in Africa one wealthy relative is expected to support numerous kinsmen in his home area, including school fees. This can be a very real burden.

During 1977, I had what were perhaps the two most absorbing months of my whole diplomatic career. David Owen, together with a bevy of senior officials, was making a tour of the front-line African states, all engaged in trying to find a solution to the Rhodesia problem and putting pressure on Britain. They travelled in a VC10 of the Queen's flight. Whilst they were in Lusaka, they called on President Kaunda and others. Then the Foreign Office senior Under-Secretary in the party told me that I should pack a case, as I was to accompany them down to Salisbury, where I would be an informal representative of the British Government (without any diplomatic status or cipher equipment, since Smith had not permitted this), with the job of liaising with the regime, giving presentations to the European

and coloured communities about the then current settlement proposals and learning what I could about African attitudes to them. I said my farewells to Wendy and went off.

During the short flight down to Salisbury, there was an amusing incident. It was about 12.30 and the officials were gathered in their part of the plane having a drink before lunch. David Owen, who had the mistaken belief that senior FCO officials were somehow opposed to Labour Government policies, came in with his tie halfway down his chest and his top button open. He took one look at us with our gin and tonics and said loudly “Really, I do not know how you can expect to do serious work and drink”. At this, Tony Duff, an Under-Secretary, ex-submarine commander during the war and later Mrs Thatcher’s Security Adviser, immediately beckoned a hovering steward over and said, “A gin and tonic please, steward.” At this David Owen stormed back to his own quarters.

Once in Salisbury, I was booked into what was then the most modern hotel, where I took a suite so that I had a place where I could meet people as well as sleep. Having no support, I had to make my own appointments and arrangements. The European community treated me as something of a curiosity. Perhaps because of this, many of them seemed to want to meet me.

I attended a number of rather select dinner parties. At one of them, I lost my wool. I had not in several weeks met a single European who had admitted supporting Ian Smith at the previous elections. Rather, they all said that they were opponents. So, when yet another individual said, “Oh well, of course we do not support Smith.” I said, “This is very peculiar. In the last three weeks here, I have not met a single Smith supporter and yet his party won all 50 seats at the last election.” There was a rather embarrassed silence.

More important than dinner parties, I went around the country giving talks to groups of farmers and other Europeans. On the whole, I was given an attentive hearing, but what I had to say was greeted with considerable scepticism and, sometimes, dismay. The prospect of majority rule simply did not either appeal or figure in their calculations. I was not allowed to deal directly with Ian Smith because we did not recognise his regime. Instead, I had to make all my arrangements through the Cabinet Secretary, a charming retired headmaster, Jack Gaylard, who did all he could to make things easier for me without conceding anything important.

My stay had its amusing moments. I recall one fierce European lady coming in to give me her views. She ostentatiously unstrapped a rifle from her back and asked where she should

leave it. I replied that really, I didn't mind at all where she left it, but preferred her not to wave it around. I also recall a visit to a farmers' association some way from Salisbury. There I gave my usual talk about the current Anglo-American proposals for a settlement. At the end, one of the younger farmers got up and said, "Well Mr Varcoe, having heard what you have to say, I can't see any alternative but to don my tackies [slang for trainers] and run." Some meetings were more hostile and I used to take a careful look round when I went into a hall or schoolroom to see if there was a back entrance I could use to flee through if necessary. My 'promotion' work was not confined to the Europeans. I met all the African groups still in the country as well as visiting missions and community organisations. One painful occasion was my acceptance of an invitation to the élite stand at the Salisbury Racecourse. Here I mingled with some of the most right-wing leaders of the Rhodesian front. They treated me with suspicion, but only one was actually aggressive towards me. He questioned how I could have been allowed to be there. Actually, I wished I had not been!

Both in Salisbury and during sorties outside I heard harrowing accounts of ZANLA violence, mainly against other Africans. Equally, European men, then required to report for active military service one week in three, told me with honesty, but also usually with contempt for the *terrs*, how they were sent out to hunt down and kill them, often using dubious tactics.

I had a good deal of interesting information to report back to London. Since I had no means of encrypting my messages, I took to flying down to Pretoria every two or three weeks to dictate my telegrams to a secretary at our Embassy. The pressure on me got so much that I asked whether Wendy, who was a qualified shorthand typist, could join me as my secretary. To my surprise, the Foreign Office agreed to this. She even got paid, though not very much. It was wonderful having her as a support and having someone to whom I could talk.

Shortly after this, I was allowed to move to the Residence used by former British High Commissioners to Rhodesia. Mirimba House had been shut up since 1964. Every day for twelve years, the caretaker had crossed from the door to the window of the sitting room to open the curtains and then in the evening shut them again, so we found a worn footpath across the sitting room carpet. Nostalgic. Wendy was at her brilliant best and we hired several staff so that we could reopen the place. This was necessary as we had to entertain an important visitor – Field Marshal Lord Carver, who had been designated as the potential British representative during the proposed short transition phase to majority rule. He duly arrived in an official plane and was formally welcomed by the Rhodesian Chief of Staff,

Ministers and other officials. His three Staff Officers were high-flyers, all ending up as Generals. Not only were Wendy and I expected to look after him but also, as the man on the ground, I had to brief him about various aspects of the situation in Rhodesia at the time. I enjoyed that, though I also took quiet satisfaction from the fact that although Lord Carver, like me but a much more exalted former RTR officer, had a formidable intellect he still told the same story several times!

His visit did not go particularly well, although he met Ian Smith. Part of the problem was that he arrived wearing his Field Marshal's uniform, thus outranking the senior Rhodesian service chiefs. This was, I learnt later, deeply resented.

There was considerable British press interest in what was happening in Salisbury at the time. One day, the BBC correspondent for the nine o'clock news interviewed me. Perhaps because there was little else going on in the world at the time, I was given a five-minute slot.

Afterwards I hoped that I had said the right things. However, next morning I received a call from the Private Secretary to David Owen. He said that the Foreign Secretary was not pleased that I had chosen to talk about British policy towards Rhodesia. That was his job. I should not do it again. Feeling dismayed, I was slightly comforted when the Private Secretary (someone whom I knew quite well and who later had a very distinguished career) added, "Jeremy, I should not worry too much. I actually thought you did a very good job." Even so, I became more circumspect.

There were further visits to Salisbury by different people involved in the whole settlement process, but in late November 1977, after I had been there less than three months, Ian Smith made clear that he was going to impose an internal settlement with Bishop Muzorewa, who had been given a degree of authority but was, rightly, regarded as a stooge by the more radical Rhodesian nationalists. At this point it was clear that my presence could be seen as endorsing such an arrangement, so Wendy and I were recalled to Lusaka where our tour came to an end a few months later. We were sad to leave.

Central and Southern African Department, FCO, 1978-79

My job was the Assistant Head of what was still the Central and Southern African Department of the Foreign Office. My Head of Department for most of the time was Brian Barder, who became a lifelong friend. He was extremely clever. Having cycled or jogged into the office from Wandsworth, he would have drafted long instructional telegrams to our UN Mission in New York by the time most others arrived for the day. He was very good to

me as his Assistant. He decided that he would largely handle the main issue of the day, the attempts to reach an acceptable independence for Namibia from South Africa, whilst I was primarily responsible for looking after the smaller countries, namely Zambia, Malawi, Angola, Mozambique, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Since the guerrilla war against the Rhodesian regime was increasing in intensity, there was plenty to keep me busy.

One instance was a plea from Zambia for military equipment to enable them to repel raids across their border by white Rhodesian forces in pursuit of African guerrillas. Other African governments fully supported this request. Our Ministers agreed to help but military chiefs were reluctant, pleading the paucity of our own stocks. After protracted negotiations, a package was agreed. Some of the items were obsolete, but that did not matter much since the Zambians never even unpacked the Rapier anti-aircraft missile system.

Having so many countries to monitor, I was required to attend a lot of inter-departmental meetings, including the Africa Sub-Group of the Joint Intelligence Committee charged with preparing weekly reports for Ministers and other selective recipients. I was fully security cleared to see highly classified material. All this increased my respect for our intelligence services.

Two amusing asides from this time. The FCO corresponded formally with embassies in London by Third Person Notes. Those from the pro-Soviet People's Republic of Mozambique were always signed off with '*A luta continua, a vitoria e certa*' (the struggle continues, the victory is certain). Actually, the country was far from democratic and victory was equally uncertain!

Once when Brian Barder was away, I was summoned by the Private Secretary to see the Secretary of State, Lord Carrington. On entering his office, the Foreign Secretary looked up and said, "Tell me Jeremy, do you find Namibia as balls-achingly boring an issue as I do?" He was a wonderful man to work for and his easy charm only partially concealed his excellent brain.

British High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, 1979-82

When the time came to go abroad again, I was pleased to be selected to be Commercial Counsellor in Kuala Lumpur, providing both promotion and experience in a different area of work. As always, the Post wanted me there yesterday. I did not overlap with my

predecessor, (Sir) Rex Hunt, who was about to find unexpected fame as Governor of the Falklands, where he handled the Argentinian invasion with courage and panache.

Wendy and I were fortunate to have been allocated quite the nicest house in the High Commission stock in Kuala Lumpur. It was a large old colonial house, formerly occupied by the general manager of Malay Railways, in a leafy suburb of KL with an extensive garden: we grew orchids galore and had lots of beautiful shrubs.

My boss, Sir Donald Hawley, had had a distinguished career in the Middle East and later wrote widely about the region. He had a good baritone voice with which he used to regale us with songs from Gilbert & Sullivan. He was a good man to work for but, if he had one fault, it was sometimes to over-egg his success diplomatically when reporting to London. I therefore on occasions played devil's advocate, putting questions which he did not always like, but which helped us to reach a more balanced conclusion about events.

I was also fortunate in that my job took me to the two offshore parts of Malaysia, both nearly two hours' flight from KL, on the island of Borneo. Sabah and Sarawak were both fascinating, in very different ways. Sabah, formerly the British colony of Borneo, has developed recently with considerable wealth from oil, gas, palm oil and timber, as well as other agricultural crops (notably cocoa) and with many modern buildings, especially in the state capital, Kota Kinabalu. By contrast Sarawak, formerly the fiefdom of Rajah Brooke, remains partially feudal. The pace there is slower, although it too is well endowed with natural resources and has considerable wealth. The population is more diverse with traditional tribes, some of whom were until quite recently head hunters. However, in Sarawak it is the Chinese — especially those in the timber industry — who are the wealthiest. In Sabah, I was invited to dinner at the club to which all the wealthiest Towkays belonged. The chef goes abroad annually to learn new Chinese dishes. The food was therefore delicious and every diner had his own bottle of Black Label whisky or Napoleon brandy, of which at least half was expected to be drunk.

Both states suffer from serious over-logging and the degradation of much of their natural forests. On one of my visits to Sabah I climbed Mount Kinabalu, some 13,500 feet high. It was strenuous but incredibly beautiful with giant groundsel, a small weed with us, some fifteen feet high. There was also a cacophony of birds, some of them strikingly colourful.

We also took full advantage of the beauty of the Malayan peninsula, staying on the offshore islands and in the National Park rainforest and the old 'colonial' hill stations.

In general, civil servants are not good at trade promotion. My tenure in KL coincided with the premiership of Dr Mahathir, a doctor trained in Britain. For various reasons, including controversy over whether Concorde should be allowed to overfly Malaysia, he felt scorned by the British. He therefore ruled that, when it came to contracts for goods, consultancies or anything, Malaysians would buy British only as a last resort.

Normally, the job of the Commercial Counsellor is to keep in touch with British business representatives, help to iron out any difficulties they may have, find agents for British companies entering the market, and to provide hospitality, advice and to organise as high level a programme as possible for visiting trade missions and company representatives. The High Commission also held monthly meetings for the senior members of British Companies operating in Malaysia. These provided a useful forum for an exchange of views and enabled me to keep in touch with things as well as a chance to brief the businessmen on recent developments of importance to them. Because of the 'Buy British Last' policy, I was several times asked to try to ensure that a British bid was fully considered. I had one notable success. Malaysian Airways were in the process of buying engines for their new fleet of Boeing 747s. The competitors were the usual three: Pratt & Whitney, General Electric (both American) and Rolls Royce. Fortunately, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry handling the purchase, was of the old school and pro-British. He allowed me twice to visit him after dark at his home to set out some of the terms that Rolls Royce were offering. In the end, they did get the contract and the grateful RR Director asked if there was anything the company could do for me. Well aware of the rule that no diplomat could accept any gift worth over £40 I wondered whether perhaps a seat at Wimbledon might be possible. I was rewarded with two tickets for a semi-final, a memorable match between Borg and Connors.

On a less happy note, I made enemies of the local directors of Inchcape, the agents for Land Rover. They had a potential conflict of interest because they also represented the Japanese Land Cruisers. In my view, they put more effort into the latter than on behalf of the British company. So, when during my leave, I went to see Land Rover in Solihull, I explained what I regarded as the problem. Although I was listened to, I felt that no real attention was being paid or that any action would follow. My call must, however, have been relayed, as on my return to KL, the reception from Inchcape was frosty.

Although I am not trained in economics and there was a lady First Secretary who was, I enjoyed having to cover the national economy and to meet with the necessary ministers and Central Bank Governor etc. Overall, I found it a stimulating and worthwhile job.

Shortly before we left KL, a more thrusting and acerbic High Commissioner, Bill Bentley, replaced Sir Donald. He had been in Malaysia some years earlier but, unwisely, he adopted a slightly haughty tone with the Government. This did not go down well. Nor was the British community happy when he acceded to a request from Dr Mahathir to return Carcosa, the beautiful residence on a hill of the former Governors, and a former palace, that had been given to Britain at independence by the first Malaysian Prime Minister. Having just spent thousands installing (in my view quite unnecessarily given the high ceilings and fans) air conditioning in Carcosa, Bentley's decision was not popular; but he was probably correct.

I recall one evening there when Lord Carrington, then Foreign Secretary, was visiting. Over several glasses of whisky after dinner, he was fuming because he had just learnt that, in his absence, Margaret Thatcher had, apparently without consultation with the Foreign Office, taken the decision to increase university fees for Commonwealth students. This would bear particularly hard on Malaysia because at that time most Chinese students had to go abroad for university, because the local places were reserved for the native Malays. This was all part of Mahathir's policy of promoting the Malays over the Chinese, until then dominant in the commercial sector. Carrington went on to tell me that he was the only member of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet that she feared at all because, unlike the rest of them, he was not dependent on her patronage.

He demonstrated his decency and sense of duty when he resigned over the Falklands War. In reality it had not been the Foreign Office but the Ministry of Defence that had shown the Argentinians a sign of possible weakness by withdrawing the armed icebreaker HMS Endurance from the South Atlantic. Thus, it should have been Sir John Nott who retired. However, Carrington very properly took the view that at the time it was more important to have continuity in the Defence Secretary than in the Foreign Secretary. Although patrician, Lord Carrington was an outstandingly able and wise Minister. To me he was a hero.

Our stay coincided with the last of the British 'planters' managing some of the larger rubber and palm oil plantations. Invited to a Saturday curry tiffin, we would arrive around noon. After prolonged drinks and perhaps some gentle croquet in their lovely garden or a tour of the estate, we would sit down around 4 pm for a huge curry spread with numerous 'add-ons',

washed down with beer and followed by *gula malacca*, a local speciality made with sago pearls sweetened with palm sugar and coconut. We then poured ourselves into our vehicles around 6 pm as darkness fell. As always, our own entertaining load, mainly visiting delegations and senior executives both expatriate and local, was heavy but also valuable.

Our time in Malaysia was cut slightly short when I was selected for the politically sensitive job of Head of the South African Department in the FCO.

South African Department, FCO, 1982–84

This was undoubtedly my most challenging assignment in the Foreign Office. Attending meetings with other Heads of Departments, I soon realised that they included some of the brightest, and also most ambitious, of our generation. I admit to having occasionally felt intimidated. Although the job was not beyond me, there were moments when I wondered if I had done an adequate piece of work. I had to work long hours, arriving before nine and often leaving the office at half past eight in the evening. My one rule was that on Thursdays I must be home in time to watch *Fawlty Towers*!

In addition to the usual work of briefing Ministers, there was always a background of rising calls from the Commonwealth and other nations for increased pressure on South Africa to end apartheid, including the imposition of stronger economic sanctions. Largely unknown to me, there was at the time tension between Margaret Thatcher in Number 10 and the Foreign Office over UK policy towards South Africa. Her Foreign Affairs Advisor, Charles (later Lord) Powell, quite often short-circuited the Foreign Office, presumably on the Prime Minister's instructions.

An example of the kind of issue with which I had to deal was that of whether export licences should be issued for dual-purpose equipment, i.e. items such as air traffic control systems that could be used either for civilian or military purposes. The same problem arose with items such as tear gas, which could be used in a legitimate way to quell rioting or to oppress the African majority. It was my job to prepare a submission, setting out the facts, the policy options and then a recommendation for what should be done. In all cases where Number 10 was involved, papers from the Department had to be signed off by one and sometimes two Under-Secretaries in the Foreign Office before going across to Number 10.

There was a particular rumpus in 1984 over a group of South Africans and Britons who were charged with conspiring to export military equipment in violation of the mandatory UN arms

embargo. They were remanded in custody and their passports confiscated, but they were released on bail when a First Secretary at the South African Embassy agreed to stand surety. After an intervention from Number 10, a judge ruled that their passports should be returned and they were allowed to travel to South Africa on condition that they return for their trial. Later the South African government refused to allow the men to stand trial and the bail money was forfeited. By that time, I had left the Department, but I had wrestled with the matter earlier.

I also recall a lunch when Sir Geoffrey Howe, then Foreign Secretary, entertained Pik Botha, his South African opposite number. I remember fuming with frustration when Botha harangued Howe and was extremely aggressive. In response, Sir Geoffrey quietly delivered well-aimed barbs, but mostly these were too subtle for Botha. I wished he had been more positive, but it may well have been that his approach was correct in the circumstances.

The real policy dilemma at that time was to ensure a degree of access to the South African market for our exports whilst minimising the wider damage to our interests and standing from angry African and other governments. Based on a raft of intelligence and other information I concluded that the UK's interest would on balance be less damaged if we continued to observe the sanctions regime as laid down by the UN Security Council. The South African ability to withstand this, reinforced as it was by the withdrawal by Washington of much of its essential international credit, was undoubtedly weakening the Nationalist Government's resolve and ability to resist constitutional reform. The Afrikaners' morale was also upset by the sporting boycott, especially with rugby and cricket. Hence my advice to Ministers. I was, of course, aware of Tory unease with such a policy but I was never warned that No 10 also fundamentally disagreed with it. We cannot tell whether Mrs Thatcher's preferred policy of applying only limited sanctions while influencing the South African leadership on the need for change was really more effective in bringing about the dramatic end of minority rule in 1990. Personally, I believe this was entirely or mainly due to the inherent economic inefficiency of *apartheid* combined with international financial and political pressures.

A year earlier than would be normal I was called to see the Head of the Personnel Department, who informed me that it had been thought right to give me a change of scene. The option was Head of another Department for eighteen months or to go back to Turkey as the number two in the Embassy here. What I learnt only several years later was that the Prime Minister, through Charles Powell, had instigated this move. Apparently, she did not

like the advice I was giving on the maintenance of sanctions against South Africa as fully as possible. She did not agree with that policy. It was therefore agreed between Powell and an Under-Secretary at the FCO that I should be moved.

When I did learn about it, I was told that this was not held against me as it was recognised that my policy advice was quite legitimate and had, of course, been endorsed at a higher level within the FCO. Nevertheless, I cannot understand to this day why I was not told the truth at the time, or warned about the strong views held by Mrs Thatcher. Nor can I accept entirely at face value the FCO protestations that my career had not been affected in any way. The simple fact is that I was hung out to dry and had not been savvy enough to realise what was happening. Later I felt bitter, since before taking up the job I had gone to see the Chief Clerk (No. 3 in the Office and in charge of all personnel matters) to explain that I had a strong antipathy against apartheid, which I had witnessed at close hand. Sir John Whitehead said they were aware of that but had calculated that I would not let this cloud my objectivity in dealing with South Africa. I agreed that this would be the case but felt he should be aware of it.

Turkey - British Embassy, Ankara then Standard Chartered Bank, Istanbul, 1984 – 87

In the circumstances, I opted to return to Turkey. This time, Wendy and I flew out to Ankara and were allocated an apartment in much the same area as before. I should have enjoyed this posting more than I did, particularly as the Ambassador, Mark (later Sir Mark) Russell, was both an extremely kind man and a very sound and balanced diplomat. To work with him was a pleasure.

We had a strong team, with Kevin Tebbitt, the Head of Chancery, responsible for most of the political reporting. Kevin afterwards had a meteoric career, including Director of GCHQ in Cheltenham and then Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Defence.

As the Counsellor and Deputy to the Ambassador, I was primarily responsible for all the economic and commercial side of the Embassy's work. This meant that I got to know people like the Central Bank Governor and the Minister of Finance quite well. I also led our team negotiating large loans to the Turkish Government for structural relief, and had regular meetings with EEC colleagues on economic issues.

Largely because of Wendy's mental health — she had been struggling over the years with bipolar disorder — I seriously considered leaving the Office. By a coincidence, Neville

Green, whom I had known well in Kuala Lumpur where he headed Standard Chartered Bank and I had been Commercial Counsellor, had become the Senior Regional Manager for the Middle East, including Turkey. The Bank's Board decided to open a branch, the first by any UK bank, in Istanbul. Aware that I had dealings with both the Central Bank Governor and the Minister of Finance in Turkey, Neville approached me informally to ask whether I would consider secondment to assist the bank with this. He went on to suggest that possibly, if things went well, I could even transfer to the bank on a more permanent basis. I was immediately interested and had a meeting with the Managing Director of Standard Chartered in London. I then put the offer to the Foreign Office, who were sympathetic.

During this period, there was a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing over Turkey's application to join the European Economic Community (EEC). The UK in principle supported this, given that Turkey was also a staunch NATO ally. Other countries were less certain. France, in particular, found it difficult to accept a predominantly Muslim EEC member and one with a substantial population, most of whom were well below the general level of European development. I attended a number of meetings about this and also became friendly with the EEC representative, a Brit from Wales, who administered a substantial aid programme to which we contributed a considerable share.

In November 1984, during the Ambassador's absence on leave, I stood in for him at a football World Cup qualifying match in Istanbul between Turkey and England. As the senior UK representative, I was invited to the presidential box and the President himself was expected to attend. In the event he did not, because he feared that it could be a national humiliation. His fears proved correct in that England won 8-0. I recall cheering enthusiastically after the first goal and the various ministers and dignitaries around understood that. By goal number 4, I found myself apologising and saying what a fortunate strike it had been. I noticed that by the end of the match I was almost the only person still left in the box!

I enjoyed working in a busy Embassy with a large number of diverse and important links with the host government, but I was also looking forward to a totally different challenge as an adviser to Standard Chartered.

After leave, we flew back to Istanbul. We had to find our own accommodation within rental limits set by the Bank. We were fortunate to discover a lovely large airy apartment directly overlooking the Bosphorus. I was also delighted to have been assigned a car together with a

driver. This certainly made life in Istanbul easier. Socially, we quite quickly settled into the new life, since I already knew our Consul General and some of his staff in the Istanbul Consulate. Istanbul is a fascinating city, and it was a real delight to live in such a historic, cultural and cosmopolitan centre. The commercial world was also a refreshing change from the diplomatic bubble. But also, less exciting.

As for the job, the first problem was what my title should be, since I clearly did not fit into the Bank's existing hierarchy. Eventually, we settled on the meaningless title of 'Coordinator'. My role was to facilitate as fast a start-up for the new branch as possible. I answered to the manager, Chris Mallard, an experienced Standard Chartered man who had previously been manager for Botswana. We got on reasonably well, though it is fair to say that neither he nor the three other expatriate staff quite knew what to make of me.

Initially, things went smoothly and I believe that I was of genuine assistance in getting the bank off the ground. There was a good administration officer/accountant who found suitable bank premises in what was then still primarily a residential area of Istanbul, but was also well placed for local businesses. I was able to put in a good word at high levels and I think this helped. In any case, the branch opened in record time and, after a year's trading had made over a £1million profit. Although there was a small retail element, the branch's main activity was in providing trade finance.

I was thrilled to be awarded my first and only performance-related bonus when I met almost all the targets that had been agreed between Chris Mallard and myself. It was not a huge amount, but it brought home to me the difference between the public and private sectors.

Once the bank was up and running, my role became less clear. I started calling on finance directors of some of the leading companies to try to drum up business. My Turkish was insufficient to do more than a very simple presentation, but fortunately almost all of my interlocutors spoke perfect American English and had MBAs from Harvard or Stanford. Naturally many of them wanted to talk only with the manager, Chris Mallard, since I clearly lacked the necessary experience and expertise to answer detailed questions about export credits and the like. Nor was I helped to become really effective in that role, so I achieved little.

It therefore did not come as a surprise, although still disappointing, when the new regional manager for the Middle East, a man with whom I did not get on well, warned me that my usefulness to the Bank had come to an end and that I should now return to the Foreign Office.

In part this was because there had been a failed attempt by Lloyds to take over Standard Chartered, and in the process, my supporters had all moved on. Clearly there was no question of my joining Standard Chartered and indeed I realised myself that I was not qualified to do so at a relatively senior level.

British Embassy, Mogadishu, 1987-89

When I went to see the Personnel Department in London, I had hoped that I would now be promoted to the senior grade and be given a mission of my own. I was soon disillusioned. I was firmly told that it was not right that I should be allowed to benefit from my secondment. I suspect there was an element of jealousy in this, because they knew I had been paid slightly more than I would have been in the FCO. Instead, I was offered a small overseas post of my own at the same grade as Counsellor. I opted for Mogadishu in Somalia, though I knew virtually nothing about the country.

“A man who praises himself is like a goat that suckles itself.” This Somali proverb is sound advice indeed for any Ambassador, but especially for one going to Mogadishu. I was firmly reminded during my pre-posting briefing in the Office that since the end of the Cold War the UK had had virtually no significant interests in Somalia. They hoped I would not need to trouble them over much. There were very few commercial interests in the country, but we did have a sizeable aid programme worth about £6 million a year.

Flying into Mogadishu from Nairobi, the most usual route, I was struck both by the smart white buildings of Mogadishu glistening in the sun and by the skeletons of planes that had, for whatever reason, not quite made it that surrounded the airport runway. We were taken to our residence, a villa in a smart suburb of the city. Although there was no sea view, it had a nice upstairs sitting area with a balcony overlooking the small garden. The Embassy hours were unusual but sensible – from 7.30 am through to 2.30 pm. After a meal, one could either have a siesta or, as I quite often did, go and play some golf on what was an unusual course. It was on scrubby semi-desert with stones marking the fairways. If fortunate enough to be on the ‘fairway’, one was allowed to use a tee for the next shot. Greens, like other places in the tropics, consisted of oiled sand which, when raked over, then played remarkably true. There was usually only time for nine holes and a beer before darkness descended around 6 pm.

The UK-based staff numbered just five, with several very competent Somali local staff members. My number two, Roger Huxley, and his wife Niddy became good friends and provided excellent support. The Embassy was in a small compound together with a

swimming pool for the UK-based staff and another building in which a small library had been built up in the absence of any British Council presence. Wendy and I worked hard to enlarge this.

It was soon apparent that, although Mogadishu itself was outwardly calm, the country was in a degree of mounting turmoil due to the oppressive rule of the president, Siad Barre. He had had a serious car accident the previous year and was thought to be losing some of his grip, but he was determined to retain power by any means. In the north, the area that had previously been British Somaliland, there was resentment at the way that the area was treated and largely starved of funds. There were several nascent opposition movements in different parts of the country about which I had only very hazy information and certainly no contact. One of the strongest was based on the Issaq clan in what was British Somaliland: the Somaliland National Movement (SNM), which had been founded in the UK and partially funded by Somalis, mostly ex-seamen and students, living there. This led to the eventual secession of the North to become the still unrecognised but relatively stable separate state of Somaliland.

Some 90% of Somalis are of the same ethnic origin and speak the same language. These mostly comprise nomadic herders in the north and centre of the country. In the south there are also ethnic minorities as well as several subservient, almost slave, minority groups of Bantu ethnicity who live along the rivers and are mixed farmers. In 1987 the population was around 5 million; today it is estimated at around 15 million. The whole social structure depends upon clan. The four traditionally nomadic 'noble' clans form the élite, each of them claiming its founder to have been a close relative of the Prophet Mohammad.

Somalia's history as a defined country is recent, though in the more distant past it was a thriving area with many of its port towns trading profitably with the Egyptians and Arabs, then later with the Romans. The famed land of Punt was almost certainly in the Horn of Africa, from which came biblical treasures such as myrrh and frankincense. Despite an agreement in about 200 BC with the Mediterranean powers to exclude Indian traders, the Somalis continued secretly to import saffron and other spices from there, which they then sold on at a profit while pretending they were sourced in Somalia. Somehow such enterprise typifies the Somali spirit.

Somali society has been largely influenced by three factors: the dryness of the grassland, suitable only for limited grazing; the need to seize any opportunity in such a harsh

environment to improve one's lot; and Islam. Somalia was where camels first became domesticated. As with all nomadic societies, the size of the grazing groups was determined by the amount of grazing available before it was necessary to pack up the *akals*, portable 'tents' of skins and poles, load up the camels and move to another area where rain had fallen, or was about to fall. Most groups comprised several inter-related families with their herds of camels and goats. A Somali's loyalty lies in a series of concentric circles: first to the immediate family, then to the grazing group, followed by the sub-clan and clan. This clan loyalty is absolute and almost immutable. If loyalty requires dishonesty, so be it. This, together with their very recent experience of any form of centralised government, largely explains the difficulty in creating any sense of unity among the fissiparous warlords and splintered political groups, all of which are built on a particular clan.

The harshness of the environment also helps to explain the entrepreneurial attitude of most Somalis. They feel the need to take any opportunity to make money. They are clever and adept at coping with difficulties.

Mainstream Islam is very peaceful and imposes duties to behave well and to take care of those in need. This meant that one did not need to lock one's car in Mogadishu. However, it was prudent to appoint one of the many street kids who would rush up with the cry "Me Abdi, me watchman" to look after your car for a few shillings, otherwise there was a real risk that you would return to find your wing mirrors missing. You would then have to go to the market the next day to buy them back at an inflated price.

Catering was not particularly easy in Mogadishu because there was little to buy in the shops. Suddenly word would spread that, for example, cooking oil was now available and expatriates at once dashed to the shop. Diplomats, as usual, were cushioned to some extent. There was a Greek-owned duty-free shop where alcohol was available. We also had a special perk. Every month a member of our Embassy staff acted as courier to take the small diplomatic bag to Nairobi, where it would be entrusted to the Queen's Messenger, who shepherded it to London. Our courier was then allowed to spend the weekend in Nairobi, partly to purchase the various goodies ordered in advance by the rest of the staff. For the most part, this was food and things like spare parts, which were simply not available in Somalia. Electricity was erratic and we soon got used to the clatter of our generator, which regularly cut in automatically.

I recall one occasion when it was my turn to go to Nairobi. If possible, I stayed at the famous Muthaiga Club, a mixture of white nostalgia and black resentment and I always called in at the large British High Commission. This time I returned by Air Somalia, which offered the unusual lunch menu of very palatable goat stew, followed by a banana, the main export product from Somalia, accompanied by one or two glasses of very drinkable claret, an unusual feature for the state airline of a Muslim country. On my arrival at Mogadishu, the unloading of the plane was delayed and then, when the cases and other cargo were offloaded, they remained on the tarmac for what seemed a long time. I was in the terminal watching. To my horror, I noticed a trail of blood seeping out of one of the three diplomatic bags that I had brought back. By unfortunate coincidence, the Somali Chief of Protocol was also there. Luckily, he had a sense of humour. He came up to me and said “Excellency, I hope you are not breaching the Vienna Convention. I do not think diplomatic bags are allowed to contain bodies. Perhaps we should exercise our right to open it and see”. Somewhat shamefacedly, I explained why that would not be necessary. Happily, the beef still tasted excellent.

Our small staff generally worked well and, in the early part of my tour, much of the day-to-day work was humdrum. However, tension in the north grew and, although I had been able to visit that area twice, diplomats were later banned from going to what was British Somaliland. In addition, the President had apparently issued an edict that because he suspected, quite wrongly, that the United Kingdom was supporting the rebels in the north, ministers should not deal with the British Ambassador. I only learnt of this later, from the one very good Somali friend I made. Mohammed was a former Somali Ambassador in London and at the time was director for Europe. Thus, he was the person I dealt with most in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rolling his eyes slightly, he explained that many of his colleagues did not bother to appear for work except on the 28th of each month when they came to collect their pay. Apparently, a blind eye was turned to this. I soon realised that low-level corruption was rife in Somalia and, as reports came in of numerous arrests, it seemed that Siad Barre’s regime was cracking. Later, our locally-engaged accountant, who was secretly financially supporting the rebels in the north from whence he came, was arrested and only released after I made numerous protests.

Earlier, when tensions with the north were less, I was able, despite the President’s edict, to deal with ministers reasonably freely. The British security printers, De La Rue, asked me to try and secure payment of their outstanding account for printing Somalia’s banknotes. The surprisingly urbane Minister of Finance heard me out and then said with a twinkle in his eye,

“Excellency, surely the answer is simple. De La Rue need only withhold the amount of Somali notes sufficient to settle their account?” This of course was nonsense because, as he well knew, outside Somalia the currency was virtually worthless. I doubt that De La Rue ever got paid. Indeed, even within the country, at one time the currency used between expatriates was mostly cans of beer.

Socially, entertaining was of fellow diplomats, members of the various UN agencies operating in the country and British aid workers since, for the most part, Somalis (even the educated ones) only rarely accepted invitations from Westerners. This was a pity. There were the usual national days and I recall the dreariness of meeting the same people almost every time. This was bearable when there was alcohol, but almost unbearable when the host nation was from the Middle East and all that was on offer was lukewarm orange squash. Informal entertaining among the large, mainly young, aid workers was more fun.

As Ambassador, I was asked to captain the scratch ‘White Commonwealth’ cricket team which played a few matches against a non-white team, mainly Indian and Pakistani. The square was a dusty and almost bare football pitch on which was laid a tattered coconut mat. Brian Falconer, the British World Bank representative, was our best batsman. The opposition included an ex-Pakistan National Universities player who both scored prolifically and spun the ball prodigiously, so we usually lost. Before I left, I wrote a tongue-in-cheek letter to the MCC from the MCC (Mogadishu CC) relating this far-flung enthusiasm for the game and appealed for a new mat. This was granted, but I suspect it either never arrived or coup stopped play permanently.

I travelled as much as I could. I made a point of visiting one of the several large refugee camps. One of the great bones of contention in Somali was the size of their refugee community. This comprised Ethiopians left over from the previous war. The Somalis deliberately inflated their numbers so that the amount of aid provided by UNHCR and other agencies was sufficient to feed some of the Somali population as well as the refugees. The Somalis effectively expelled the UNHCR Head, who came from the Sudan, because he would not condone their cheating.

It was much the same with foreign aid programmes. I had an acrimonious exchange with the Somalis over their attempt to impose swingeing import duties on equipment brought in as part of our aid programme. What was even more galling was that much of this money ended

up not helping the Somalis but in Swiss bank accounts owned by the ministers and probably the President.

If I sound critical of the Somalis, I must make clear that I also have great respect for them. They are a proud, loyal and brave people with a very real sense of identity and an ancient culture. This is largely oral, because their language was not written until the twentieth century. At one point, my great friend, and source of all information, Mohammed, said to me quite genuinely, "Jeremy, you are so nice, but what a shame it is that you are not a Somali". Given their poverty and lack of development I could not think of any rational response to that. Another time I asked him why no Somali ever gave any traffic signals when driving. He looked at me pityingly and replied, "You must understand that in Somalia it is essential never to give any information to anyone in case it helps your enemies." After that I accepted with equanimity that you needed to be extra careful when driving. Outside the capital, the roads were mostly so appalling that sometimes it was better to drive anywhere but on the road. This was because the tarmac had completely disintegrated and there were gaping potholes.

At one point, the Foreign Office asked me to give an assessment of the impact if the BBC Somali service was shut down. Well, twice a week at 5pm the whole of Mogadishu fell largely silent and almost the whole population congregated in the coffee shops around their radios to listen to the BBC. This was the only way that the local populace received any news about their own country in whose truth they had confidence. So I replied sharply that the BBC Somali service was by far the most influential means of projecting Britain's influence. The closure of our Embassy would make far less impact than that of the BBC service. Happily, it remained in place.

A bit later I was so infuriated by the abuse of our aid that I wrote to the Overseas Development Agency saying that the most practical way we could benefit the local people was if I was permitted to hire a light aircraft and drop US 5 dollar bills out of the window. Of course, this was treated as a joke, but I believe I was right.

The largest share of our aid money was spent on an ambitious tsetse fly control programme. This involved spraying areas of woodland that harboured the fly, which effectively prevented cattle and other livestock from being kept in infested areas. The spraying had to be very carefully carried out by a private company whose pilots had been part of Ian Smith's white Rhodesian air force. They invited me to go up in a plane with the pilot. The spraying had to

be carried out around 6am when the wind was light but sufficient to drift the spray widely across the woodland. It was essential that the plane stayed just 60 feet above the canopy. Because the terrain was undulating, this required extremely skilful flying. Before we took off, I was given a sick bag with the assurance that I would almost certainly need it. Happily, it remained empty. Nevertheless, it was one of the most exhilarating and also frightening experiences that I have ever had, as suddenly the pilot would go into a steep climb and then equally suddenly would dive again to match the contours. What was sad, but I suppose inevitable, was that with the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991 the whole programme was abandoned and so some £6 million went down the drain.

I travelled as widely as I could and was very struck by the ability of so many Somalis somehow to scrape a living when this hardly seemed possible. The black economy, remittances from relatives working in the Middle East or elsewhere, and the philanthropy of wealthy individuals discharging their Islamic duty to help the less fortunate all helped to ease the plight of many. The failure of Government to provide essential services either because they could not, or would not, afford to pay for them was partially made good by foreign aid programmes. I discovered how difficult it is to administer aid effectively when those who do not really need it see aid as just another opportunity to be exploited. Also, some programmes were inappropriate. EU funding for fishing boats might seem fine, but since the intended recipients were nomads who did not eat fish and regarded fishing as an occupation that was unworthy of them, the project failed. When visiting Kismayo, the biggest port and town in the south of the country, I called at the government hospital. It was sadly run down, though the nurses were doing their best. The only doctor was Chinese. Since he did not speak any of the languages known to the patients and staff, only Mandarin, he was of limited help. Apparently, his main treatment was to administer either red pills or green pills, apparently almost at random. Thanks to the placebo effect some may have recovered.

Two events stand out. First was a visit by HRH Princess Anne, the Princess Royal. I received various telegrams from her private secretary at Buckingham Palace outlining her plan to come, mainly to visit Save The Children Fund (SCF) work in the country but also, so that it could be funded by the government, to undertake a short official programme in Mogadishu.

The day before the Princess's arrival, Wendy spent the morning at the Government guesthouse to make it as comfortable as possible. She even put some of our possessions in

there and one or two of them subsequently ‘disappeared’. I then accompanied her in a Royal Flight plane to the north. We had first to overfly the grass airfield to clear the runway of camels and other livestock before landing. I have to say that in dealing with the Save The Children staff, both expatriate and local, and in her contribution to discussions about various projects, she was magnificent. However, things did not go smoothly. It was clear that, because we were in the north of Somalia, the government were watching everything that was going on. No doubt they had informers everywhere. At one point, they arbitrarily arrested a local member of the SCF staff. The Princess consulted me as to how we should react. I advised that we should lodge a complaint locally at as high a level as I could. If that did not work, we should threaten that the Princess would immediately leave the country. Happily, the man was released and all was well. After that the Princess appeared to have more confidence in my advice!

As an official guest of the Somali government, it was incumbent upon the President to entertain her. He chose not to give a large formal dinner. This probably suited the Princess as well. Instead, he proposed a small dinner in the garden of his Palace, Villa Somalia. The Princess had previously asked me how she should deal with the thorny issue of female genital mutilation (FGM). I explained that in Somalia, even liberal middle-class mothers with reluctance accepted that their daughters should be cut, since if they were not it would damage their marriage prospects. So whilst I shared the general abhorrence of the practice, I advised her to raise the matter with caution. Bravely, she did fairly early on in the dinner tackle the President directly on this. He listened politely and said that her points would be considered. Fortunately, he did not otherwise react. Predictably, nothing happened. Although Princess Anne clearly much preferred the SCF component of her visit, she gradually relaxed with me and, by the end, was reasonably friendly. I think she enjoyed it.

Another highlight from a UK point of view was the first ship’s visit in many years by destroyer HMS Exeter. Quite why it was decided that it should come to Somalia I am not sure, but it was certainly a welcome event. The captain was obviously an accomplished seaman, and he was also a competent diplomat. Somali service chiefs, including the admiral of the Somali navy, were invited on board. I should add that the Somali navy comprised two motor torpedo boats that were moored in the Red Sea port of Berbera. I once saw them there and I suspect that they had not put to sea for a long time. Indeed, cynics believed that if the mooring ropes were cut, the entire Somali navy would sink. Anyway, that did not stop there being an admiral to look after them.

Towards the end of my tour, events in the north of Somalia took an uglier turn. The dispute between the north and south was largely clan based, but it also had a political dimension. The British system of administration of the north had always been very different from the Italians' rule in the south. I like to think it was more efficient and less corrupt, though it has to be said that the Italians did more to improve the infrastructure in the south than we did in the north. Anyway, Siad Barre finally sought to suppress all opposition in the north using two or three ancient, cannibalised Buccaneer aircraft, a relic of British support for Somalia after it had switched its allegiance from the Soviets to the West, to bomb the capital, Hargeisa. For this, they employed mercenary white Rhodesian pilots who were based in Mogadishu. One of my staff invited them to use the Embassy pool. I was so incensed by the inhumanity of what they were doing that I personally ordered them to leave immediately. I wish I could have done more to punish them.

For several months, travel by diplomats to the north was prohibited. Eventually, I was one of the first three Ambassadors allowed to go there under strict supervision. I was horrified. Although not quite Coventry after the blitz, much of Hargeisa had been destroyed. Later still, life for the British expatriates living in the north became impossible and it was clear that they should be evacuated to safety. To his credit, the commander of the Somali army in the north, whose *nom de guerre* was General Morgan, went around the town, at some risk to himself, collecting up British citizens in his vehicle and taking them to his own house before they could be moved to safety. I became involved in the considerable to-ing and fro-ing diplomatically before eventually the UN organised an airlift of foreigners out of Hargeisa. I had earlier called on General Morgan. He was a flamboyant figure with a large dagger in his belt and a pet cheetah. Initially it was in a cage, but Morgan insisted on bringing the poor creature, happily on a chain, to join us for tea.

Soon after this, I received a telegram, which I laboriously de-coded personally using cipher books. Rather than some dramatic news it was Personnel Department asking whether I would be interested in becoming the Minister, the number two, in Lagos, where my old colleague and friend Brian Barder was the High Commissioner. I was in a quandary. Naturally I welcomed promotion and leaving Somalia was quite attractive, but I had hoped to have my own mission. Eventually I agreed and prepared to leave.

Looking back on Somalia, I realise that I should somehow have been able to glean more political information than I did, difficult though this would have been. I should also perhaps

have predicted the fairly imminent collapse of Barre's regime and the anarchy that ensued. My appreciation of the complex political scene in Somalia was badly hampered by a lack of intelligence on developments. The Foreign Office could not be expected to train officers in Somali, a language spoken nowhere else, and the end of the Cold War had greatly diminished Somalia's importance to the West, so there was virtually no MI6 interest in the country. Only the Italians had much inside information. I was aware that the country was a powder keg, but I could and did not predict how soon it would explode, just two years after I left. My successor had to be airlifted to the safety of a US warship standing off Mogadishu.

It is important to remember that until 1960 Somalia had, with neighbouring French Djibouti, been three separate territories. Also, in a nomadic society the concept of central government and control was largely alien. Combine this with the fierce loyalty of members of a clan to their kinsmen and you have a recipe for disintegration into factions led by local warlords and a lack of centralised authority. What no one predicted was the rise of extreme Islam in the form of Al-Shabaab, an organisation that has yet to be quelled. Despite this, Somali enterprise, spirit and their habit of defying disaster has meant that the country is at last starting to recover. An interesting illustration of this is that Somaliland has today one of the highest rates of mobile phone usage in Africa.

British High Commission, Lagos, 1989-90

Given Nigeria's reputation, it was with some trepidation that we flew to Lagos. We were well housed in a comfortable though characterless house, which in some ways resembled a fortress. Sadly, this was the way of life for most wealthy Nigerians and expatriates alike. Lagos at that time was a large mission with a considerable number of staff, some involved with aid, the military, a large consular section dealing with visas and one or two less usual Whitehall department representatives.

We travelled outside Lagos officially on a number of occasions. The mixture of formality and chaos made for interesting cameos. The Nigerians loved making speeches. These were always prefaced by the phrase, "My Lords, ladies, chiefs and gentlemen, all protocols observed". I twice visited Kaduna in the centre of the country, where there was a small British Consulate and British Council office. This was a sensitive area, being the watershed between the Muslim north and the Christian south. There were periodic sectarian riots in that and other parts of the country. I twice visited the oilfields of the south-east delta region. I was disturbed by the amount of flaring of potentially usable gas and the inability of the oil

companies to control leaks. Not an easy task with tribesmen trying to tap into pipelines to extract small amounts for cooking etc.

I also paid fairly regular visits to Nigeria's foremost elder statesman, Chief Obasanjo, a respected former President. Now a 'gentleman farmer' with animals that looked to be in poor condition, he was interesting to talk to and it helped to provide us with a different picture of the political situation in Nigeria. The country was then under military rule, which was often more efficient and slightly less corrupt than the civilian governments that the military usurped. At one point, we witnessed at close quarters a form of coup whereby one general overthrew the existing President. We heard shots just two houses away.

I was also fascinated to call on the former Biafra leader, Colonel Ojukwu, a fellow alumnus of my Oxford college. He was able to live in peace in a leafy suburb of Lagos, though with a military guard who no doubt also reported on his visitors. I found him surprisingly low-key given his earlier fire. He seemed reconciled to Biafra's failure to secure independence.

There was a club in Lagos, the Metropolitan Club, which was modelled loosely on London clubs. Its members included many of the Nigerian élite plus a few 'selected' expatriates. For some reason, the Minister of the British High Commission was also included in this élite. I remember on my first visit being struck by two things. First, two alternative menus were offered for lunch; one was British food, somewhat of the railway hotel variety, and the other was African food. Ironically the Nigerians all opted for the British menu while the expatriates felt obliged to eat the African food. I am not sure which was worse.

I sat at a table with a number of very urbane Nigerians, many of them Oxbridge. One of them asked me, "Jeremy, has it occurred to you to wonder why you have been invited to join this club?" I replied that the thought had crossed my mind. He went on to say "Unfortunately in recent months the British High Commission have been more difficult in issuing visas to us. In the past we used to send our drivers and they would come back with the necessary paperwork. Now we are required to attend in person and we can be asked to wait for a very long time. This is extremely inconvenient. We thought that perhaps you would be able to make arrangements to ensure that, when we sent a note to say who it was, you would arrange for a visa to be issued in the previous manner. In return we would provide you with titbits of political information which you could then send back to London showing how on the ball you were." I was rendered speechless, though I should not have been as this was very Nigerian. Anyway, I did actually manage to help introduce a process whereby

regular visitors to UK could obtain multi-entry visas. Nevertheless, I did not accede to the request in the way that it had been put to me.

The lunches at the club were always entertaining. The noise level was enormous, very different from Pall Mall. Generally the Nigerians were vivacious, intelligent and great fun. Unfortunately, Nigeria was also more corrupt than anywhere else on earth. I suspect corruption had become totally endemic in all aspects of their life. Undoubtedly this set back a country which had great resources and a skilled labour force. If everyone had pulled together, which they did not, it would today be far more successful. I used to pride myself on never having personally paid a bribe. The fact was, however, that at Christmas, our administrative officer used to grease the wheels of all those on whom the High Commission depended for permissions, permits and the like. Normally, this took the form of cases of duty-free whisky. There was also a destructive side to all this corruption. Visiting the teaching hospital in Ibadan, once probably the best in black Africa, I was shown numerous pieces of medical equipment lying idle and unusable due to the lack of spare parts. Angry doctors explained that this was the result of a shortage of foreign exchange caused entirely by this being siphoned off by corrupt senior military officers and officials who all had their snouts in the trough. I knew several totally honest officials, mostly Christians, for whom life was not easy.

Once when travelling in a more remote area, my driver managed to skid and our Range Rover landed in a ditch. A lorry containing a number of road workers duly stopped. I hoped that they would simply leap out and kindly push us back on the road, which would not have been difficult. Not a bit of it. They asked for an exorbitant amount of money to perform this simple task. Eventually my driver, Obed, reached a more realistic settlement and I duly paid up. He was lugubrious but astute. To look after all the High Commission vehicles, we had a temporary British mechanic, who was soon to be replaced by his Nigerian assistant, Joseph. I innocently asked Obed how he thought Joseph would manage. He sniffed and said, "After two weeks all our vayhickles fock op."

Perhaps the highlight for me was the visit of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. They arrived on HMY Britannia, which only confirmed for me the short-sightedness of the government's subsequent decision to de-commission her. That beautiful ship, although slightly dated, was a wonderful advertisement for Britain. One evening the marine contingent beat the retreat on the quayside. This was attended by many senior Nigerians and

made a deep impression, as did the royal visit itself. The President gave a formal banquet for the visitors. When Princess Diana entered the room in a shimmering green dress with an emerald tiara, there was a spontaneous gasp of admiration from all present.

Brian Barder asked me to arrange a gathering on Britannia for the Prince to meet a cross section of Nigerian youth over tea. I managed to get together intelligent young professionals, a leader of the disabled and other suitable representatives. The Private Secretary wondered whether we would be able to keep the conversation going long enough for tea to be served. I explained that, on the contrary, the problem would be to get rid of the guests in time for Prince Charles to have supper. Although I had to introduce topics to get the conversation flowing, once it did it was typically animated.

The other event, which I handled, was a visit by the Royal couple to Lagos's main teaching hospital. I spent several mornings planning the programme with the hospital director. When we arrived we found that the whole place, or at least all the areas visited by Charles and Diana, had been freshly repainted. At one point, we were on a covered walkway with open sides. Suddenly, from all directions people rushed towards us. Charles, looking slightly nervous, asked me whether this was all right. I assured him that everyone simply wanted to see him and the Princess. Meanwhile, Diana had as usual sensed what was happening and had dived into the crowd, shaking hands with as many people as possible. Afterwards, I asked a large and cheerful hospital sister if she had seen Diana. She replied, "Seen her? I shook the hand of the Princess and I tell you I will not wash that hand now for a whole month."

Another visit I personally enjoyed was that of Chris Patten, then Minister for Overseas Development. I was in charge at the time during Brian's temporary absence, so I accompanied the Minister in a Range Rover on a two-day tour to visit aid projects in the North. I got to know him quite well and was most impressed, especially when at very short notice he was asked to make the keynote speech at a meeting of the African Development Bank. He asked the officials who accompanied him to draft something overnight. Then at 6 am when we reconvened, he read the draft, thanked us and produced his own far better version.

Undoubtedly my ten-minute conversation with Nelson Mandela, recently released in 1990 after 27 years' incarceration and visiting Lagos to thank Nigeria for their support in the struggle for majority rule in South Africa, was the highlight of my tour. At the diplomatic

reception for him I was introduced and when I said I had known well one of his former lawyers, Vernon Berrange, he became animated. We had a serious talk about him and the ANC. He made me feel that I was an important person for him to meet, the true mark of real charisma. In my view he was one of the four most significant figures of the twentieth century, the others being Stalin, Churchill and Mahatma Gandhi.

I enjoyed my time in Nigeria because I love Africa and Africans. It may be slightly arrogant, but I believe that I am able to get on with them better than most people. This is partly because they are direct and they like people to talk to them directly. More importantly, if you can make an African laugh, you are home and dry.

Every few years, British diplomatic missions are inspected to review possible changes needed in staffing, procedures and the living allowances. I had already decided that there was little justification for Lagos continuing to have two senior grade officers. I therefore recommended that my post, that of Minister, should be abolished. This was also the Inspector's view, reflected in their report, so I was not going to return after the first eighteen months for a second tour.

G7 London Summit, 1990-91

I was told my next posting was to be in charge of organising the 1991 London G7 Summit. Given that I was good at ideas but not known for my attention to detail, I was apprehensive. Diplomats are not normally still around to see the success or failure of their activities. In this case, it would be all too obvious whether or not the Summit was an organisational success.

As an Assistant Under-Secretary, I was appointed coordinator for the 1991 G7 Summit about eighteen months before the event. This turned out to be too long and a lot of my time was spent going over and over events already agreed. I flew out in July 1990 with the British delegation to Houston to see a G7 summit at first hand. It was of little help, since it was organised by a commercial company and those I spoke to showed little interest in trying to help me. It did, however, give a useful picture of the scope of what was obviously a hugely expensive event. I believed we should not try to emulate that.

Back in London, Personnel set about recruiting staff for this new and temporary unit. Inevitably, some of them were officers that other departments were only too pleased to be rid of. My deputy was pretty useless. I too had little idea at the outset of how to organise an event of this magnitude. Again, Personnel tried to persuade me to go digital and tenders went

out for suitable computer programmes. This was a new area for me, and still for many others, and I firmly believed that when it came to the actual programme, as opposed to issuing badges for the large press corps and arranging vehicles etc, an ordinary whiteboard was preferable to some computerised system. As always with Government IT contracts, the lowest bid was accepted and it proved disastrous. We did use computers, although I had to be taught the basics before I could myself use the system we were equipped with. It had many flaws and the consultants returned several times to try to put things right. The results were mixed.

The next issue was where the event should take place. It had already been decided that it should be London rather than in the provinces. A bid was made to publicise the rapidly developing Canary Wharf and Docklands area, and I was taken up in a helicopter to look at it from above. I became quite enthusiastic, but the transport links were not yet in place and the roads would be extremely congested when they needed to be clear for convoys of VIPs. We therefore resorted to using Lancaster House for the larger meetings of the Heads of Government and Ministers, whilst the five-year-old Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre opposite Big Ben was selected as the media centre. A senior information officer from another Ministry was seconded to support me with this important and extremely time-consuming side of the Summit.

There were so many things to consider. On the finance side, I was never told the actual budget for the Summit and I stupidly never asked. However, it was agreed that we would not attempt to outspend earlier summits by providing lavish entertainment. The whole point of the G7 was to allow world leaders to talk informally and to get to know each other in a relaxed manner. We decided to rely on the splendour and history of our venues to achieve this. All the same, we went through a number of standard, though perhaps not really necessary, rituals, such as choosing a logo to promote the event and providing modest goodie bags for the delegates and the accredited journalists. We persuaded a number of companies to give items free of charge as good publicity for them. Jaguar provided a fleet of limousines for the delegations.

As well as the main programme, I had to help devise a suitable programme for the spouses of the leaders, such as a boat trip on the Thames and a visit to Kew Gardens. This involved me with meetings with Norma Major at Number 10. I suspect she hated the limelight and

wanted only to be able to enjoy her love of opera and family pursuits. Despite this, she played her part very well.

In the same way I got to know John Major. He could be petulant but, on the whole, he was a pleasure to deal with. New to his role, he also performed the role of summit host with aplomb and political skill. I must make clear that I had nothing to do with the substance of the conference, although I sometimes wished I had.

Despite the difficulties and the need to make changes, the plans proceeded reasonably well. Much time and effort were spent on the selection of an expensive new wooden conference table for the main meetings in Lancaster House. Also I had a fierce argument with American officials about the degree of security necessary for their President. They wanted an armed agent behind virtually every tree in Green Park when he was having lunch in a beautiful house overlooking the Park. In the end, this was wisely left to security officials to sort out.

Christmas was a somewhat tense affair, as Wendy had been very unwell again. She spent a short period in the psychiatric wing of the Westminster Hospital, where she was under the care of a senior psychiatrist. It was 13 February 1991 when tragedy struck. On returning to our flat in Pimlico, I found her dead. I dialled 999 and a young police constable arrived. I think he was more distressed than me and it was I who, with shaking hands, had to make us both a cup of tea.

Wendy had tried hard to conceal her mental illness from almost everyone. I had lived with the possibility of disaster for some years, but I suppose I had persuaded myself that it would not happen. So her death was profound, gut-wrenching shock.

I was given a week's compassionate leave by the Office. Having to return to work made me focus on the job that had to be done, though, of course, I continued to hurt inside. John Major invited me to one of his Sunday lunches at Chequers so that I could discuss the details for a lunch Norma was to give for the summit spouses. In the morning they would have been visiting nearby Stoke Mandeville hospital, specialising in spinal injuries.

Having to work hard on final preparations for the summit during the week was also helpful. These annual meetings are supposed to be an opportunity for the heads of government of the Western world to speak together informally and freely. In reality, a great deal of prior work goes on behind the scenes. Each leader appoints a Sherpa to represent his country and to prepare the ground for the Summit discussions. It was also in my brief to organise suitable

meeting places, usually in attractive country house hotels, for the Sherpas to meet three or four times. There they formulated the agenda, drafted possible outcomes for the main areas of discussion and agreed the communiqué that would be issued after the summit.

On the first day, I supported John Major in meeting and greeting the various leaders and their delegations. Whilst I did not play any part in the actual discussions, I twice went into the room at Lancaster House to check that all was well. The social events were equally important. On one evening, John Major first entertained his guests for drinks in the Jewel House at the Tower of London before they had an intimate dinner in the room in which Anne Boleyn had spent her last night watching the scaffold being erected outside. I suggested to the Prime Minister that he might raise this with his guests as a kind of warning to the powerful not to become over-confident. At the same time, senior officials from the delegations, including myself, had a separate dinner in another room in the Tower. It was clear that members of the delegations much appreciated the glamour and special nature of the place.

There was a minor glitch at the beginning in that all the guests arrived reasonably punctually, except President Mitterrand of France. After about 25 minutes, I suggested to John Major that he should join his other guests while I waited for the French President who turned up nearly 40 minutes late without any real explanation. Afterwards, his very urbane Chief of Staff rather sarcastically asked me whether it was correct for a head of state to be greeted personally by his host. I explained that this was indeed normal but, equally, it was normal for guests to arrive within the timescale considered polite.

On the following day, there was another excitement. I was suddenly summoned to the entrance of Lancaster House, where President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union had arrived rather earlier than anticipated. I engaged him in polite conversation until the Prime Minister arrived to greet him properly. This was the first time that he had attended any such event.

Later that evening, there was a reception for the delegates at Buckingham Place hosted by the Queen. I had earlier had a meeting with both her and her Private Secretary, during which she displayed a wry sense of humour. I merely hovered in the wings to see that all was well. After that, we all repaired to the roof of Buckingham Palace to see a short but stunning display of laser beams and fireworks. During the following days, some of the Press were critical of the fact that this display had not been visible to any of the public. The Foreign

Secretary, Douglas Hurd, told me that he had never seen anything as good and that the British were still paramount in mounting ceremonial displays.

On the last evening of the summit John Major entertained just the heads of government for dinner at Number 10. Together with the head of Government Hospitality, I had arranged for an English wine to be served. I learnt that President Mitterrand, normally largely teetotal, had taken a few sips and pronounced it as “not bad for an English wine”. John Major also kindly circulated a menu which everyone had signed. I treasured this memento of the summit and eventually gave it to my only grandson, Sky.

On the morning when the delegations were leaving, I sat in my office in Lancaster House with eyes closed and heaving a sigh of relief that it had all passed off without undue incident. Suddenly, there was a heavy knock on my door followed immediately afterwards by the entry of a large American Sergeant of Marines, who stamped on the floor, saluted and said to me “Sir, the President of the United States.” Naturally, I stood up as George Bush Senior entered. Having asked me to sit down, he said, “Jeremy, what a very successful summit this has been. If you have no objection, I would like to borrow your junior staff for a few minutes so that I can have my photograph taken with each of them.” So he was duly taken round to meet the security guards and secretaries for photographs to be taken by the White House photographer. Two weeks later they each received a signed copy from the President’s office. I also received a personal letter of thanks. I found this remarkable from a President who was also an experienced diplomat and an extraordinarily nice man.

My last task was to write a report on the summit in which I recommended the establishment of a cross-Whitehall conference unit, based in the FCO, to handle all major Government events including the growing number of EU conferences. Once implemented, this specialist team soon proved to be more efficient than ad hoc units such as mine.

John Major kindly gave a drinks party at Number 10 for members of my team. This was a gracious gesture on his part. He also helped me in another way. The Office had told me earlier that they thought the post of High Commissioner in Trinidad would be a good one for me as it would be less stressful for Wendy. After her death, when John Major asked me what I was due to do next, I explained all this. He said that perhaps I could do something more challenging and offered to have a word with the Office.

As a result, I was told that I had been selected as the High Commissioner in Colombo to succeed David Gladstone, who had effectively been expelled by the Sri Lankan President for

allegedly interfering in the country's internal affairs. This came at a time of heightened tension in the civil conflict there between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority led by the militant Tamil Tigers.

After the summit and a brief sailing holiday with an old FCO colleague in the Isles of Scilly, I thought hard about my future. When the time came for me to make a decision about Sri Lanka, I met up with the Gladstones. They told me that they had paid off almost all the staff at the Residence in Colombo. The prospect of having to cope on my own with a heavy entertainment load and the running of the Residence filled me with trepidation. I was also still in emotional turmoil.

I therefore told the Office that I felt unable to take up the post and that I would be retiring from the Service. Considering that my late cancellation of the posting caused them some embarrassment, they were really very understanding. After consultations, they said I was eligible for redundancy terms, though not the most generous. I could draw my Foreign Office pension as from the date of my retirement (as from the end of 1992), even though this was still short of the normal retirement age of 60.

Since I still had a few months to serve, I was asked to go to Croatia in former Yugoslavia as an OECD peace monitor during the conflict between the Serbs and Croats.

OECD Peace Monitor, Croatia, 1992

I knew very little about the Balkans and my FCO briefing was sketchy. We were told to find the equivalent of a white uniform which, together with blue UN armbands, served to distinguish the monitors. Whereas the Italians and other nationals were equipped with white tropical service uniforms, it was suggested that we each buy ourselves a white anorak and a pair of cricket flannels.

A week later I flew to Graz in Austria, from where we were taken to Croatia. On the way, we visited a stunning cave, Postojna in Slovenia, on a small internal railway to view magnificent stalactites and stalagmites. We also stopped at a monastery winery making very good wines, which we tasted. We were housed in a mediocre hotel on the edge of Zagreb.

The impressive Dutch Ambassador, who was the chief monitor, briefed me next morning and introduced me to the rest of my team. They comprised a Canadian Artillery Major, a younger, very suave French diplomat who spoke a little Serbo-Croat and an extremely nice Serbo-Croat interpreter who in real life was an academic. Our role was to try to broker local

peace deals and to see that the rules of conflict were observed. Not much hope as it turned out, since there was such bitterness in this conflict. Overall, the Serbs were more ruthless, but both sides cheated if they could. What was even stranger was that when, on two evenings I went into the centre of Zagreb for dinner at a restaurant, the atmosphere was totally normal and indeed party-like, even though the boom of guns from the front was clearly audible. I was shocked that so many young Croats seemed to be totally oblivious to the nearby conflict and the fate of their nation, while others of their friends, as conscripts, were fighting and dying on their behalf.

During my two-month stay I undertook a number of missions. The first was to scan an area of the front line consisting mainly of artillery exchanges. After a Croat complaint that the Serbs were targeting a clearly marked hospital, I was — with difficulty — able to contact both sides and to broker a cease-fire agreement. This required the removal of the alleged snipers dug in around the hospital and a cessation of the Serb shelling. All went well for about an hour before the Serbs resumed their bombardment. Our further attempts to stop them were ignored.

A couple of days later, our team visited a small hamlet abandoned after fierce fighting. I was asked to escort the then head of the excellent French charity Médecins Sans Frontières, Bernard Kouchner, a future French Minister. As the charity had a number of volunteers working in the area, he wanted to see what was happening on the ground. It was fairly late afternoon by the time we arrived in this village and, after we had examined some of the ruins, finding body parts, the Guardian's clapped-out hire car suffered a puncture. Since it was beginning to get dark, I was anxious as I knew that the Serbs were liable to start shelling again at nightfall. The driver was making heavy weather of changing his tyre, so Kouchner quickly took over, exhibiting the efficiency and courage for which he was well known. I greatly admired him, although later he got a reputation for being mainly a self-publicist, ensuring that on all occasions there was a TV crew present to publicise his involvement. On this occasion there was none.

A few days later, my team was selected to go to Osijek, a large town in the north of the country under attack by Serb forces. We arrived there around 10 a.m. and went straight to the Mayor's office where we were warmly welcomed. After a briefing, we were shown some of the substantial damage already sustained. In the event, the shelling went on for several more months, killing some 600 civilians. I quickly assessed that since the Serbs had been warned

that monitors were in the town, we should make ourselves as visible as possible, so allowing everyone to leave their cellars where they had been sheltering and go out to stock up with essentials. So we drove around the town, stopping and talking to people as we went. We stayed as long as we could, until the light began to fade. We were then advised to leave, as the shelling would soon resume. How much good we did I do not know, but at least we provided a respite.

Our most memorable mission was an unusual one. Under an arrangement between the Serbs and Croats, it was arranged that armaments and ordinance belonging to the now disbanded joint Yugoslav National Army (JNA) should be returned to their place of origin, provided that they were not then recycled for further use in the conflict. We were asked to travel on an old ferry conveying lightly armoured vehicles and shells from the port of Rijeka to Bar, a small port close to the border with Serbia in Montenegro. Since we were the only passengers, we had the whole lounge in which to stretch out overnight. The next day, we reached Bar and prepared to disembark to check on what happened to the cargo when it was unloaded. We were not allowed to land but were firmly told by local officials that since there was no agreement between OECD (or the European Union, the successor organisation responsible for the monitors) and the now semi-autonomous government of Montenegro, we had no fiat to operate there. Accordingly, we would be held under house arrest nearby. This meant that we had no idea what happened to the armaments, but I suspect that the Serbs, contrary to their agreement, would have recycled them.

We were housed in a comfortable hotel and that evening the self-styled Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs met us and paid for a very good dinner. It became apparent that as a former sea captain who had enjoyed life in London, he wanted to practise his English. We had a suitably convivial evening.

Next day we were all driven up the mountainous road to the capital, Podgorica (formerly Titograd) to see a senior official in the Foreign Ministry. We received a semi-apology and an assurance that we would be safely returned to Croatia by the next available boat leaving Bar. Back at the port, we were shown another former ferry, a larger one, which used to ply between Cyprus and Lebanon. It had only a skeleton crew on board. When I visited the bridge, I was worried to find that most of the more sophisticated navigation equipment appeared to have been removed. The captain, a Jordanian, had clearly been on drugs and I was not greatly reassured. Nevertheless, in spite of a somewhat circuitous route, we returned

safely to Rijeka. I was not surprised to read in the paper a few weeks later that the same vessel had sunk after being consumed by a mysterious fire. It was almost certainly an insurance job. I suspect that it was only our presence on board that delayed its deliberate destruction.

For a brief final individual mission, I was asked to escort George Schultz, the former US Secretary of State, who was charged with helping to resolve the conflict, across no man's land. There was extensive radio chatter with both sides before we set off. We were issued with flak jackets, but knowing that many roads had been mined, I decided to sit on my jacket rather than wear it. The BBC war correspondent, Kate Adie, wanted to question me about the mission and asked why I was not wearing my jacket. I explained that I did not know about others but personally I was concerned to protect my 'crown jewels'. Kate roared with laughter and suggested we have dinner in London on my return, an invitation I wish I had taken up. I duly delivered Schultz safely to the Serbian side.

Before leaving Zagreb I helped to draft a short paper warning Western governments of the likelihood that the Serbs would move next to annexe or disrupt Bosnia-Herzegovina. I returned to London full of zeal to persuade the Foreign Office to adopt a more hard-line approach towards Serbian aggression. I asked to see a Minister to promote this view, but was rebuffed. Eventually I was offered an appointment with the Under Secretary responsible for the Balkans, Jeremy Greenstock, later of Iraq fame (or infamy?). He barely listened to me. Perhaps foolishly, this caused me to threaten to go public in the media with my views. At the time, I did intend to contact the BBC Radio 4 Today programme but, two days later, I flew to Miami to join my father for Christmas.

On my return, I began to realise that things had moved on and I no longer had immediacy on my side. Then the Chief Clerk, a nice man whom I knew fairly well, rang to tell me that if I went public my FCO pension could be in jeopardy. I replied that such threats would only make me more determined to do what I believed to be right. The Chief Clerk said that knowing me he had anticipated that reaction. He was clearly embarrassed at having to deliver such a message and he simply urged me not to tarnish my retirement after an honourable career. I let the issue rest, but not because of the threat. As regards Bosnia, history proved that we monitors had been right to fear Serb ambitions.

Although I could have expected one final posting, finding worthwhile employment at 60 might have been more problematical. As it was, my FCO career undoubtedly helped me to enjoy working until forced, reluctantly, to retire at seventy. My CV was a factor in my being appointed as Director-General of United World Colleges, an inspirational organisation. The original sixth form mixed school for which the International Baccalaureate was developed, Atlantic College in South Wales, is the best known of the present 15 similar institutions scattered across the globe.

Later I was appointed as a part-time immigration judge, despite not formally being fully qualified for the job, never having done pupillage though called to the Bar back in 1966. My application was referred to the Lord Chancellor, Derry Irvine who commented that ‘Mr Varcoe may have no judicial and little legal experience, but he distinguished himself in his Bar finals exam so will be able quickly to pick up immigration law. More important, he has lived and worked among different religions and cultures enabling him better to understand the applicants before him.’ This proved to be generally correct.

Although my career was truncated and I had one cause of resentment I am, on balance, very grateful to the FCO. And I am pleased to have proved that there can be a satisfying life after the Service.

Being a diplomat taught me the importance of looking at problems from the point of view of the other person rather than just your own. I am generally tolerant and regard myself as having liberal ideas. Thus, I was quick to accept homosexuality, female priests, abortion on demand and gay marriage. I am a good debater and have become a competent advocate for local causes. I have a tendency to be over-vigorous in arguments, though.

I enjoy finding out more about people that I meet. Having as a diplomat learnt that there is no such thing as an indiscreet question, only indiscreet answers, I do not hesitate to ask questions. The desire to go on learning and to keep myself informed has, I hope, enabled me to keep dementia at bay and to retain a keen interest in all aspects of what is going on around me.

Life has taught that many of one's most important decisions are the result of an accident rather than by design. In my case, the failure of my parents to appreciate that as a young barrister I would need a degree of financial support meant that I never went to the Bar. Whether I would have had such an interesting and varied life is extremely doubtful.