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**WARREN, Sir David Alexander (born 11 August 1952)**

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A more detailed synopsis provided by Sir David Warren.

Joined FCO, 1975

- Recruitment process; Positive Vetting

South-East Asian Department, FCO, 1975-1976

- Office working styles in the mid-1970s; Burma and Cambodia (and ‘the killing fields’)

Japanese language training, SOAS and Kamakura, Japan, 1976-1978

Second, later First Secretary, Tokyo, 1978-1981

- Private Secretary to the Ambassador, Sir Michael Wilford; protocol and etiquette; the Embassy as a community;
- Economic Department: the changing trade and investment relationship; Sir Hugh Cortazzi

Personnel Policy Department, FCO, 1981-1983

- Head of Recruitment Section; Fast-Stream Recruitment policy; ‘intellect’ versus ‘leadership potential’ at the Civil Service Selection Board; lack of diversity; liberalisation of rules on nationality, but not homosexuality

European Community Department (External), FCO, 1983-1986

- Desk officer for international trade policy; preparations for the GATT Uruguay Round
- Resident (later Senior Resident) Clerk; FDA/DSA Trade Union activities

First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Nairobi, 1987-1990

- President Daniel Arap Moi; political stability; human rights; security; pastoral management within the High Commission

Assistant, Far Eastern Department, FCO, 1990-1991

- China, Japan, Korea (including North Korea), Mongolia

Head of International Division, Science and Technology Secretariat (later Office of Science and Technology, Cabinet Office, 1991-1993

- Sir William Stewart, Chief Scientific Adviser; post-1992 election creation of Office of Science and Technology; European Community Framework Programme negotiations; international S & T collaboration

Counsellor (Commercial), Tokyo, 1993-1998

- Changing FCO/DTI approaches to trade promotion; 'Action Japan' and other Japan export promotion campaigns; the 1997 election, and the arrival of the Blair Government

Head of China Hong Kong Department, FCO, 1998-2000

- Relations, post-Hong Kong handover, with China, Hong Kong and Taiwan; Bombing of Chinese Embassy in Belgrade; State Visit of Jiang Zemin

Director, British Trade International (later UK Trade and Investment), 2000-2004

- Director of Business Group, dealing with specific industrial sectors
- Director of International Group, dealing with specific country markets
- Complexity of merging FCO and DTI trade promotion activity within one organisation, with the aim of emphasising business competitiveness rather than public diplomacy

Director, Human Resources, FCO, 2004-2007

- Radical change, away from centralised, resource-heavy, system, towards devolving HR to line departments; slimming down of Senior Management Structure; other reforms, including abolition of retirement age, introduction of assessment and development centres, job interviews; closure of Diplomatic Service Language Centre

Ambassador, Tokyo, 2008-2012

- Preparations
- Japan at a time of political change, with the (unsuccessful) Democratic Party of Japan government elected in 2009

- Japan as a close partner of the UK, but also a very different type of country, not always easily understood in Westminster and Whitehall
- Broad foreign policy alignment: trade and investment objectives (including defence sales)
- Management of Embassy, the Residence, compound, etc
- Contacts with the Imperial Family
- The 2011 earthquake/tsunami/nuclear disaster
- Concluding thoughts

## BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR DAVID WARREN KCMG,  
RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS

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SR: It's Tuesday October 20, 2020. This is Suzanne Ricketts, speaking via Skype to Sir David Warren. David, can you tell me why you decided to join the Foreign Office?

DW: This is very difficult to remember. I was at university in the early 1970s.

SR: That was Oxford, wasn't it?

DW: Yes, I read English. I had no very clear sense of what career I wanted to follow. It was a time, I think, at which those of us at university (which of course was a much smaller percentage of school-leavers than today) were quite spoiled, in that we had an expectation of being able to get a job without too much difficulty.

SR: And a good one!

DW: In the sense perhaps of joining one of the professions, fulfilling whatever our sense of vocation might be. Even though the economy was beginning to turn down, no-one felt uneasy about their personal prospects.

I was interested in current affairs. I didn't want a political career, but I thought that the Civil Service might be an interesting route to follow. So I decided to apply. I'd known somebody, not a close friend, at the Foreign Office. He spoke positively about his work. I had travelled as a student in the United States: I was on the English Speaking Union debating tour of the US in the Michaelmas term of 1974. At the end of that trip, we were entertained by the Deputy Head of the British Information Service at his apartment in New York. He invited us to a party where we met a jolly crowd of people. I thought that this looked an interesting life.

SR: Did you have any family connection with the Foreign Office?

DW: Virtually none. My father worked as a middle manager for a paper manufacturer: my mother was a housewife, or as we might say now, a home-maker. Her parents had been Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who had settled in the East End,

and later Brixton. My grandfather was a bespoke tailor, my grandmother ran a ladies' dress shop. The rag trade. Both my parents left school at 12 or 13 in the 1920s: no member of my direct family had gone to university. My father's father, as an ex-serviceman after World War One, worked for some years as a porter in the Foreign Office: he would occasionally reminisce about having to stoke the coal fires in Ministers' offices. That was my only connection.

I applied, took the Civil Service qualifying test and the two-day Civil Service Selection Board.

SR: How did you find that? Was it gruelling?

DW: I found it quite gruelling, yes. I was at the emotional stage of finding myself fascinating at the age of 22 and so a process which encouraged you to think about yourself and about how other people might see you probably intrigued me. So I quite enjoyed it. I was successful at the Civil Service Selection Board and went on to the Final Selection Board which I found a more unsatisfying experience. I gave a very confused and rather directionless interview.

SR: Other subjects have commented on how very intimidating it was, having to face 12 people behind a long table.

DW: Yes, I did find it intimidating. But I performed poorly. I know this because many years later, I discovered, on someone else's INDIV file in Personnel Department, a note on my Final Selection Board which had been wrongly filed. It confirmed that I had not impressed them.

SR: How interesting! But, in spite of that, you got through? They obviously saw the potential.

DW: I think CSSB saw the potential and Final Selection Board couldn't quite bring themselves to say that CSSB was daft. So I got through. I found the whole process fascinating. When we talk about Personnel Policy, I will go into this at greater length.

SR: And of course it has all changed now.

DW: Completely. I was part of that process as Director of Human Resources at a time when the Office was realising that it needed to be doing more than looking for intellectual

capabilities and that it should be developing future leaders, effective managers, and people who were prepared to be radical as well as follow a conventional train of thought.

One aspect of the process that we might also mention, as these interviews are intended to capture the details of Foreign Office life at that time, was what was then known as ‘positive vetting’.

All new entrants were subject to detailed investigation about their personal circumstances, to enable a judgement to be made about whether they were any sort of security risk. This included an interview with the vetting officer, who also spoke to previous employers, their university or school, personal referees, and so on. The attitude of candidates to this process was an odd mixture of disdain and fear. Disdain, because the assumption was that the narrow-minded types who ran the system would make ridiculously old-fashioned, prudish judgements about your personal life that would call your suitability into question. And fear that you didn’t quite know what they were looking for.

My 1975 interview was with a benign, moustachioed, retired Colonel Hadingham. (I was fascinated to find his name, forty years later, in the late David Cesarani’s history of terrorism against the British mandate in Palestine in 1946/7, as a senior Intelligence officer opposed to the criminal tactics employed by some British forces against Jewish groups.) We ran through all the usual suspects: sex, drugs, drink, money, politics (the fact that I had been an active member of the Oxford University Labour Club and made no secret of my views at that time cropped up in subsequent vetting interviews throughout my career). He asked me whether I had known any Communists: I mentioned one name, something I have always felt a little ashamed of, although the person in question was open about their affiliation (and told me later that he would have been offended if I hadn’t mentioned him). I was a little puzzled that he dwelt on my having taken part in university drama. I read some years later in a guide for vetting officers that it was regarded as an indication of homosexuality. I think my mother’s family’s (by 1975, non-existent) links with Eastern Europe were covered in one of my referees’ interviews: he assured the vetter ‘I have known David’s parents for many years, and they do not have a transmitter in the attic!’.

In those days, and when I first worked in Personnel in the early 1980s, the vetting file was attached to the INDIV Personnel file – quite inappropriately, as it contained a large amount of very personal material on individual officers. The system changed later. Most recruits passed the vetting process without difficulty, but if there was a doubt of some kind that fell

short of Security actually withholding the vetting certificate, a yellow tag would be attached to the file and the officer would be subject to more regular vetting reviews.

My own reviews took place at the usual ten-year intervals for the rest of my career. They were always impeccably courteous and professional: as the years went by, the interviewers seemed a little more embarrassed to be asking the more personal questions. And I sensed, from the interviews I gave on my own behalf and in relation to others, that the judgements being made became more sophisticated: fewer assumptions that a particular lifestyle automatically made a person vulnerable, more emphasis on personality traits – vanity, for example – that might be of concern.

### **South-East Asian Department (SEAD), FCO, 1975–76**

SR: So your first job was in the Foreign Office in King Charles Street? You were the desk officer for Burma and Cambodia.

DW: To be strictly correct, I was in Downing Street West. One of the first things I learned when I joined the Foreign Office was how to find my way around that very confusing building. Rooms were numbered in accordance with their position in the quadrangle of Downing Street West, Downing Street East, King Charles Street and Whitehall. I was in South-East Asian Department which was at the corner of the building on the third floor of Downing Street West, overlooking St James's Park.

The new entrants in what was then called Grade 8, the Fast Stream entry, were assigned to what were described as training desks 'with policy content', as opposed to the Executive Stream entrants (whom we never met) who were assigned to desks in Departments dealing with administration or service delivery. The distinction now seems strange, but it reflected a pretty conventional division of labour between graduate and non-graduate entrants, although a very large number of Executive Stream entrants were indeed graduates.

I took over two desks: there had been two new entrants in the year before me, one dealing with Burma (now Myanmar), and the other with Cambodia. This was the autumn of 1975, just after the end of the Vietnam War. The British Embassy in Phnom Penh had closed, obviously, with the end of the War and the victory of the Khmer Rouge, so the size of the job had reduced and it was thought that one person could do two countries. So I took over Burma where we had an Embassy and Cambodia where we had no diplomatic representation at all.

On the Burma side, I monitored political developments through regular Embassy reports and dealt with correspondence from the families of individuals whose assets in Burma had been expropriated on independence in 1948: they were still making claims against the Burmese government for money and property, and faced considerable bureaucratic obstruction. I liaised with the Embassy in Rangoon (now Yangon) who were trying to secure some restitution for the individuals in the UK, most of whom, of course, were elderly.

Cambodia was a more complicated desk because of reports of “the killing fields”, as we now know them. Towards the end of 1975, the first reports began to emerge that the Khmer Rouge had been exceptionally brutal in ‘liberating’ the country. By the spring of 1976, there were more detailed reports from refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border. There was some Parliamentary interest, and pressure on the British government to make representations to the Cambodians or the Kampuchians as they now called themselves. There was no obvious way to do this: we had no diplomatic relations and no clear route through which to communicate with them. Ministers were reluctant to go beyond generalised expressions of concern.

With hindsight, this was a pretty pusillanimous reaction to reports of diabolical atrocities. There was a departmental submission on the subject on which the Head of Department wrote: ‘We must remember that we had to evacuate our Embassy in Phnom Penh in a hurry. We left behind two large electricity generators, worth £10,000 each, which we will not see again if we make too much of a fuss about these reports which can’t be corroborated.’ I remember a fellow desk officer staring at this and saying to me, ‘That’s going to look good in the archives in 30 years’ time, isn’t it?’ This was just after the reports of the Foreign Office’s complicity in the “Victims of Yalta” and the Soviet killings of repatriated Cossacks at the end of the Second World War had become public under the 30-year rule. I haven’t been to Kew to see if this document still exists.

I guess we should talk about the way the Office worked?

SR: Yes please. It was really on-the-job training, wasn’t it? Were you helped by others in the Department about how to write and minutes and the mechanics of putting up a submission and so on?

DW: The Department was essentially two ‘third rooms’, as they were called. I was in the one dealing with Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Burma. The other South-East Asian countries, mostly members of ASEAN, were in the other third room; each room had its

registry clerks; there was a secretaries' room, a sort of small typing pool; we had an Assistant Head of Department and a Head of Department with his PA, and that was it. I had a kindly senior desk officer for Vietnam, Philip Astley (who later became Ambassador in Copenhagen). He couldn't have been more helpful in mentoring me and showing me how stuff was done.

I learnt about the protocols of working in the Office. This is now a lost world, with today's emails and instant communications. Your day was organised essentially around telegram distributions. They arrived three times a day: at 0930 or 1000 when you got into the office, another at lunchtime and a third distribution later in the afternoon. Green folders would appear containing the telegrams: incoming on white paper, outgoing telegrams sent by the FCO to posts overseas on pink paper. You saw the telegrams from the posts in your particular bailiwick; telegrams on broader foreign policy questions and those intended for wider guidance and information purposes; and, from time to time, beautifully polished and printed dispatches from Her Majesty's representatives in different Embassies around the world dealing with issues of general interest.

You received correspondence – notes from within the Foreign Office, from other Whitehall departments, from your post overseas and other Embassies, and letters from outside Government. The first judgement you had to make was what you did with all this. The first thing was usually to mark it '*Enter with papers*' to the registry clerk sitting opposite you, which meant that it would be attached to the relevant file. Then you might submit it to senior officials with marginal notes, which you would want to make as intelligent-sounding as possible, on the implications of the document. Or you might just write 'p.a.' (put away) on it to show that nobody needed to bother with it further.

In comparison with today, it was a very slow and sedate way of discharging business. I learned about how you submitted papers and how you interpreted material for senior officials and Ministers, not that I saw much of Ministers during that year, I have to say. How you prepared a submission with a draft letter for the Minister or senior official to sign to a third party, inside or outside government. How it was important not to duplicate your thinking so that whatever you put in the draft letter you didn't need to repeat in the submission and whatever you put in the submission you didn't need to repeat in the note you had written to cover the submission. Communication had to be clear, transparent and accessible, not stylish or literary.

SR: Weren't you a student journalist? I have my spies!

DW: Well, I did a little, although I was more of a Union man, a political debater. But your spies are not completely wrong because when I left Oxford, I originally thought maybe I would like to be a journalist. I enjoyed writing. It took me some time to understand that the purpose of communication in the Foreign Office was to convey information, not to impress.

SR: And just to revert to the mechanics of it, you had to write these drafts in longhand didn't you? Did you have to send them to the typing pool?

DW: Indeed we did. I was terribly encouraged that one of the first things that people said to me was that I had nice, legible handwriting!

When I first wrote to the Embassy in Rangoon, I was told quite firmly that you addressed a civil servant whom you had not met by his surname. (It was usually a man you were writing to: you were allowed to address women by the relevant honorific.) So you wrote *Dear Smith* and he replied *Dear Warren*. When you had reached a level of relative intimacy with exchanges of correspondence, you moved from surname to given name.

I was a brash young thing, so after I had written to the Head of Chancery in Rangoon, John Chick, as *Dear Chick* and he had written back *Dear Warren*, I threw caution to the winds and called him *Dear John*. I was abashed to discover that he continued to refer to me for some weeks as *Dear Warren*. Eventually all ended happily and we became *Dear John* and *Dear David* for the rest of the year. I never met him in person.

A digression into social history. As late as the 1970s, it was still common for male professionals – and I would say it was very much a male thing – to refer to each other by surnames. Perhaps less so in conversation, but you will find in some of the oral archives from, say, as late as the '50s and '60s, recordings of older men using surnames rather than given names. The Foreign Office was not completely out of kilter with wider professional society.

In the late 1980s, I received a letter from an elderly man with whom I had had close professional contact, which began: "Dear Warren (I should like to call you David, but feel that I need your permission first)." By the 1990s, the custom had completely disappeared. One of my Ambassadors in Tokyo wrote to an Under-Secretary in another Whitehall

department using his surname, and caused offence. Having been an act of courtesy, it was now seen as actively discourteous.

Incidentally, it contrasted, even in 1975, with the protocols for daily conversational contact with colleagues. We were told on our first day in the office that you a) always used given names, and b) never knocked on doors.

SR: You added an intriguing note to your synopsis, *U Nu alive or dead?* Tell me about that.

DW: The new Deputy Under-Secretary arrived shortly after I started work in the Department, Hugh Cortazzi, later a close colleague and friend for many years because of Japan. Hugh came round his Departments and saw the desk officers in a group with the Head of Department. We all said a little bit about our areas of responsibility. I described my work monitoring what had become a pretty brutal dictatorship since President Ne Win's seizure of power in 1962.

Out of the blue, Hugh fired a question at me: 'Is U Nu alive or dead?' U Nu was one of the leaders of Burmese independence in the 1940s who had been overthrown in 1962. I was new and hadn't the faintest idea. I was too frightened and foolish to say 'I don't know', so I decided to guess and said 'Alive', because I couldn't remember reading anywhere that he was dead. Quick as a flash, the Head of Department said, 'I thought he was dead.' I wanted the floor to open up. Then another desk officer who knew more about the subject than anyone else in the room, said, 'No, no, he's still alive.' Hugh nodded. So this was my first fundamental lesson: never put yourself in that position. If you don't know, say so.

SR: Wasn't it quite unusual for someone as grand and lofty as an Under-Secretary to meet the toilers in the salt mine?

DW: As I wrote in his 'Guardian' obituary a couple of years ago when he died at the age of 94, Hugh was a very demanding man but good to junior officials. He wasn't a stander on ceremony. He was the Office's expert on Japan, having studied Japanese during the war and done three tours of duty in Tokyo. When I was assigned to learn Japanese, he spent an hour with me just talking about Japan. I think he enjoyed doing that, but it was kind of him all the same.

Last thoughts on the admin side of SEAD. I don't remember much of the preliminary training course that we all attended. It was a bit ephemeral, I felt. Mainly lectures about

things which didn't mean very much before we started work. I do remember an hour spent on security where attempts were made, in what seemed a ridiculous way, to emphasise the threat of destabilisation from far left groups then believed to be infiltrating the media and creative arts.

But I had an oppressive sense of fear during my first year that I might commit a security breach. The worst thing you could do was to leave the safe open or confidential papers out on the desk. I don't mean to ridicule the importance of security, but there was a real sense that this was a very black mark indeed. I remember one night, on my way home, walking over Westminster Bridge, halfway to Waterloo station, turning round and going back to the Office to check whether I had closed the safe.

Each desk also had a red ring-binder directory of everyone working in the Foreign Office in London. It was called the Red Book. If you locked nothing else away, you locked away the Red Book.

### **Japanese language training, SOAS, London and Kamakura, Japan, 1976-78**

SR: Let's move on to Japanese language training. When did you take the language aptitude test?

DW: Shortly after joining the Office. I was not a linguist. I had done some French at school to O-level (GCSE). To my surprise, I scored well in terms of my potential for understanding complex grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. I was given a list of languages to choose from. I chose Russian and Chinese first and Japanese a little lower down, because I was interested in a language which had a literature attached to it. I didn't at that point automatically think of myself as pursuing a Foreign Office career for the rest of my life. I thought maybe I would do it for some years and then do other things. I still had one foot in a kind of literary and artistic world as well as the world of politics and public service, so I imagined learning a language which might allow me to operate in either. Russian and Chinese were spoken for, so Training Department told me it would be Japanese. I knew nothing about Japan apart from reading a bit of Japanese literature and the classic movies like 'Seven Samurai', 'Rashomon' and so forth.

We started at SOAS, where we joined the first year undergraduate class. I don't remember much adjustment being made for us having to learn a practical language rather than following an academic course. I found the year at SOAS difficult, because of this. Maybe it was

inevitable: if you're learning completely from scratch, you really do have to have an academic-style structure of understanding Japanese ideograms, grammar and so on. I'm not saying that SOAS were wrong, but quite a lot of the teaching seemed to be designed for students who would be doing a full degree course, not two years' intensive practical training. It may also have been that I simply didn't work hard enough.

SR: And then you went off to Japan. Did you live with a family?

DW: No: the Embassy language school was in Kamakura, a seaside town about an hour south of Tokyo, the old capital of Japan back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. We had our lessons in a house just outside Kamakura, a most beautiful location on a hill overlooking a valley, beyond which was the sea. On fine days you could see Mount Fuji from a little further up the road. It was a Japanese-style house where the lessons took place in rooms on the top floor. There was a bachelor flat downstairs where one of the students could live. At that stage, I didn't drive, so I lived downstairs in the part Japanese, part Western style flat, sleeping Japanese-style on *tatami* matting. I had 13 months of intensive Japanese tuition there.

There were three teachers and four students. Two of us were from the Foreign Office. There was a naval officer who was originally scheduled to become Assistant Defence Attaché at the Embassy - but the job was cut as soon as he'd got through the course – and a German Embassy official joined us as well. It was what the Japanese call 'man to man' teaching.

One of our teachers had been a prisoner of war of the Australians during World War II. He had learned his English in a POW camp and become a Japanese teacher after the war. He brought inspirational energy and intensity to his lessons. Learning with him meant being immersed in Japanese from day one. He made virtually no allowance for whether you understood one word in ten. He simply took you through all the required reading and practice: the newspaper articles and leaders, the third person notes from the Japanese Foreign Ministry, the official documents, casual conversations, formal interpretation practice. He was able to sustain over hours of teaching a ferociously tough but immensely motivating approach. It was in his lessons that I began to realise that I could speak Japanese and even think in Japanese, although I would never argue that my proficiency was anything like the quality of some of the really distinguished Japanese language students that have come through this process. It was a liberating moment.

The other teachers were more academic in their temperament. One was a younger man, who later became a banker. He was more organised and structured in the way in which he took us through how to converse in the language. The other was an older man, who seemed to exist in a constant state of feud with the senior teacher, whom he disapproved of because he'd allowed himself to be taken prisoner during the war. He also felt aggrieved that the head teacher did all the motivating stuff while he had to concentrate on the basic grammar. There was a fascinating dynamic within the school between these three men.

You asked whether I lived with a Japanese family. Well, I went off for two home-stays, as they were called, one in Hiroshima in the spring of 1978 and one in Hokkaido, the northern island, later that summer. Lazily, I'm afraid, I chose two parts of Japan where standard Japanese is spoken rather than regional dialects. We had to organise these for ourselves. In Hiroshima I became a sort of intern in the local newspaper for two weeks and up on Hokkaido I worked on a farm with a four-generation family. All of this gave you much more of a sense of living in the real Japan.

#### **Private Secretary to Ambassador, Tokyo, 1978–79**

SR: So after your two years of studying the language, then you moved to the Embassy in Tokyo.

DW: Yes, I did. We hadn't seen an enormous amount of them during the year, although there was social contact and I used to go up to Tokyo from time to time to pick up mail and get out of the hothouse atmosphere of the school.

I became the Ambassador's Private Secretary in September 1978. The Ambassador was Michael Wilford, who was not a Japanese speaker. Michael had had a distinguished career in various Asia-related jobs, and had been Hugh Cortazzi's predecessor as Deputy-Under Secretary for Asia in London. He had originally been intended to go to Hong Kong as Governor, but that didn't work out so he came to Tokyo. He was also a brilliant golfer, playing off a handicap of six in Pro/Am tournaments with some of the world's greatest. This gave him an extraordinary entrée into Japanese business and political society: he would go off for the day to play golf with the Prime Minister and captains of industry: he had wonderful contacts that way. Some in the Office were condescending towards him because he wasn't a Japanese specialist. But I thought he was a man of great leadership and energy

and had a strategic understanding of why Japan mattered, and why it was a country from which we could learn.

The job I did no longer exists: today the Ambassador in Japan has Japanese and British personal assistants, and a full-time Japanese Residence Events Manager. I dealt with Japanese language correspondence, organised events which required Japanese language liaison with the Foreign Ministry, and did some interpreting for him (mostly social) at meetings. I travelled with him and Joan Wilford round the country from time to time. I used to have to do the *placement* for dinner parties to ensure that everyone was sitting in the right place. And routine gatekeeping, etc, the usual stuff that a Private Secretary would do. But there was no real policy content to the job. I was given a little residual Chancery-type work to do relating to the United Nations, but it was quite insubstantial.

Michael was an old-fashioned, conservative Ambassador. I wrote an appreciation of him for one of Hugh Cortazzi's books ([Britain & Japan Biographical Portraits Vol. X Sir Michael Wilford \(1\).pdf.](#)) He was addressed as 'Sir' by all members of staff, which I think was customary for all Heads of Mission at that time: when being referred to in internal memos within the Embassy, the title 'HE (His Excellency)' was used, although he vetoed the even more formal term 'YE (Your Excellency)' when a memo was addressed to him directly – it sounded absurdly medieval.

He attached great importance to protocol and etiquette. Dinner parties were occasions where husbands and wives gathered. The ladies would retire at the end of the evening to another room with Joan Wilford. The gentlemen would smoke, drink brandy and discuss events. This custom, which of course now seems bizarre to us, was already disappearing, and within a year or so it had gone completely.

*Placement* was terribly important as Japan is a hierarchical society. The British Embassy was by no means the most obsessed with this: the French Ambassador once walked out of a diplomatic event because he had been put in the wrong place. He turned his plate over and left the room at the insult to *la gloire de la France*. Here is an anecdote from what we must remember is another century. Michael could be quite choleric and would get annoyed with me when I got things wrong. He was a popular and social Ambassador and gave parties which *le gratin de Tokyo* would attend. On one such occasion, he invited a socialite who lived in Japan at that time, Princess Michaela von Habsburg, a *habituée* of the nightclubs in Tokyo. I naïvely put her in pride of place. Michael stormed into my office and said, 'What

the hell have you done?’ I replied, ‘But she’s a Princess, Ambassador!’ ‘She’s not a (expletive deleted) Princess, she’s a little bit of old totty!’

There was also, in a curious way, a sense of the Embassy as more of a family than an office. When I use the word family, I don’t mean that it was necessarily a happy family – although I think morale was reasonable: the Wilfords were a popular couple. But I mean that it was a social grouping as much as a professional one.

I realise that I am describing Michael Wilford in terms to which younger, and perhaps not just younger, readers will react: ‘He was just an old dinosaur.’ He wasn’t. He was an impressive man in many ways, but he reflected a set of social and professional assumptions which were already rapidly changing. Does that make sense?

SR: Absolutely. And I think the role of women in this is important as well. The Ambassador’s wife held a certain position and expected the ladies in the Embassy to rally round for good causes.

DW: This was certainly true of Joan Wilford. And the ladies of the Embassy – and the word ‘ladies’ dates us as well - were questioning whether it was what they wanted to do. We were not a hotbed of revolution but already it was clear that everyone had lives of their own. Joan Wilford was an enormously entertaining, salty, life-enhancing person. I was fond of them both. But the culture, social as well as professional, was shifting.

The year before I arrived in Tokyo, the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) had done their review of the Foreign Office and had visited Tokyo, among other posts. Their report was critical of the FCO attempting to do too much, often to too high a standard, and argued for a merger in some areas with the Home Civil Service, more interchange, a separate export promotion service, etc.

Some of their points stand up quite well. Others were foolish, for example questioning the importance of language training when everybody spoke English, which of course was and is not the case in Japan. Michael had been outraged by some of the more ignorant views expressed by the CPRS team, and the fact that some members of the team were relatively young women also affected his judgement. You’re right: there were strong gender assumptions.

I was aware of all this, but conscious also – as somebody who enjoyed being in the Office but didn't then feel wholly committed to a lifetime career in it – that I was happy to fit into it for a time. It was a world I found engaging and which I enjoyed in a superficial way.

It was a large Embassy. It had 60 UK-based staff.

SR: Did they all live on that lovely compound?

DW: No, mostly off the compound. The senior staff, the Minister, the Counsellors, some of the First Secretaries, lived there. It was a very top-heavy pyramid. We had the Ambassador, a Minister and I think eleven Counsellors, including three Defence Attachés, and a Squadron Leader Assistant DA. There were lots of secretaries, a large Administration Department, or Management as it became, with a UK-based Accountant, Accommodation Officer, and someone from the Property Services Agency dealing with the actual physical structures in the Embassy. There were four communicators, ex-Wireless Service, and four Security Officers, mostly ex-servicemen, who looked after the Embassy overnight: lock and leave came many years later. So it was an extremely large contingent. And, of course, there were many locally engaged staff. Some of us spoke Japanese, but many did not. And even more than now, Japan was a non-English-speaking culture.

As I've said, morale was not bad, but there wasn't an enormous sense of pastoral care. You learned what your job was and coped: you sank or swam. Most people swam reasonably comfortably. If you looked as if you were having difficulties, I'm not quite certain how you would have been helped.

SR: That's tough, isn't it, in a post so far away from home, especially for the single people?

DW: Yes, especially for non-Japanese speakers. Of course, it was a safe and unthreatening environment – except for earthquakes. But distance brings loneliness. Some single people did find it difficult. It was far from home. You didn't have direct dialling. I used to speak to my parents once a week, booking a call with the international operator, which would come through an hour or two later. You had the telegram traffic, obviously, but none of the regular contacts that you could expect in an era of IDD, let alone email and texts and so forth. People did not nip over to Hawaii for a week's holiday break in those days. You made your own entertainments. I remember it as a mostly happy time, but there may well be people who remember it less happily.

SR: You mentioned that Princess Margaret came to Tokyo. Can you tell me about that?

DW: She was the first VIP I had to deal with in my role as Private Secretary; she was on her way back from granting independence to Tuvalu. She'd been quite ill on that trip with pleurisy, and spent three semi-convalescent days in Tokyo. I was responsible for organising cars and that sort of thing. I'd never been anywhere near a royal personage before. I had to interpret at a dinner in the Embassy ballroom for Lady Wilford and the Japanese Foreign Minister, converting their small talk into more or less elegant English and Japanese.

When she left, I organised the formal farewells for her to say thank you to the people who had helped her during the trip, including the three Japanese policemen who had been in charge of her security. When I approached the police agency, they told me that all three would have liked to have been there but unfortunately Deng Xiaoping was coming to Tokyo the following week and two of the coppers she wanted to thank were being deployed to look after him. I explained this to her lady-in-waiting. She was outraged. 'But this is a command by Princess Margaret.' I said that I understood, but that they were looking after Deng Xiaoping. And she said, as if to an idiot, 'But this is Princess Margaret!' The world was changing but not everybody realised.

SR: I think you said you had more anecdotes about being Private Secretary?

DW: I was Michael's interpreter, which I found quite stressful. Although my Japanese was much better than it had been when I started training, it was still not brilliant, even less so translating back into English – although translating into your own language, you can, with a degree of confidence, create an impression, one might even say an illusion, of fluency.

I accompanied Michael and Joan up to the Tohoku region, in the north-east of the country, for a week. It was great fun, but the dialect there is impenetrable. When Michael would walk round factories asking, 'How does this work?', I used to have to pretend that I understood what he was being told and convert it into something approaching English. I confessed to him after one such excursion that I had been guessing. To which he replied, 'That was bloody obvious!'

He would get me up in public fora to do this, quite shamelessly. I recall a lunch he gave for the second Import Promotion mission from Japan to the UK. This was an important area of commercial work. Japanese business representatives had started going to the UK to meet potential exporters from Britain in the early 1970s to demonstrate how seriously Japan

wanted to reduce the trade imbalance. These missions were led by the Chairman of Marubeni, a major trading company, Mr Matsuo, who had been the senior official at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. A wonderful man: I got to know him very well much later. His Japanese consisted mainly of guttural bursts of noise which were almost impossible to understand.

He made a speech at the end of this lunch and Michael waved me up with his hand to interpret. I got past the first couple of sentences of proforma courtesies and thanks. Then he said something completely incomprehensible. I was trying desperately to find a form of words which sounded vaguely appropriate. Matsuo knew enough English to realise that I had not quite translated him precisely. So he stopped and indicated that he wanted me to complete the interpretation. One of the guests at the lunch was Sir John Figgess, who had been an Army officer in Japan at the end of the war and later Information Counsellor at the Embassy and the Commissioner at the Expo in 1970. His Japanese was very erudite. He leaned over to me and said in a stentorian stage whisper, ‘You may not know the word that Mr Matsuo has used. It was used in the Meiji era to indicate the small drum played by a ceremonial monkey on an organ.’ I said, ‘Thank you so much!’ Nightmarish. I found these events quite terrifying. I think Michael was amused.

I’m trying to give the flavour of a job which wasn’t very demanding, but was colourful enough to be entertaining. I feel that this will give any reader a misleading sense that life in the Foreign Office was a bit of a jape. I took it more seriously than that. But at this stage of my career, I’m in anecdotal territory.

SR: What about the British community? Did you have much to do with them?

DW: The point there is that there was at that time a British community. Later in my career, when I was doing commercial work in the 1990s and then as Ambassador the following decade, there was much less of an identifiable community: British companies were headed by individuals who might not be British and even if they were, tended not to identify themselves with an expatriate community. In the 1970s in Tokyo, we had the large British industrial multinationals, names that we remember and some we might have forgotten: Beechams, ICI, Wiggins Teape, Peat Marwick, British Steel as well as the four main high street banks. There was an active British Chamber of Commerce, although more of a social grouping rather than the trade policy-focused organisation it became later.

But Britain was seen as a country in decline. The phrase used was *Eikoku-byō*. It meant ‘the British disease’. The economic problems in Britain from the early 1970s, the conflict between the government and the trades unions, the difficulties that Britain had had with the IMF in 1976 and the travails of the Labour government with a small majority staggering through, left the impression of a failing state. In Japan, this clashed with what has always been a slightly sentimental sense of Britain as a country with a glorious history, including the Alliance with Japan of 1902 – myths which need to be interrogated quite coolly, incidentally. It was a country on the skids in Japanese eyes.

That began to change with Mrs Thatcher becoming Prime Minister. We saw her in Tokyo very shortly after she had become PM, when she came for the G7 summit in June 1979. My involvement was purely administrative so I don’t have any serious insights to give you. But even at a stage when her future was by no means as assured as it became later and she had not become ‘the Iron Lady’, she was fascinating to the Japanese.

### **Second, later First Secretary, Economic Department, Tokyo, 1979-81**

SR: So you got promoted then to a more policy-heavy job, it must have been quite interesting to do economic policy?

DW: Yes. The promotion actually came in the course of the next job; it was age-related. You joined the Office as a Grade 8 if you were in the Fast Stream, you became a Second Secretary after three years or at age 26, and then you became a First Secretary when you were 28 and a half. I was promoted to First Secretary in early 1981. I took over from someone who had been a language student three years ahead of me.

Let me say a word about the context here of trade and investment. Already it was apparent in the late ‘70s that the Embassy's main purpose - not to play down the importance of political relations with a country of Japan's size and potential influence - was focused on trade, investment and innovation. So we had a very large Commercial Department, a smaller Economic Department and a substantial Department dealing with science and technology. We also had a Counsellor sponsored by British Nuclear Fuels, whose role was to monitor and promote the nuclear trade relationship. Commercial Department dealt with export promotion. Economic Department dealt with trade policy and investment by Japanese companies into the UK, as well as economic analysis.

The Japanese were dealing with the political problem of their large trade surpluses with the UK and other countries by encouraging imports from abroad and by voluntary restraint arrangements (VRAs), industry by industry, to moderate the level of their own exports. We were beginning to see Japanese companies seeking to offset trade imbalances by investing overseas. Japanese companies had invested in the UK in some form for many years, but major industrial investment really dated from the early 1970s: Sony in Bridgend, Toshiba's relationship with Rank, Hitachi with GEC (although Arnold Weinstock was always very equivocal about Japan). Companies like NSK, which makes ball bearings, invested in the North East, Sharp (electronics) in Wales and so forth.

My role in the Economic Department was relatively low-level. I didn't deal with any of the big industry-to-industry VRAs. I handled problems with patents and trademarks, where British exporters had difficulty penetrating the Japanese market because of excessive and sometimes unfair regulations. Also energy policy, so I was monitoring developments at the time of the second 'oil shock', as the Japanese call it, the explosion of prices after the Iranian Revolution. Something like 10% of Japan's oil came from Iran and suddenly the price on the world market went through what seemed then to be the roof: on the spot market in Rotterdam, it went above \$40 a barrel in late 1979, which seemed at the time horrendous. Japan is a country with few natural resources. This became an issue of great political as well as economic significance.

I also dealt with civil aviation, so I was the point man for air service negotiations conducted by the Department for Trade, and shipping and shipbuilding. It was a mass of individual dossiers, all very interesting. It taught me a lot about how Japanese industry worked and although I didn't have one big subject that I could get my teeth into, I got an insight into Japanese innovation.

I remember organising the visit of an impressive Department of Industry official, Jonathan Solomon (who died quite young), in 1981. I took him round various scientific and industrial laboratories, and we saw a fax machine for the first time. The technology had existed in one form or another for decades, but had not really been applied commercially in compact form. We watched this machine transmit an image and text across a room to another fax machine. We said, 'This is extraordinary. It's going to revolutionise our lives, it's going to make postal services a thing of the past. What do you expect the impact to be?' The Japanese engineer said, 'We expect to have one of these in every house in Japan within the next 15 years.' And,

of course, 15 years later, when I was back in Tokyo, there in the corner of my office in Tokyo was a fax – a couple of years away from obsolescence because of the coming of email.

I reported on Japan's relations with the Middle East in the energy field, the implications for Japan's trading houses, some of whom were quite exposed by the instability in Iran after the Revolution, and developing relations with China, at a time when China was beginning, following the 'Nixon Shock', to open up to the world. I spent Christmas and the New Year 1979 dealing with the impact on Japan of the crisis in the spot oil market. We were trying to persuade the Japanese not to purchase spot oil at a high price and break the IEA guidelines on Iranian oil after the taking of the US Embassy hostages in Tehran.

I touched the edge of inward investment in helping to organise the first visit by a mission from the UK regions chasing the Nissan plant. Nissan invested eventually in Sunderland: the agreement was reached in 1984 and the factory opened in 1986. But as early as 1981, when its interest in the UK became public, the West Midlands Development Agency put a professional pitch together and came to Tokyo: the Chair of the local Council, his Chief Executive and the head of the West Midlands TUC, a member of the Communist Party. I remember the Japanese being quite impressed at how a CP union man and a Conservative leader of the Council operated in harmony as they tried to encourage them to come to the West Midlands. They knew that they weren't going to get it: there was no chance of the Japanese going anywhere near an area without a deepwater port nearby. But it was putting down a marker.

SR: Tell me a bit about your second Ambassador, Hugh Cortazzi.

DW: Hugh took over at the end of 1980. He'd been in the Embassy in the 1950s, he'd been Commercial Counsellor, and in charge of the Political Section in the 1960s. His arrival in the Embassy and that of John Whitehead (also later Ambassador) as the Minister began to focus the Embassy's work with sharper attention to delivering practical outcomes. I don't want to suggest that there was a completely blank canvas. But the tone and mood changed.

Hugh brought enormous energy; a ruthless and relentless attention to detail; and a sense of wanting to be active everywhere. He was an exhausting man to work for: he could be difficult and fussy. But I had great respect for him, and got to know him well over the next 35 years, both in the context of my work with Japan and my Chairmanship in retirement of the Japan Society (which he had chaired for many years), and as a friend.

SR: In his reminiscences for our oral history project, he talks of himself as a scholar diplomat. That's an interesting description.

DW: He certainly was. His retirement was spent as much in scholarship as in business-related activities, in fact, much more so. His essays, his writings, his excavation of the history of the British-Japanese relationship from the period of the Meiji Restoration through to the present day, have produced an enormous and important historical resource for future researchers. On the whole, people today are not that interested in diplomatic history, it's barely taught in universities and there isn't much of a focus on Japan outside the world of Japanology. But Hugh's work and that of the other scholars whom he persuaded to write for him is very important.

Hugh was a critical admirer of Japan. When you get to know a country well, people say, 'Oh, you must love Japan.' I always bridle at that. I think, 'No, I don't love Japan. I admire many things about Japan; I'm impressed by Japan; and I find Japan consistently interesting.'

Hugh, I think, would have said something similar. He saw Japan very clearly: there were many things about it of which he was critical. But he felt it was a country from which we could learn. He despised the 'little Englander' mentality, and was impatient with politicians for whom Japan was just a bit too difficult, a bit alien, not sufficiently 'Western' or accessible. He thought that this was not good enough as a reaction to a country that is still, and is going to be for the rest of our lifetimes, a major economic and an important middle-ranking political power as well.

I'm not saying that all these thoughts were fully formed in my mind in 1981. But I began to think in these terms.

A final anecdote about moving offices. When John Whitehead arrived, he wanted to reorganise the rooms in the Embassy, so that the sections were more sensibly arranged. This involved knocking down walls and moving security doors and so forth. As Second Secretary, I was tucked away in a nice, cosy, tiny corner room: the smallest office in the Embassy. I imagined that it would be difficult to move me. But they were tremendously ingenious. They decided to convert the gentlemen's lavatory at the other end of the corridor into an office and move me in there. So that's where I happily spent my last year in the Embassy. Oddly enough, when I went back many years later as Ambassador, I ended up in the office, equally small, immediately opposite.

SR: I sincerely hope they moved the gentlemen's lavatory somewhere else so you weren't bereft of facilities?

DW: Oh, they thought of everything!

**Head of Recruitment Section, Personnel Policy Department (PPD), FCO, 1981-83**

SR: David, your next job was back in London. How did it come about? Was this still in the days when Personnel told you where to go and you didn't have much choice in what came next?

DW: Let's remind ourselves how the system worked. You had 'career chats' with the personnel officer for your area (there were four geographical units within Personnel Operations Department) every year or so. I had one during my mid-tour leave in 1979. You could express interest in specific jobs, but you would effectively be given an assignment which reflected your career development needs as well as (or instead of) your preferences.

Because I'd found the process of recruitment and assessment so interesting, I volunteered for this job. And the Personnel Operations man told me straight away that there was no question of my doing it. I asked why. He said, 'Because you went to Oxford. And this is a job which involves the incumbent going around universities and encouraging people outside Oxford and Cambridge to apply to the Foreign Office. One of our major priorities is to encourage a more diverse university intake. We don't want an Oxbridge graduate doing the job, because it would undermine that.'

I thought that this was poor reasoning: it appeared to be a cosmetic attempt to pretend to be more diverse than we really were. I also realised, as I was talking to him, that in fact two of the last four incumbents in the job had actually been to Oxford. I pointed this out. And he said with something of a sarcastic edge: 'Oh, I see you've been doing your homework.' I was made to feel that I had not been playing the game.

However, I left my interest on the file. Just before I left Tokyo in September 1981, I was told that I would be the desk officer for Japan in Far Eastern Department. I would have been very happy with that, and it might have been better, in terms of re-entering the Whitehall system after a first overseas posting, if I had had a grounding in a more mainstream desk role. But at the last minute, there was a change of plan, the personnel job became vacant, and I became Head of Recruitment Section.

It was a large section and I had virtually no management experience at that stage. I had barely even written an appraisal. I found it a challenge.

It was an oddly-structured job: one crucial element of it was that you were the assessor i.e interviewer at the Civil Service Selection Board during the recruitment season, which was most of the first half of the year. That was two and a half days' work a week outside the Office in Standard House, up by Charing Cross. It was one and a half jobs, essentially. And although I think I brought a lot of energy and commitment to the task of overseeing recruitment policy, I was deficient at the organisational aspect of running a large section, and organising my own work in a timely and efficient fashion within that section.

The job involved overseeing the different recruitment competitions for everyone joining the Office. That included the Grade 9s as they were then called, the Executive Stream; the Clerical Officers and Assistants, an enormous input of people coming in at the clerical level in what was then called Grade 10; and the secretaries, of whom we still recruited large numbers. And specialists, including the research cadre, lawyers, economists, as well as competitions for information and system analysts (as we began to take IT seriously), vetting officers and so forth. All of these competitions, run with the Civil Service Commission, were handled by one or other member of the Recruitment Section: it was a big throughput of work.

The Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB) process, which I mentioned earlier, lasted two days. A group of five or six candidates, sometimes still at university or recently graduated, occasionally slightly older (the upper age limit, I think, was 32 at that time) went through a battery of tests and interviews. It was overseen by a Chair, usually a retired civil servant, sometimes a senior figure like a headmaster or headmistress. There was also a psychologist and an interviewer called an Observer, whose job was to test the intellectual reflexes of the candidates. That was the role I took.

Each candidate was interviewed by each assessor, and there were group and written exercises. On the third morning, the assessors would meet and agree who had passed, on the basis of the markings that they had given for the exercises over the previous two days. It was a demanding process for assessors as well as candidates: you were marking as they were writing. It was fascinating to see how some candidates would develop over this intense couple of days.

The process of CSSB is described in great detail, accurately but critically, in a book called *The Civil Servants* by Peter Kellner and Lord (Norman) Crowther-Hunt, published in 1981. The authors describe it as a superficially scientific process, in which civil servants were recruiting in their own image, rather than looking for radically different types of people to take on public sector roles. This is not entirely unfair. It's changed, I think, today.

The FCO, as I've indicated, was embarrassed that it was recruiting mainly from Oxford and Cambridge, and wanted to be seen to be drawing its intake from a wider range of universities. There were a smaller number of universities in 1981 than today, as this pre-dated the 1992 expansion of higher education; but there was still a need for much greater diversity of educational background.

There was also a tension in the Office's mind about the sort of people that it was looking for. Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary, went on a trip to South-East Asia: on his return, he commented rather cryptically that he had not been tremendously impressed by the Heads of Mission he'd met. His precise words were: 'There are too many men with beards. And the beards are concealing weak chins.' What he meant was that a lot of ambassadors were clever – he's talking about men, because we had only had one female Ambassador, Anne Warburton in Copenhagen, at this time - but that their cleverness was a sort of academic understanding of the culture and history of their countries, and that they lacked the qualities of what we would now call 'leadership'.

He was also, I think, bemoaning the fact that there wasn't a very strong sense of being there to promote British interests, not simply understand, analyse, and report – in other words, to make a difference. This embarrassed the Office a bit. After all, there was a sense, which I certainly felt on the day I joined, that the Office was an intellectual élite. We were encouraged to think of ourselves in those terms. Many senior officials associated this with what they saw – in themselves and others - as high intellect. They were concerned that if we tried to recruit people with other practical, or broader, skills, we would dilute this.

I was very struck actually, as I looked at individuals' files, that there was often little correlation between the brilliance CSSB perceived during recruitment and the individual's subsequent career. Sometimes of course, people were poorly managed or they'd gone off the boil in some way - supernovas fall and some people bloom and fade quite quickly. But I can also recall examples of people whose CSSB performance against the cognitive test indices

(raw verbal and non-verbal skills) was relatively low, but whose ability to deploy those skills in practical situations in their Foreign Office careers was outstanding.

So it was not clear to me that there was a precise correlation between high intellect (even if we really knew what that was) and effective diplomatic skills. I don't claim that I was brilliant at not recruiting in my own image. There is always a tendency to look in a mirror when you're interviewing, which you have to fight against. But I did have a natural bias, I think, to look for people who brought a different kind of energy, if not quirkiness – rather than what a lot of people in the upper echelons of the Office at that time wanted, which tended to be the sort of person that they thought they had been when they joined the Office.

I found it hard to find candidates who seemed to me to have the right balance. I went through about 10 CSSBs, one after another, without passing anybody. At one point, the head of CSSB said to me, 'You really are being very tough on people. What is the matter?' And I said, 'Well, I just don't feel that any of these people are right.' Sometimes it was obvious that they were not suitable, because there was little evidence that they were engaged with the idea of public service, even to the extent of just showing that they had read the newspapers and formed simple views on the issues of the day. I wasn't a brutal interviewer. I was always looking for those moments where the candidate would say: "This is why I would be perfect for this job; this is why you need to recruit me, and this is why I want to be a diplomat'. But it was difficult. I recruited some individuals who had highly successful careers, and others who were less stellar but respectable.

I have gone into this at some length to try and capture the principles of recruitment policy at that time. We did fill most of the Grade 8 slots while I was head of the unit. We moved a little closer towards the 50/50 Oxbridge/non-Oxbridge, not that that was representative of the higher education community more generally.

SR: And what about the gender balance? How many women did you recruit?

DW: Only a small number. We were not remotely near gender parity with the wider population, or even proportionately with applicants for the competition. A much higher percentage of women candidates failed the Civil Service Commission qualifying test i.e the pre-CSSB stage. None of the administrators of the recruitment competition seemed to ask themselves why, or if they did, they settled on an assumption that, say, universities were

encouraging poorly-qualified candidates to apply, perhaps concentrating too much on modern language graduates rather than casting the net more widely.

All such competitions depend upon ways of reducing thousands of applicants to a manageable number. It won't be 100% scientific. The qualifying test, which was a mixture of IQ-type exercises, summarising a complex piece of prose, interpreting statistics, writing a policy recommendation (Kellner and Crowther-Hunt describe all this in detail), seemed to have the effect (which I assume was unintentional) of discriminating against women candidates. Even if we judge 1981 and 1982 by the standards of the time, it's unclear why people didn't see that as institutional discrimination.

I remember also that I interviewed only one BAME candidate (out of probably about a couple of hundred candidates in all) during my two years at CSSB.

We reintroduced the Supplementary Open Competition for direct-entry Principals (or as the FCO described them, Grade 5 First Secretaries) during my time as head of recruitment section, to the anger of the Trade Union side, who objected to reduced promotional opportunities for their own members. I remember spending Saturday 3 April 1982 – I can date it because it was the day that Parliament met after the Argentine invasion of the Falklands - in my office in Curtis Green Building, where we were then situated, on the Embankment, going through all the INDIV Personnel folders of people we had brought into the Office through past such competitions. Some had had distinguished careers: David Gillmore, who became Permanent Under-Secretary, Nigel Broomfield, who became Ambassador to Germany and had joined from the army, were two examples. So we felt, on the basis of my rather laborious analysis of successful candidates' track records, that it was worth doing it again. I think we brought in about five or six, although the actual process was concluded after my time in the department.

We were at an early stage of recognising that management was important. Not just being considerate to your subordinates, but as a concept: work, time, resources, people, skills, personal development, working as a team, delivering projects. All things which don't, you know, happen organically, but emerge from an intelligent working culture that needs to be managed effectively.

This was not something that most people in the Office, however clever and committed to public service they might have been, necessarily understood in the early 80s. It developed

over time. We were not alone. The Civil Service Commission asked Alec Atkinson, who'd been Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security (and one of the best chairs I had worked with at CSSB), to review their processes in 1983. He concluded that the Civil Service needed not just brainboxes, but more diversity, people who would be at home not simply in an Oxbridge common room, but in a more demanding, complex, fast moving and resilient working environment, and who would come from a wider range of educational and social backgrounds. We needed to find a way of identifying these people and encouraging them to think of a Civil Service career.

It wasn't just that the Foreign Office at that time had an elitist image. We seemed also to want clever linguists rather than people who were curious about their own society. The Australian Foreign Ministry from the late 1970s used to train their new intake by taking them around the country and introducing them to all aspects of Australian life and society, business and industry. We never thought of doing that in the FCO. The jobs in my subsequent career that I found most satisfying were those which exposed me to areas of life that I knew nothing about, especially outside London.

We liberalised the nationality rules while I was in the department, in 1982. We had very restrictive rules which, as I recall, required new entrants to the Foreign Office, not just to be born in Britain of British parents, but to have nationality requirements going back two generations to grandparents as well. The idea behind that was not to do with security, but reflected the assumption that the longer-established your family links with Britain were, the more you would, as it were by osmosis, understand the country you represented abroad. It was a very restrictive assumption. Lord Silkin, who had been the Labour Attorney General, worried away at this rule in correspondence with Ministers very effectively for a long time, as a result of which we relaxed the requirements.

As I've indicated, my own family on my mother's side were Jewish immigrants from Russia towards the end of the 19th century. I was clearly eligible to be a candidate when I applied, otherwise I would never have got in. But I do recall that my mother was hesitant about my joining the Foreign Office, because she assumed that I would encounter anti-Semitism – she was making assumptions about Foreign Office Arabists, and so on. She would have preferred me to go off and become a lawyer.

SR: You'd have earned more money, David!

DW: Yes, but that is not the be all and end all. It would have meant carrying on studying for another two or three years, wouldn't it? I think that probably discouraged me. I should add, for the record, that I never encountered or witnessed any anti-Semitism in the Office.

So we liberalised the rules on nationality, but not on gay members of the Service. On that I do remember arguing the toss within Personnel, but being told firmly that there was no question of the removal of those rules.

The assumption was that homosexuals were likely to be blackmailable and therefore security risks. However offensive that seems to us now, and indeed to many of us at the time, that was the rule. I remember a colleague in Security Department saying, 'David, one day this will change, but not within the next 10 years', and he was more or less right. 1991 was when the rule changed.

**International Trade Policy Desk Officer, European Community Department (External), FCO, 1983-86**

SR: Good morning. It's the 26th of October and I'm talking to David Warren via Skype. In our last session, we finished in Personnel Policy Department. Then you went into the very different world of the European Community. How did you find it?

DW: Well, after two years in the Administration, I was posted to what we should call a 'political' department, or department dealing with an aspect of foreign policy. The structure of a 'fast stream' career in the Foreign Office at that time, after initial postings overseas, was a sequence of Departments at home to provide a range of experience.

I was assigned — I don't remember having any choice in the matter, although at some point there was talk of my going into the Policy Planning Staff — to the European Community Department to become the desk officer for international trade policy. It was a completely new area of work for me.

European Community work was divided into two departments, Internal and External. The former dealt with the major internal policies of what was then still called the European Economic Community: the budget, the Common Agricultural Policy and so forth. External dealt with the Community's trade and economic relationships with developed countries, with developing countries through the Lomé Convention and the Generalised System of Trade

Preferences, with the potential enlargement of the Community to include Spain and Portugal, and with nascent political co-operation within the Community on a common foreign policy.

I worked in ECD(E) from September 1983 to the end of the UK Presidency in December 1986. This was the period during which Mrs Thatcher obtained a satisfactory solution to the budget rebate problem at the 1984 Fontainebleau Summit, and the Community agreed the terms of its enlargement to include the Iberian countries.

The trade desk covered the EC's relations with the United States, with Japan (which I knew a little about), and with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union through the old Comecon group of countries. It also covered the UK's involvement in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the precursor of the World Trade Organisation we know today. Because trade was an area in which the Community had competence and member states did not have individual voices, the EC negotiated on behalf of all the (then) 10 member states in the Community.

I was dealing with technical trade policy subjects, mainly sources of trade friction between the EC and its major partners, in the context of the work going on to tidy up the conclusions of the last big multilateral round of trade negotiations, the Tokyo Round, which was supposed to have concluded in 1979 but which was still dragging on in some areas, and prepare for the next round, which became the Uruguay Round launched in 1986.

The lead on all these subjects was taken outside the Foreign Office. The Department of Trade and Industry had general responsibility for trade policy and covered particular industries, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries had responsibility for issues in those sectors. The Foreign Office was essentially making sure that what was going on in other government departments, as well as coordination of policy across Whitehall through the Cabinet Office, didn't cut across Britain's foreign policy, objectives and interests. I spent an enormous amount of time in liaison with my DTI, MAFF and Cabinet Secretariat opposite numbers, the trade policy officer in UKREP Brussels, who represented the UK on what was then called the Article 113 Committee (referring to the Article in the Treaty of Rome enshrining Community competence in this area), and writing briefs to a ruthless and demanding timetable for the monthly meetings of European Foreign Ministers.

SR: Ruthless is an interesting adjective, there.

DW: Yes, the Foreign Affairs Councils (FACs) took place every month and the Friday before the FAC would be taken up with writing long, detailed briefs, clearing them with the rest of Whitehall, submitting them for final approval to the Assistant or Head of Department, or on the most high profile and sensitive issues, the Under-Secretary, rewriting them when the brief emerging from the DTI and MAFF ran counter to what the Foreign Office thought the major thrust should be, renegotiating with departments again, and so on. All to the deadline of the Minister's box closing so that the overall briefing – for anything upwards of thirty or forty agenda items - could be finalised. Geoffrey Howe was Secretary of State for the whole of this period. He had formidable forensic skills, and could read and digest a terrifically complicated set of briefs over the weekend.

It was a bureaucratic, somewhat robotic, process. Some people get frustrated by that sort of work. I got used to it and found it rather good discipline. It was a bit of a treadmill, but I learned a lot about an area of policy I had known little about and got to understand how other government departments worked. And learning is always a source of job satisfaction.

The work was very technical. I wrote endless briefs on concepts such as 'standstill and rollback' of measures incompatible with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. These sound very dry, philosophical concepts. But they carried great political weight and sensitivity, because the thoughts that lie behind them — as with all trade policy — touch on the interests of communities whose life is bound up with the agricultural or manufactured goods whose trade will be regulated by these rules.

For example, safeguards against surges of exports of specific items like semi-finished steel products, citrus fruit, American cereal exports to Spain (in the context of the new trading arrangements that had to be put in place after the EC's enlargement); long negotiations in the GATT on the implications of enlargement; discussions with the Americans on how the Japanese should be pressured to increase their imports in the new round of GATT negotiations, as well as how areas which were relatively unregulated, like services and agriculture, should be included in the Uruguay Round. There was constant pressure from the US to protect the principle of extraterritoriality to ensure that the legal writ of America ran around the world in the areas of trade. The technical issues carried a powerful political charge.

SR: You mentioned Geoffrey Howe, David. At this point, there were great tensions between him and the Prime Minister. Did you see anything of that from your position in the Department?

DW: Not really. I think the tensions between Geoffrey Howe and Margaret Thatcher built up over his period in office and, of course, came to a climax later, over the Bruges speech and the Prime Minister's reluctance to accept the emollient — in her view, compromising — tone on what she saw as the danger of European federalism, that was emerging from the Foreign Office. I didn't see this at first hand. I saw Geoffrey Howe occasionally when I took notes at departmental meetings, and as Secretary of State, he would always pop into the Department at Christmas time to thank everyone for what they were doing. But a desk officer was quite a long way down the food chain in the Foreign Office at that time.

From time to time, I got an insight into the politics of all this. I contributed to the draft communiqué for the 1986 Tokyo G7 Summit and wrote a lot of material on the importance of maintaining free trade and starting a new round of GATT negotiations to get more free trade. I saw off attempts by other Departments to insert little sentences in this to protect one or other industrial constituency, and was very proud of myself. Nothing could be allowed to dilute the purity of the message. This was what Ministers wanted.

So when the team got back from Tokyo and I read the final document which Mrs Thatcher had signed, I was puzzled to see a sentence in the middle of the communiqué say: 'We all recognise the importance of agriculture to the well-being of rural communities.'

Unobjectionable on the surface, but it could be seen as coded language implying a willingness to give renewed protection to farmers. This had not been in the original draft. I wondered where it had come from. Rodric Braithwaite, my Deputy Under-Secretary, explained patiently to me that the Government was facing two rural by-elections, in Ryedale and West Derbyshire, two days after the Tokyo Summit. The fate of small agricultural communities was front and centre of Mrs Thatcher's mind.

The government did badly in both by-elections. Indeed they lost one of the seats. So I assume that the voters of rural Yorkshire and West Derbyshire had not read the communiqué of the Tokyo Summit. But that's history.

Education in the politics of detail was very important. There was a danger in the Foreign Office at that time — not where I was working, but I saw it in one or two other areas — of

feeling that Ministers and their political concerns were a bit of an embarrassing irrelevance to the work which officials needed to do to run a government smoothly. I thought it was an unhealthy view then. I feel that even more now. This is quite different, of course, from challenging Ministers when there are reasons of law or fact that will mean that proposed policy directions cannot work, or be made to work.

SR: David, I'm interested in this bit about plans to facilitate withholding EU contributions? I'm wondering how the senior people in the Office reacted to this?

DW: I was taken off trade policy for about a month, towards the beginning of 1984, and assigned to the proposed legislation to enable the British government to withhold its contribution to the EC budget as a way of exerting pressure on the Commission and the Community to agree to the UK's budget rebate, which Mrs Thatcher was pressing for.

Stephen Wall's history of Britain in the EU makes clear that the idea of withholding the UK's contribution to the budget had been around for some time. It had surfaced in interdepartmental and Cabinet discussions before. But the Law Officers had always advised that this would be illegal if the government had not introduced legislation to make it legal. If the government was seriously going to go down this route, it therefore needed to legislate. Work on this began in the first quarter of 1984. I recall that it was all very secret. Ministers were extremely worried that the fact that they were even preparing (for this was some way away from actually implementing the policy) would be very controversial.

So there was an absolute instruction, not just not to discuss it, but not even to print draft legal documents, because that act might itself stimulate a leak. Some disapproved. I remember a fellow desk officer who was a very passionate Europhile storming into my office and denouncing me for having accepted this filthy instruction from senior officials. He thought it was absolutely unacceptable. It didn't seem to me to be remotely in that category.

I was working at this time on the internal side of the EC Department and essentially for the Cabinet Office. It was an interesting area of work to get into, even only briefly, because the Foreign Office is not on the whole a legislating department, and none of us had any experience in drafting bills and so forth. The whole thing petered out after about a month. The fears about leaking were a factor. And by the spring of 1984 we were moving in a direction towards the sort of compromise on which we could settle and which we reached at Fontainebleau: the issue was becoming less toxic.

SR: How on earth did you keep it secret?

DW: It was secret in the sense that the papers were classified Secret, but everybody in the Department knew it was going on. I don't think the concept of withholding contributions was a secret: the issue was that the Government proposed to change the law to enable this to happen. It was quite different from the fracas in 2020 over the Brexit Internal Market Bill, which actually proposed to break an international treaty commitment.

A couple of other things. Japan. As I said, our work was to ensure that the management of these dossiers supported Britain's foreign policy objectives. On the whole, this was less difficult on Japan, where our policy had for a long time been to find ways to reduce the trade surplus, to encourage the Japanese to open their market, to remove the tariff and non-tariff barriers to trading links behind which it had expanded economically in the 1960s and 70s, and to invest abroad. The attitudes of the EC, its member states and the British government – and the US Administration - were broadly aligned. There were tensions – for example, the Bosphorus Bridge project in 1985, which the Japanese were widely believed to have won by agreeing to aid/credit arrangements outside the international guidelines, on which there was a difficult meeting between Mrs Thatcher and Prime Minister Nakasone at the G7 Summit.

I saw all of this at a distance. It was during this time that the revaluation of world currencies, with the 1985 Plaza Accord, began the process of ensuring that the yen was more realistically valued. That, in turn, helped trade to move back towards balance. And the process of helping exporters into the Japanese market and supporting Japanese outward investment became a little easier. These areas became important elements of my work in future jobs.

I also worked on possible Chinese membership of the GATT. I think I wrote the first policy paper on this while I was on the desk. This again became an important area of work when China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001.

The international politics of these issues could be rough. I remember a 1986 visit by the Deputy US Trade Representative, Mike 'Boom Boom' Smith (as he was called, I was told, in the corridors of the European Commission). A very belligerent man. Lynda Chalker was by then our Minister. Smith was as aggressive and abusive as I've ever heard a foreign official be, in his meeting with her.

We were arguing over the implications for US exports to Europe post EC enlargement. At one point, he leaned across the table and shouted at her, 'Listen, lady, you're not gonna screw

with me!’ Lynda seized up and Rodric Braithwaite, with great presence, leaned forward and said, ‘I think the tone of this meeting is becoming unfortunate. And I think we should focus on the details of the dossier in front of us, on which I’m sure we can reach agreement.’ We carried on with the meeting and it all ended happily. Lynda said to me afterwards, ‘I’m not a shrinking violet, but I almost walked out!’ I would not have blamed her if she had.

He was even worse with Paul Channon, the Secretary of State for Trade, a very cultivated man. Channon had given an early morning interview on the issue on the ‘Today’ programme. On entering his office in the DTI, Smith immediately said, ‘I know what the British government’s position is. I heard your interview on the radio this morning. I was taking a dump at the time!’

I record all this for the archive, just to remind everyone that Trump-style diplomacy is not new. We’ve all been there. I actually found Mike Smith’s own oral history archive interview online, which is fascinating and sets out his insights into European and British negotiating tactics, for which he had relatively little respect.

SR: I’m astonished to see that, during this busy time, you also were a resident clerk.

DW: Yes. In time I became the senior Resident Clerk. The six Resident Clerks were the Foreign Office duty officers. There was a suite of rooms on the top floor of the building, overlooking St. James’s Park and Horse Guards Parade where each Clerk had what was effectively a little bedsit flat: there was a common area in which there was a sort of office overnight and at weekends.

There was no permanent crisis centre in the Office at that time: emergency units for crises such as the Falklands War were organised ad hoc with volunteers supporting the core departmental staff handling the issue in question. There was no real sense of a need to have a 24/7 system of emergency response as there is today, although of course the COMCEN (the communication centre where telegrams were dispatched and received), with messengers to take them to people working in the building, operated on a 24/7 basis, and there was a Consular Department duty officer at weekends. By today’s standards it was quite a Heath Robinson operation.

We took it in turns to be duty officer: this usually worked out at one weekend in six and one evening most weeks. We received a very small financial allowance, but were still expected at the end of the night to return to our Departments and do a full day’s work. Some nights

would be very quiet, others very eventful. Our responsibility was to ensure that anything which came into the Office overnight was appropriately dealt with.

Most things could wait until the morning. We might give officials a ring to warn them of telegrams on this or that subject or developments which needed to be thought about before the following day: occasionally I would write up an overnight briefing note for Ministers on a fast-moving issue. But there wasn't a constant sense, as there would be today, of having to manage breaking news and urgent crises - although of course when real crises did develop staff would return to the office to deal with them.

It was a useful education in the Office's work and exposure to potential emergencies. I don't recall having to exercise complicated judgement very much in the job, other than to determine when telegrams arrived whether they needed to be dealt with, or whether they could wait. 'Flash' telegrams (which were supposed to be on an official's desk within fifteen minutes) and telegrams marked 'desk by' a specific time during the evening, clearly required urgent attention. But telegrams marked 'Immediate', 'Priority' or 'Routine' could wait. I would sometimes go to bed and worry all night about whether I'd made the right decision not to bother someone.

We dealt with calls from members of the public, of which there were a small number, mainly consular enquiries. The Passport Office was part of the Foreign Office at that time and we had the authority to issue emergency travel documents where necessary. The rule was that we could only do this in life or death cases, although we interpreted that quite liberally. I remember one weekend a man calling me to say that his passport had run out and he had to get to Amsterdam for his brother's wedding where he was best man. I said, as sympathetically as I could, 'I do understand, but you realise I'm really only supposed to issue these things in life or death cases?' To which, he replied, 'Well, if I don't get there, he'll kill me!' I thought that seemed reasonable justification, so I issued the document.

SR: Were you not absolutely exhausted, David?

DW: Well, I was only 33, you know, and bursting with energy and vim! But you just got on with it. And none of the Ministers who phoned you up – among the bank of telephones was a red phone with a number known only to the Secretary of State - realised that they were talking to desk officers who were then going off and spending the next day at their desks.

I mentioned this once to Geoffrey Howe and he was very surprised to discover that was how the Office worked. And he was right to be surprised. It was a classic example of how, at that time, the Office did things in a way in which it had always done things without really examining whether it made sense. We tolerated it because it was interesting work: I did it for about two or two and a half years and then decided I'd had enough and passed the baton to somebody else.

I also worked during this period on the Trade Union Side of the FCO, which had only recently changed its name from the Staff Side.

I was on the committee of the Diplomatic Service (fast stream) Association (DSA) for about three years, holding the portfolio which dealt with what was then called Foreign Service Allowance (FSA) negotiations. This allowance (later renamed Cost of Living Addition or COLA) was the sum of money we were all paid to compensate us for the additional cost of living overseas. I was part of the negotiating team with the Treasury, under the auspices of the Council of Civil Service Unions. I also represented the DSA on the Committee of the First Division Association, and was Deputy Chair of the FCO Trade Union Side for a time.

FSA/COLA was an important problem, obviously, for the FCO, but we were a relatively small part of the civil service-wide negotiations, which were dominated by MOD concerns about defence staff overseas, especially in the British Army on the Rhine.

We concluded the negotiations towards the end of 1986. The Foreign Service Allowance had been an attempt to find a rationale for the money that needed to be paid to civil servants living in countries where the cost of living was greater. It contained a number of elements which were increasingly anomalous. Chief among them was the fact that all members of the Service, whether or not married with children, were in receipt of an additional sum of money to compensate them for a notional eight year old child.

SR: Ah yes, he was called Horace, wasn't he?

DW: Yes. The logic behind this, which as we might say has a quaint period charm, was that even if you didn't have an eight year-old child and even if you were not married, in the fullness of time you probably would be married and you probably would have children. So by the laws of swings and roundabouts, 'Horace' could be justified. Obviously, this was no longer sustainable by the mid-80s. Our negotiations focused on how precisely a fair uplift should be calculated, what the additional costs of having actual children were (particularly

babysitting), where and how you calculated the cost of a shopping basket, transport and so forth.

None of that is worth recording in detail. But I remember one fascinating exchange, in which the Treasury negotiator said to the unions: ‘Look, you’re arguing about the additional cost of taking your family overseas. But we are only posting the officer. We are not posting the officer’s family. It’s entirely up to the officer whether he or she chooses to take their family with them overseas. That is their choice. You might well have to explain to the British taxpayer why we are paying for families to travel as well as individuals.’

He was making that point at a difficult stage of the negotiations as part of a negotiating ploy to get us to be realistic (and in the event, the final deal we reached was a reasonable compromise). His words struck me at the time – this is thirty-five years ago – as extraordinary. It was nevertheless a harbinger of things to come. There was a mind-set within the Office that we were a sort of family as well as a government department, which meant that, in addition to basic pastoral care and appropriate terms and conditions, those working for the Office had the right to expect that their families would be respected as integral members of this community. The Treasury man was making the point, crudely, that this was old-think. The balance of expectation between the person dedicating his or her life to government service and the taxpayer wanting to know how their money is being spent was fundamentally shifting. I tell the story because I am amazed, now, at how amazed I was, then.

SR: I’m amazed you had time to do all this when you were in European Community Department!

DW: The work in European Community Department was long hours but oddly lumpy. There were stretches where you weren’t on the treadmill writing Foreign Affairs Council briefs. Brian Crowe, who was the Head of European Community Department for my first year and a half there was the Chair of the Diplomatic Service Association at that time, and was keen that I should be part of this work.

Nairobi was inspected – those were still the days in which all these decisions, on allowances, establishment and grading of jobs, etc, were taken by Inspectors every few years - shortly after I got there at the beginning of 1987. I think I got a little bit of street-cred, as the new Head of Chancery, in being able to advise everybody on how to negotiate on the important

bits of their allowances and not waste time on other things. Gamekeeper turned poacher, or maybe the other way round.

### **First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Nairobi, 1987–90**

SR: Let's now move on to your next job, if we may. You went on another foreign posting, to Nairobi. Did you express an interest or did they tell you where you were going to go?

DW: I've described the basic structure of a fast-stream career at this time: an overseas posting, one or two jobs at home, then abroad again for jobs which would either hone the policy skills of the 'flyers' in Washington, Bonn, Paris, Brussels etc or provide a broader range of experience, in terms of geographical region, type of policy, management etc.

Because I was working in European Community Department, I was earmarked for a possible transfer to UKRep Brussels. After three years in ECD (E), I wasn't terribly keen on this. I wanted to go somewhere else. I didn't make that as clear as I should have done to Personnel. So when I was told, just before the 1986 Presidency, that I was being sent to Brussels as First Secretary (Fisheries), I said I didn't want to go and they got quite annoyed with me. But I was ultimately forgiven and told that I was being sent to a Head of Chancery job in a medium-sized post. The one that came up for me was Nairobi. At the end of the UK Presidency in December 1986, there was an outpouring of desk officers from the European departments who'd been locked into their jobs for a long period of time. I started in Nairobi in February 1987.

SR: Was it a handicap not to be an African expert?

DW: I wondered about that. I was surrounded by African experts. My High Commissioner was John Johnson, who had been Under-Secretary for Africa, had a profound knowledge of the continent, and as a young man had been in the Colonial Service in Kenya (he was District Commissioner in Thika), before independence in 1963. The Deputy High Commissioner was John Edwards, who had been in the Colonial Office at the time of the negotiations over Kenyan decolonisation, and had then been in the Overseas Development Ministry: he had been the Head of the Development Division in Nairobi some years previously, before transferring to the FCO: he spent the rest of his career in Africa.

But Africa was seen as an area where generalists could serve. My predecessors as Head of Chancery had all come from very different backgrounds. I was new to political reporting

and to post management. I found that I took to work in Africa immediately: it was a fascinating and stimulating environment.

SR: You mentioned in your synopsis constant friction with FCO officials. Can you expand on that?

DW: To explain that, I have to say something about the job. I was a sort of Chief of Staff to the High Commissioner, and head of the political section. The Deputy High Commissioner oversaw the economic and commercial work of the mission, as well as bilateral aid, consular affairs and the post management. It was quite a large mission, operating out of three floors in a rather rundown office block in downtown Nairobi. (It has since moved to a grander and more secure building). There was also the ODA Development Division for East Africa, not part of the High Commission, although co-located.

The tension with the East African Department of the Foreign Office arose primarily over the assessment of the stability of the one-party régime in Kenya under President Daniel arap Moi. The party was KANU, the Kenyan African National Union, founded by Jomo Kenyatta. There were concerns over human rights, specifically the Kenyan government's clamping down on dissidents and what they claimed were anti-KANU political forces.

The relationship with the UK was both close and tense. Close because of the historical connection, counterintuitive though that seems, when you consider the violent revolt in Kenya against colonial rule in the 1950s. But Kenya was seen by many in Britain, not least Mrs Thatcher, as a stable, reliable, pragmatic country in Africa at a time when the British government was concerned about Communist infiltration of liberation movements and supported conservative, non-ideological leaders like Moi in the context of the negotiations in South Africa which led up to the release of Nelson Mandela (shortly after I left post in February 1990).

So while Kenya was seen by Ministers as an ally, there was a residual concern that the government's intolerance towards dissent, as well as a perception of widespread corruption, was storing up trouble in the future.

The additional complexity was British military involvement. The British Army used Kenya for training for six months of every year - three battalions in rotation, up country near Mount Kenya, where the terrain was extraordinarily good for training: within a relatively small area there were mountains, plantation, desert and scrubland.

The military training programme was not a secret. But the Kenyan Government was very sensitive to allegations by their critics that there was some sort of unacknowledged agreement with the British government that, in the event of the inevitable coup or rebellion, Britain would protect Moi and his cronies against the forces of liberation and independence. The Kenyans therefore objected to any public reference to even the transitory presence of British soldiers for training purposes.

This was complicated additionally by the upsurge of concern in the mid-1980s about HIV and AIDS. In 1986 there had been a powerful despatch from Kelvin White, the High Commissioner in Zambia, about the potential impact of HIV in Africa and more widely. This was a high profile subject. About a week before I went to Kenya, BBC News reported that 300 soldiers training with one of the battalions up-country had had to be AIDS-tested, because of sexual contact with Kenyan prostitutes. This excited incredible anger on the part of Kenyan politicians who maintained it was a libel on the country, it was outrageous to suggest that HIV was prevalent, this was the revenge of Western countries like Britain for Kenya's boycotting the Commonwealth Games and all that sort of nonsense.

And so you had this constant, febrile, jumpy atmosphere: warmth in terms of shared political objectives and violent, prickly aggression which would emerge without warning.

Of course we had contact in the High Commission with dissidents and politicians who were opposed to Moi. This was not carried out at the highest levels: it was thought not desirable for the High Commissioner or even the Deputy High Commissioner to be seen with these guys. But the Head of Chancery and other members of the mission did maintain contact.

I took over from my predecessor a wide range of contacts with politicians who were out of favour, mainly from tribes disaffected from a Government dominated by the Kalenjin (Moi was a Tugen Kalenjin). I recall John Edwards, when he was Deputy High Commissioner, being invited to have lunch with Oginga Odinga, the venerated Luo politician who had been Kenyatta's Vice-President in the early days, and whom John had known from the negotiations in the 1960s. There was much sucking of teeth and it was finally decided that perhaps the Deputy High Commissioner should not actually have lunch with Odinga, but the Head of Chancery could be dispatched in his place. So off I went and had a fascinating two and a half hour lunch with him and his associates in a nearby hotel to get their views of Moi's government. It was very useful.

The tensions with the Department arose because there was at some levels a tendency to listen to the more excitable gossip in London about how unstable the régime was and to feed this back to us in terms which suggested that we were too complacent, didn't have our finger on the pulse, didn't realise just how volatile the situation was and how the whole thing was going to go up like a tinderbox.

The Office had been alarmed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979. There was a report written by Nick Browne, later Ambassador in Copenhagen, then in Tehran, which had analysed how the Embassy, during the last year of the Shah, had not been attentive enough to the views developing on the street and in the marketplace about the future of the Peacock Throne: it had concentrated too much on trade missions, etc. That led the Office to be more on guard against the risk of an Embassy's not really listening to what was going on.

That was a very fair point to make in the generality but in the case of Nairobi at that specific time I felt it was wrong. The reality was that not everything the dissidents told us could be accepted at face value. Moi was an autocrat and became a dictator; and he tolerated abuses of human rights. But it was not clear, or as absolutely clear as some people then argued, that he was quite the Mephistophelean figure presented by some of the dissidents: nor that they had widespread support outside the Central Province, dominated by the Kikuyu, then out of favour. It was difficult to distinguish between the legitimate criticisms and unsubstantiated allegations.

I spent quite a lot of time with opponents of Moi. I was struck, for example, when I spoke to a man like Ken Matiba, who was a very senior Kikuyu politician, at how angry he was at Moi's behaviour, but nuanced in his personal criticism of the man. "He is not a murderer, and for that I love him", I recall his saying to me once. This was not a straightforward heroes and villains scenario.

In addition, some of the expatriates were extraordinarily credulous, if not mischievous. There were people turning up at parties on a Friday night saying 'Is this the weekend of the coup? I've heard there are army tanks on the streets.' They didn't have any tanks: this was complete nonsense. On the other hand, I was told by one policeman I got friendly with, who was a security detail to a visiting VIP, 'You have to understand that sometimes people are tortured.' Getting the balance right between conflicting sources of information was complex.

I got to know Sir Michael Blundell very well. Michael had been the leader of the settlers, most of whom had been white farmers who had emigrated to Kenya in the 1920s and 30s. He had been one of the instrumental figures in the negotiations over decolonization, moving Kenya towards a multi-racial system, in the 1950s and early 1960s. He'd been Minister of Agriculture in the colonial government.

He had dedicated his life to Kenya and was a revered figure. He was a conservative in political terms, but a man both of absolute integrity and essentially a liberal vision: he was committed to making Kenya an African success story. He was an old man when I knew him, and a source of great wisdom as well as balanced and objective analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the country, its political system and the individuals he'd known.

He was a very close friend of John Johnson, who'd known him as a young man as a District Commissioner, and came regularly to the High Commission. He had a deep love of classical music. As a very young man, he had trained as a *lieder* singer in Austria for a time, before he returned to Kenya to farm. I used to go up to his house occasionally on Sunday nights - he lived not far from me in Muthaiga - and we would sit and watch videos of opera, about which he was profoundly knowledgeable, and talk about Kenyan politics and how Kenya worked.

I tried to draw as wide a set of views as possible from as many people as I could talk to. I hope my political judgements were balanced. I felt that some of the officials in London were less balanced and more superficial in their judgements.

Having said all that, I think it is possible for us to be accused of complacency. Reacting against the unreliable elements in the expatriate and dissident communities led us to downplay the potential impact of human rights abuses and increasing corruption. I haven't reviewed the reporting we did during that period. But I suspect that we could have gone further and been tougher with ourselves.

SR: Is there anything you wanted to add about Kenya?

DW: I should give a pen-picture of Moi. I saw him from time to time when British ministers came. I had a sense of him as a figure of massive, sometimes frightening, power. He was not as depraved and brutal a dictator as, say, Amin or Bokassa. But he certainly had a forceful and intimidating presence.

He felt easily patronised. Visitors who were able to communicate with him best tended to be those who treated him — I'm quoting a phrase from John Johnson — as the elder of his tribe, with a degree of self-conscious respect.

We took Lynda Chalker, now Minister for Africa, to see him once out of town at his residence up country, one Sunday morning. We were walking across the compound towards the President's mansion when suddenly we heard a voice screaming in what sounded like uncontrollable, incandescent rage, in either Kikalenjin or Kiswahili. It was a terrifying sound. The Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry who was accompanying us stopped and said urbane to the Minister, 'I don't think the President is quite ready to see us yet, so perhaps we should go back and have another cup of coffee?' which we did.

On such occasions he could be very touchy - hair-trigger angry to an extraordinary degree. What often set him off would be the early morning BBC World Service news. It might be an innocuous and uncontroversial reference to some aspect of UK-Kenyan relations, which in his mind exposed him to criticism of his maintaining any sort of relationship with the old colonial government, which in turn was part of a conspiracy by the liberal Western media to bring him down.

Any British politician sitting in front of him could become an immediate focus for this. The most extreme, perhaps even farcical, example was a visit by the Minister of State for the Armed Forces. I cannot remember the precise cause of Moi's annoyance that day. But whatever it was, the Minister was unable to get a word in after his initial 'Good morning'. Moi went off on a riff of anger, grievance, complaint, which lasted, virtually uninterrupted and uninteruptable, for forty-five minutes. At the end of it all, he said 'Anyway it's good to have met you', shook the Minister's hand, and we were all ushered out of his presence. The High Commissioner said to me a little mischievously, 'Head of Chancery, I hope you will send a telegram that appropriately records that conversation'. I said: 'What conversation?' However, I arranged my notes, I am ashamed to say, in reporting telegram form, so as to give the appearance of their having been a full and frank exchange of views.

We had a visit scheduled by the Chief of the General Staff to go to London, which somebody in the High Commission inadvertently, but not obviously inappropriately, briefed the press about. It was not secret. But it was immediately cancelled after the press notice had appeared because the Kenyans were so paranoid about any announcement being made.

So it was a difficult relationship. It was handled primarily by the High Commissioner in personal contacts. There are further accounts in this archive, sadly not from John who died a couple of years ago, but from other High Commissioners, Len Allinson, Kieran Prendergast and Roger Tomkys, which give more detail on this.

The Prime Minister visited while I was there. She came out for three days in January 1988. It was successful, because Moi was her sort of African leader: she adopted a tone with him which got the balance between respect and encouragement right. I was charged mainly with administrative arrangements. I remember trekking over fields up in Western Kenya to find a clump of sugar cane that the Prime Minister could be seen to be chopping down as a photo opportunity. Of course it got on to every front page: it was too good to miss a shot of Mrs Thatcher wielding a machete.

A word about relations with the media. We had some impressive foreign journalists in Kenya. There were others who were at the more credulous end of the spectrum. Inevitably, this would contribute to the President's paranoia. From time to time, there were tensions within the High Commission on this point.

I used to know very well Lindsey Hilsum, who later became Channel 4's international affairs editor and who was then working for *The Guardian* in Kenya: a fine journalist. She was very badly beaten in a demonstration when Kenyan security forces ran amok with truncheons. She came into my office in the High Commission to show me her wounds. John Johnson and I were quite clear that this was unacceptable and we made a forceful complaint to the Kenyan government. But there were elements within the High Commission that objected to our doing this. They thought this was unhelpful and that we ought not to be making waves in this way. These differences within the High Commission themselves became a talking point with some of the more thoughtful members of the media community.

It was a very febrile security environment. It became much worse later. A member of the High Commission was shot and killed in a car-jacking some years after I left. I remember at a party in my first week in February 1987 some of the older residents telling me that the country used to be lovely, but had begun to go downhill three years earlier in terms of corruption and security; it was on a slippery slope, etc. I left almost exactly three years later, and at my farewell parties, many of the same people told me that Kenya had been a wonderful place to live, but you know, three years earlier, it had begun to go downhill. . .

There was a constant, self-fulfilling myth of inevitable change and decay, which had always started the day before yesterday. On security, however, this was true.

I was once woken up in the middle of the night by the High Commission security officer to say that a British couple had been taken from their hotel to Nairobi airport to be deported, because of some commercial dispute, and wanting to see the duty British Consul, which that week was me. There was no possibility of finding anybody in the Kenyan government before morning. But I knew I had to do something because I did not want to see a *Daily Mail* headline the following day 'We phoned the Embassy and it was shut'.

So I got dressed and drove to Nairobi Airport, which really was not a sensible thing to do at half-past two in the morning. I took a circuitous route through one of the big townships where the road was much worse but better lit, and where I thought that, if I got into difficulty, I'd be more likely to find someone to help than on the deserted airport road, where carjackers used to spread tin tacks to puncture car tyres and rob their occupants. So I got to the airport and stayed for the next couple of hours with this nice couple for whom I could do very little, arguing with the security man at the airport who was completely drunk and making no sense. As dawn rose, I said 'I don't think there's much more I can do, I'm going to have to go home now.' And they were deported. So it was a frustrating as well as a volatile environment.

Let me say a word about the Head of Chancery's pastoral role. I had an undefined responsibility for staff issues, and what was loosely described as 'morale'. That really amounted to: is everybody more or less happy and if they're not, what can we do about it? And if we can't do anything about it, how can we get people to just tolerate it? And it was the beginning of an insight into the sort of pastoral side of management at which the Foreign Office had an erratic record and yet which they always saw as an unspoken element of a senior manager's portfolio of skills. Do you know what mean?

SR: Exactly.

DW: I enjoyed meeting and working with different types of people: I tried to bring some sympathy and understanding and, when necessary, a 'well, this is maybe not ideal, but I'm afraid this is what we've got to do' type of approach – not always successfully, I dare say. I was intrigued by how we were on the cusp of changing from an extraordinarily paternalistic system to a system in which individuals made their own choices and created their own lives and careers as they developed professional skills.

There were flashes of a more traditional set of values, particularly about people's personal lives. I used to have to go up to the Communications Centre to receive the formal 'DEDIP' (i.e to be personally deciphered) telegrams which Personnel Operations Department (POD) would send to the High Commissioner to submit the name of a new member of staff for him to approve.

It was in late 1989, I think, or early 1990. I received a telegram which informed us that Personnel were sending someone - let's call him John Smith - as a new member of the High Commission. His CV is as follows. His skills are as follows. He's an admirable man, but High Commissioner, you may wish to know that he is at present co-habiting with a lady who is his fiancée and that they intend to be married at some point in the future, but that they are not married yet. Personnel tiptoed tentatively around the fact that we were being assigned a couple who were living in freedom, as our grandparents would have said.

I took this to the High Commissioner and I said, 'We have a new guy joining. He sounds good. He's living with his girlfriend. They just want to check that you're happy with that. They're going to get married.' And John said to me, 'You may tell them that I am delighted they are going to get married.' I record that as a tiny insight into the mores of the institution that I worked for, which were shortly to be obliterated without trace.

How did we tolerate it? But we did. It could have been much worse. Eight years previously, when I was in Personnel, I recall a case in which a Head of Mission had to be forcibly prevented from refusing to accept a female, married officer who wished to use her maiden name.

The recent past is often incomprehensible to us.

### **Assistant Head, Far Eastern Department, FCO, 1990-91**

SR: Shall we move on to your next assignment, which was Far Eastern Department back in the Office?

DW: Yes, I had been identified, I think, as a potential candidate for Assistant Head of Far Eastern Department. I came back in February 1990, a couple of months earlier than expected for tragic reasons: my predecessor in that post had died suddenly.

The fast-stream career again: in your late 30s, the assumption was that you would move to an Assistant Head of Department post, effectively a Senior Principal in Home Civil Service

terms, called Grade 5S. The Office still had a rigorously calibrated sense of when people should be promoted. The magical point was becoming a Counsellor. If you were a 'flyer' (individuals were formally identified in their mid-30s as flyers), you would be promoted to Counsellor at 37. If you were a 'reserve flyer', it would be 38. There was another category, 'near-miss reserve flyer', promoted at 39. And if you were in none of these groups, promotion would come at around 40 or 41, depending on jobs coming up. 41 was kind of average: not terrible, but you weren't moving as fast as the zippier members of the cohort. If you didn't get promotion until you were 42 or 43, it was an indication of your career slowing up. There would be jobs for you somewhere. But these might be harder to come by.

SR: It wasn't dependent on some sort of competition as it is now?

DW: No. This is all before the days of assessment centres, which we'll come on to later, because I was part of the introduction of this new system when I was HR Director.

At that time, you had an automatic expectation in the fast stream that you would reach at least the lower reaches of the Senior Management Structure i.e Counsellor - one star, as the military would say. You might do a number of jobs at that level; you might not be promoted further from that position. Or you would be promoted up to Assistant Under-Secretary, Deputy Under-Secretary or as we would now say Director or Director General. The assumption behind it all was that your career potential could be scientifically calculated, that the jobs to which you were posted would be selected in accordance with that calculation, and that the management of your career would be adjusted as it developed or failed to develop.

To be Assistant Head of the Far Eastern Department, given my Japan experience, was logical for me. FED covered China (not Hong Kong), Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan and Mongolia. My Head of Department for most of the time I was there was Hugh Davies, a very experienced Sinologist who'd been in that world for a long time and was a pleasure to work with. He led on China: I led on Japan.

Essentially my job was to co-ordinate our excellent desk officers, quality check the department's work, make sure that ministers' needs were met, parliamentary questions replied to, that MPs' letters got the appropriate draft responses, briefing prepared for meetings, etc. I liaised with other government departments, for example with the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Trade and Industry on the takeover which was going through at that time between ICL and Fujitsu, and with the ODA regarding development assistance

for Mongolia, which was beginning to open up after the *perestroika* and *glasnost* which had emerged in the Soviet Union. There was an argument that we should be supporting this process in Mongolia, which was not terrifically popular in other parts of the Office which saw Mongolia as a lower priority. There was also liaison with universities on Korea and Japan and so forth. It was an interesting year and a half dealing with all these different countries.

Perhaps I should talk a little bit about the policy side of it?

SR: Yes, that would be interesting.

DW: I didn't cover China as closely as Hugh did. But I deputised for him as necessary, so I had to know what was going on. It was just after Tiananmen Square: relations with China were now frozen again because of the killings. There was, as there always has been, constant tension between the need for us to be doing more in areas about which the Chinese remained extremely hostile, such as Tibet and Taiwan. Contacts with the Dalai Lama were sensitive. He visited Britain in 1991 and did not on that occasion see the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary, although he did subsequently.

We were also beginning to inch our relations forward with Taiwan: 30 years ago these were less well developed than they are today, as Taiwan has become a country (although the Chinese will never accept this terminology) in all but formal name. In 1990, we had Taiwanese diplomats operating in London out of what purported to be a commercial operation called the Majestic Trading Company. And we had a one man operation in Taipei, without even the right to issue visas and keeping an eye on political and commercial opportunities there. We had constant pressure from some business people and politicians to build up links with Taiwan, and never mind what the Chinese were saying.

The diplomats at the Japanese Embassy were charmingly awkward about my leading on Japan. They really wanted to deal with the Head of Department rather than his Deputy, although they recognised that I had more direct experience of Japan. I discovered subsequently that in order for them to be able to do this, they had slightly 'promoted' me in their reporting telegrams to the Foreign Ministry. So I was given a leg up, which was fine, except of course that I think I had to have further legs up each time I was subsequently promoted.

The major context of our work was the Gulf War of 1990, with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Our aim was to get Japan (up to that point an economic superpower, but more tentative in

terms of playing an international political role) to contribute to the Gulf War - ideally more than simply providing resources for it. And we wanted to prevent the Americans from taking for themselves all the resources which the Japanese did supply.

I also oversaw the Foreign Office end of the Japan Festival of 1991. There had been a big Royal Academy exhibition of Japanese art in 1981, and in 1991 it was the centenary of the Japan Society, the cultural and educational friendship society (of which I became Chair after having retired from the Office). An impressive array of events, exhibitions and performances were organised around the country. The Crown Prince (now the Emperor) came to open the festival and undertook a tour including Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the North of England - a complicated but enjoyable trip. I accompanied him.

The political relationship with Japan had become closer as the trading relationship had improved and the Japanese had shown themselves receptive to successive attempts to encourage exports to Japan and to liberalise parts of the Japanese market that had remained closed. I wrote an essay on the contribution Geoffrey Howe and FCO officials made to this process in one of Hugh Cortazzi's 'Biographical Portraits' volumes, which sets out the history in more detail: [British Foreign Secretaries and Japan Geoffrey Howe.pdf](#).

There was still the nagging issue of the treatment of Far Eastern Prisoners of War, many of whom were by then very elderly and who felt, with justification, that they had never been adequately compensated for the terrible suffering they'd endured during their incarceration by the Japanese. There was frankly not much that we were able to do to progress this question until after I'd left the Department.

On Korea, there was much speculation, amazing though it seems now, about reunification. Japan was keen to bring North Korea in from the cold. Both Koreas joined the United Nations in late 1991. I recall making a very bold, confident and completely inaccurate assertion to a meeting of the Korea Trade Advisory Group in the DTI that we would see Korean unification in our lifetimes: I even dared to put an earlier date on it. It was not to be.

I spent more time than I'd expected on Mongolia: with the liberalisation of the former Soviet sphere of influence, we began to work up ideas for engaging the Mongolians. Indeed, I went with the first Foreign Office minister to visit Mongolia - Lord Brabazon of Tara in the spring of 1990: the ice was just breaking in parts of the capital. We flew down from Ulan Bator to somewhere in the Gobi Desert where we all stayed in a yurt camp. It was a reasonably

comfortable, VIP-style yurt, but we still had a 300 yard walk across freezing gravel to the ablutions block in the morning, which I think the Minister found a little *lèse-majesté*. I went on thereafter to do my familiarisation visit to Beijing, by the Trans-Siberian Railway.

I went back to Mongolia the following year, as the Secretary of the UK-Mongolia Round Table, an attempt to create a ‘Track Two’ forum which could create a dialogue between influencers and perhaps elicit ideas for broadening the relationship. It was a pretty insubstantial meeting, but it was an earnest of friendship, and we identified one or two commercial opportunities. I think I'm right in saying that I ended up writing the minutes before it had actually taken place: it was obvious what was going to go into the final session.

SR: One final point. Why did you refer to the name of the Department in your synopsis?

DW: The name Far Eastern Department was very old fashioned. The countries we covered are in the Far East if you're sitting in London. But the London Embassies with whom we liaised were puzzled by being described in those terms. It was overdue for a change to East Asian Department, but I was told that the PUS, Patrick Wright, did not want to do this, as it was the only Department in the Foreign Office whose name had remained unchanged since the War. So we kept it as it was. Of course, everything has changed since then.

### **Head, International Section, Science and Technology Secretariat, Cabinet Office, 1991-93**

SR: Good morning. This is Suzanne Ricketts talking to David Warren via Skype on 2 November 2020. David, shall we start today with your move to the Cabinet Office in 1991? You say very honestly in your synopsis ‘not a job for which I had any particular relevant experience’. So why did they give it to you?

DW: I talked in our last session about the mechanics of promotion. I was identified as promotable in the course of 1991 and got more or less the first home Counsellor slot that came up that they thought appropriate for me. I had been told of the science and technology position in the Cabinet Office some months previously, but Personnel said that it was a job I would not be considered for because I was not a scientist. A couple of months later I was told that it was the perfect job for me, because it would enable me to diversify my skills and learn about science. So I was promoted to become the Head of the international team in the Science and Technology Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

For most of the next 20 years, in other words for the rest of my career, I would be in jobs involving some degree of corporate reorganisation, in constantly shifting management structures. I was being promoted into the world of corporate change.

The Science and Technology Secretariat in the Cabinet Office worked to the Chief Scientific Adviser, who in turn reported to the Prime Minister. The international section oversaw British involvement in the European Union Science and Technology Research Framework Programme and the encouragement, more generally, of international science and technology collaboration, particularly with major developed countries, whose chief scientific advisers were part of the so-called Carnegie Group: the US, France, Germany, Russia, Japan and so on.

I took on this role a few months before the 1992 general election, at which John Major was returned to office as Prime Minister. He introduced a radical reorganisation of the centre of government with the creation of the Office for Public Service and Science (OPSS) under William Waldegrave, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Within the OPSS, the Office of Science and Technology, as we became, was headed by the Chief Scientific Adviser, Bill Stewart. Bill was a very distinguished biologist with an eminent academic background, who had been in charge of the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) and had become famous because he managed the team which removed anthrax from Gruinard Island off the Scottish coast, which had been made toxic during the war as a result of germ warfare experimentation.

He was a fascinating man to work for. I had not really, in the Foreign Office up to that point, worked for any official who so ruthlessly demonstrated how power could be exercised. I had worked for some very distinguished officials. Probably the only one in the FCO who fell into that 'power broker' category would have been Robin Renwick, Assistant Under-Secretary for Europe in the mid 80s. But I wasn't as close to Robin as I was to Bill, as his head of international activity.

Bill was a man who thought in power political terms, both to promote an understanding of the importance of science and technology, and to ensure that the government's science budget, most of which he did not control, was used properly, to enable long-term research and wealth creation. His understanding of power was incisive. He once said to me, 'In any job you do, David, there are only four people who matter. They will always be different people, but there will only be four of them. You have to concentrate on those people: everything else is

extraneous.’ His intuitive understanding of whether somebody was a threat to his power, whether he could do a deal with them, whether he could ignore them, whether he would have to suppress them, or whether he could co-opt them, was an education to me.

I’m not saying he was a model for my behaviour: I am a different sort of person. Indeed, he was a difficult man to work for, administratively quite chaotic, because the smooth execution of governmental processes was not something he was greatly bothered about: that was our job. His role was to deliver the right outcomes for the scientific community whose interests he represented to the Prime Minister and to ensure the right delivery of the Prime Minister's requirements of science in terms of running government. But it was an education in how power works within government.

SR: And when you say ‘scientific community’, David, do you mean universities? Or do you mean pharmaceutical firms and other areas in the private sector?

DW: All of those: public laboratories financed by the Research Councils, research in universities, industrial research and development in key business sectors like pharmaceuticals, the major public and private institutes. We're talking about ensuring that public resources support the delivery of science, technology and engineering that enables government to achieve its objectives in terms of prosperity and security. During my time in the Cabinet Office, we had the 1993 White Paper on Science and Technology, whose purpose was to break down the barriers to understanding how science and technology could be applied to wealth creation and how a more stable funding model might be adopted.

The problem for us in the Cabinet Office was that we had had no direct responsibility for any of the budget. With the creation of the Office of Science and Technology, we effectively had a merger between the residual bit of science and technology in the Cabinet Office and the science part of the Department of Education and Science (DES), whose budget supported the Research Councils, where most government-funded research took place. The second half of my time in the Cabinet Office was spent trying to make that merger work in the international field.

Before William Waldegrave, we had this odd arrangement whereby there was a very junior minister for science sitting in the Department of Trade and Industry (and in the House of Lords). So when there were European meetings of science ministers this DTI Parliamentary Under-Secretary represented the British government, while most of the money was being

spent by the Department of Education and Science, and an enormous amount of other work on research and development was going on in other Departments: Agriculture, Environment, Energy (still a separate department until 1992) and so forth. There were big budgets all over Whitehall and no real coherence within government as to how money was being spent. The creation of the Office of Science and Technology was an attempt to pull this work together.

The European angle was a major part of my responsibilities. The European Community Framework Programme had been in existence for a long time. And about half of my job, maybe slightly more than half, was negotiating in Brussels on its future, both how we should top up the existing programme which was running out of money, and what we should include in the Fourth Framework Programme, which the Community was working towards.

I spent much of my time liaising with UKREP Brussels on these negotiating dossiers, trying to keep too many large projects out of the Fourth Programme, and to ensure instead that it included things like the exploitation of generic technologies which were integral to ‘blue sky’ research. And back in Whitehall, trying to sign Departments up to the money needed to top up the existing Programme. The finances were complicated. The Treasury were rigorous. Money received from Brussels was attributed against (and subtracted from) Departments’ budgets: it could not be spent twice. I had a very good team who were really expert overseeing this work. Waldegrave chaired the Research Council under the British Presidency in the second half of 1992. We got as far as we could towards agreeing the way in which the Framework Programme was going to develop, although not quite to the point of agreeing the size of the budget.

SR: What was William Waldegrave like?

DW: Cerebral. He was fascinated by science. I think he found it intellectually a very exciting part of his responsibilities. But I don’t think he saw science as a particularly political issue – as opposed to the ‘public service’ elements of his role, which in the era of the ‘Citizen’s Charter’ carried a greater political charge. When the inter-departmental politics over money got difficult, I sensed a certain fatalism creep into his thinking as to whether these problems were soluble. Sometimes you work for ministers who are absolutely focused on what they can achieve and will push you hard to go the extra mile to get there.

Waldegrave was less inclined to do that if he felt that the issue was intractable. I read his memoir a few years ago: he barely mentions science.

I think he got on quite well with Bill. When Bill said that only four people mattered, at the start of his time that would have been the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, the Head of the Civil Service (Robin Butler at that time) and the Deputy Secretary of the Treasury who held the purse strings (Richard Wilson). When Waldegrave arrived as the minister, of course, he immediately became part of the magic four.

The other half of my job was international science and technology collaboration. In one sense, this was less political, more a question of organising opportunities, through Carnegie Group meetings and bilateral consultations, to improve collaboration on an international science and technology agenda.

I spent a lot of time struggling with the management of the network of Science Counsellors around the world. Technically, they worked for the Foreign Office. I felt they were variable, not so much in the quality of the individuals, but whether what they were doing was meaningful in terms of Government science and technology objectives. In some countries, particularly Japan, we had a Science and Technology Counsellor completely integrated in the Embassy's work to promote trade, investment and technology cooperation, get a better understanding of Japanese innovation and how British scientists could benefit. In other parts of the network, that integration was absent.

I got into trouble when the Foreign Office Inspectors went to look at the US network. I briefed them beforehand and said rather artlessly that, although I thought the individuals working in the Washington science section were admirable guys, I couldn't see much coming out of the Embassy of enormous relevance to what we were doing. The reports seemed pretty tangential to the core work of government. I thought that the Inspectors might look for savings in that direction.

No sooner did I offer them a finger or two than they bit my arm off and came back with recommendations to cut the section quite savagely. So I ended up having to go to the Foreign Office's Inspection debriefing meeting to argue against all the things I'd been suggesting in the first place. The meeting was filmed for the BBC documentary series on the Foreign Office, 'True Brits', the last episode of which focused on the Office's need to find savings to make ends meet. There I am, looking tense and sweaty!

Brian Donnelly, one of my predecessors in this role, makes this point in his oral history archive interview. There's always a tension. If you're a Foreign Office person in a Cabinet

Office role, the Foreign Office will see you as their man in the Cabinet Office. They won't see you as part of a cross-Whitehall team that is trying to break down silos. From time to time, I would get calls from the relevant Department in the Foreign Office to encourage me to be more co-operative to what the Foreign Office were trying to do, rather than constantly feel I just had to work for Bill Stewart.

Two final points. It was fascinating seeing the 1992 election from inside the Cabinet Office. Of course, we were writing briefs for all eventualities. But it was clear to me that the expectation among officials in April 1992 was that there would be a hung parliament and a coalition government. The fact that John Major got back with a clear majority came, I think, as a surprise to everyone. But it instantly gave us the administrative clarity and political space for the work that we had to do.

The other memory is of my first office computer, quite separate from the 'word processors' that began to feature in secretarial offices in the mid-1980s. I had not had a computer on my desk before I went to the Cabinet Office. It was clunky and slow. I couldn't tell you who made it or how I used it, other than for occasional internal emails. I mentioned fax machines earlier. We'd begun to use them between London and Brussels when I was in European Community Department, and I remember how fascinated people were in Nairobi a couple of years later, when they were used for example to fax press cuttings to the post overnight. Gradually we were acquiring and exploring the technology.

I finished in the Cabinet Office in July 1993.

### **1993 – 1998: Counsellor (Commercial), Tokyo**

SR: Then you went back to Tokyo again. Did you ask to go to there?

DW: Yes. I had actually applied for a Counsellor job in Tokyo when I left Nairobi, but I wasn't promotable at that stage. Two Counsellor positions came up in Tokyo in 1993: Commercial, handling export promotion, and Economic, dealing with inward investment, trade policy questions and economic analysis. I had done some economic work previously, and was keen to diversify myself and take on trade promotion.

SR: Had you kept your Japanese up?

DW: -ish! I did some refresher training and got it back. In fact, I think my Japanese was better during my second tour in Tokyo than when I'd first been there. My earlier jobs had

mostly involved contact with Japanese English-speaking officials, whereas the Japanese business community was less Anglophone, so I was using Japanese more often, listening to Japanese conversations. And I was managing a large department with Japanese locally-engaged staff who of course spoke good English, but we didn't always speak English to each other. So I was able to use Japanese more frequently.

There were people in the DTI who thought that I ought to be doing the Economic Counsellor job because that's what I'd done before, and I was a 'policy person'. There was an unspoken assumption that, you know, commercial work was for the executive grades and economic policy work was for the administrative grades. It may not have been quite as binary a judgement as that, but the assumption was that that was how you deployed your resources.

But I wanted to do commercial work, because I wanted to understand the nuts and bolts of how companies worked. I found it liberating to get outside the Foreign Office into the world of trade and investment and see government from a completely different angle. I saw thousands of companies during my four and a bit years in the job. The vast majority had little sense of government as a facilitator of trade, and why should they? They understood government as a regulator; they obviously understood its tax-collecting and resource-distributing functions. But the idea of using the resources of government to promote trade was conceptually quite difficult for many firms.

Japan was a uniquely important export market. It was not only (then) the world's second largest economy and an industrial and technological powerhouse. It also had a commercial culture that was crucial for British companies to understand, and quite complex. This gave an automatic role to an Embassy to guide companies through the dos and don'ts of doing business in Japan, and the standards that Japanese buyers and consumers, among the most demanding in the world, would expect. I suspect that the Embassy's role was probably more extensive than many other British Embassies in other big developed markets.

SR: Can you tell me a bit about specific Japan trade promotion work?

DW: There were about 35 people in the Commercial Department in Tokyo: five or six UK-based staff and the rest locally engaged, mostly Japanese. We had specialists in every sector, some of the Japanese staff very highly qualified, and central administrative teams to deal with the heavy throughput of trade missions and groups at international trade fairs (of which there were a large number, as Japan was a world trade fair centre). We had a consumer goods team

and an industrial goods team. The myth has always been that we only sell Scotch whisky and fashion to Japan, but of course most British exports were in the industrial sector and often in very high tech areas, power generation, scientific instruments, and so forth.

A lot of the output of the department was in the form of advice to companies, helping them make the right contacts in the market, on the basis of what were called 'chargeable enquiries'. You would draw up a Market Information Report for a company with a particular product, identifying contacts and potential agents who could help the company sell. We would organise programmes of meetings for company representatives coming to Tokyo or Osaka (where we had a separate Consulate General covering Western Japan), to meet potential customers, agents, buyers and so on.

We would also organise promotional events for individual companies and groups of companies through trade associations. By 1993, a new building had been opened on the Embassy compound to house the Commercial and Science and Innovation Departments, with a purpose-built facility for trade mission receptions and other events. We told companies the absolute truth: we did not pretend that there was a market for everything in Japan. Companies were occasionally annoyed with us if we told them that their products would have difficulty.

SR: Such as?

DW: It could be a matter of quality. Some of the foodstuffs we were asked to promote were poor quality for the Japanese market. I remember one Market Information Report from a Japanese member of staff telling a British company: 'Frankly, the taste of your product is disgusting.' Sometimes it was a cultural issue. We were asked once to do a chargeable inquiry for tattoo parlours. We told the company that the only people who wore tattoos in Japan were members of the Yakuza, or criminal underworld, and we could not find a commercial officer who was brave enough to go down to the relevant part of Tokyo to make the necessary inquiries about whether there would be a market for these services from various gentlemen with one finger missing.

Sometimes it was a matter of the market just being too crowded with Japanese products of high, if not higher, quality than the products being exported from the UK. When a company would complain to me that we weren't trying harder to promote their goods, I would say, 'Look, I think we're doing you a favour actually, giving you - for a heavily subsidised sum - a

piece of commercial consultancy advice which would cost you thousands of pounds on the open market.'

We also had the Exports to Japan Unit in the DTI, which had been set up in the early 1970s after the Prime Minister, Ted Heath's, visit to Japan. He'd come back to London appalled at what he saw as the amateurism of British business's engagement with this important market, and set up a dedicated unit in the then Department of Trade in order to raise everyone's game. It was traditionally headed by someone who had done commercial work in Tokyo.

By the time I went back as Commercial Counsellor in 1993, most of the tariff barriers to trade with Japan had come down. The British government's approach now focused on promotional campaigns presenting the attractions of Japan for British exporters. The first was 'Opportunity Japan' in 1989/1990. This encouraged exporters to explore an unfamiliar market and to benchmark themselves for other markets against high Japanese quality standards.

The Japanese 'bubble' economy had burst at the end of 1989, and Japan entered its 'lost' deflationary decade. Foreign exporters could sell competitively to Japan. We exploited that in successive campaigns: 'Opportunity Japan' was followed by 'Priority Japan' and 'Action Japan' (which started just as I took over as Commercial Counsellor). This focused on specific sectors: food and drink, fashion, clothing and textiles, automotive and electronic components which we were trying to get designed into Japanese products, medical instrumentation and so forth. I think there were ten in all.

We were trying to make our approach more systematic and focused: Tokyo, Osaka and London, all working together without thinking of ourselves in individual silos. I believe we operated an effective and cohesive unit to try and improve British companies' knowledge of Japan and encourage the ones capable of exporting to Japan to come, suitably prepared, to market.

We had a good British Chamber of Commerce in Tokyo as well. In some parts of Asia, they were more social clubs than professional groupings. I felt, coming back to Tokyo after 12 years away, that the British Chamber had turned itself into a very professional organisation, well informed on the complicated regulatory agenda of breaking down non-tariff barriers in the Japanese market, as well as providing good mentoring and advice for small and medium

sized companies trying to set themselves up in Japan. So we had a professional team of resident British businessmen in Japan who both supported and challenged us.

SR: Can I ask you about the political involvement and Michael Heseltine?

DW: We benefited from strong political leadership in the Department of Trade and Industry with Heseltine and Richard Needham, the Minister for Trade. Needham had been one of the founders of the UK-Japan 2000 Group, the 'Track Two' forum set up in 1984 by Mrs Thatcher and Prime Minister Nakasone, to try and emulate the way in which the Königswinter conferences had brought British and German thinkers and politicians together in the 1950s and later. The UK-Japan 2000 Group (now the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Group) was designed to do the same for British politicians, businessmen, industrialists, academics, media, officials and so forth. Richard Needham was a minister who needed no education on the importance of Japan. Nor did Heseltine.

But it wasn't just Japan. A different way of tackling trade promotion was being developed. There had been a very hidebound approach in the DTI. You had a rigid calendar of trade missions and trade fairs. The latter understandably, perhaps: groups had to be scheduled well in advance. But there had been little effort to test the capabilities of specific trade associations or chambers of commerce, and the idea that, say, the Wolverhampton Chamber of Commerce should have a regular East Asia trade mission slot every two years irrespective of conditions in the market, the interests of specific companies, whether they were able to mobilise twenty or so suitable firms, etc, was very old-fashioned.

Ministers insisted on a new and much more flexible approach, with the starting point an understanding of the needs of specific business sectors and the potential in specific country markets, and promotional priorities stemming from that. Japan's economic size, business sophistication and cultural complexity meant that it was at the heart of the new approach.

The Foreign Office was uneasy about aspects of this. For a lot of Embassies, commercial diplomacy was both a rationale to use in the perennial argument with the Treasury over funding, and an aspect of public diplomacy. There was a tendency to welcome bums on seats, but not necessarily to scrutinise that whether every company was as suitable or well-prepared for a specific market as they should have been. Under Ministerial direction, the DTI began to think of this work more in terms of improving the competitiveness of British industry and helping individual companies develop. The Joint FCO/DTI Export Promotion

Directorate had been set up a few years before I went to Tokyo to try and bring the two sides together, but it was still pretty uncoordinated.

I don't honestly think the Foreign Office ever really understood trade promotion. There was a tendency to think in terms of setting export targets. To be fair, this was not a uniquely Foreign Office problem. All Ministers want to demonstrate success by saying, 'I've achieved x million pounds worth of exports.' In the real world, the work of officials is never going to have more than a marginal impact on headline figures. A country's export level is a reflection of its macro economy; as the economy grows, its exports will grow, and vice versa.

Usually, when we had to set ourselves export targets in our promotion campaigns, they would all be forgotten by the time we'd failed to achieve them. Or something had happened to make us look brilliant for other reasons. When we started 'Opportunity Japan' in the late 1980s, we said 'we will double British exports to Japan'. Well, the campaign coincided with the collapse of the Japanese economy so obviously that wasn't going to happen. But everybody had forgotten the target when the campaign finished three years later.

When we started 'Action Japan', we set ourselves the target of £3.5 billion worth of exports in three years. Black Wednesday and the collapse of sterling in 1992 automatically made British exports more competitive worldwide. We hit our target with a year and a half to spare, and got tremendous street-cred that we probably didn't deserve.

I remember a very senior Foreign Office official visiting Tokyo and asking me with some irritation, 'Why in spite of all your activity, does Germany still export more to Japan than Britain does?' The answer was because in nominal GDP terms, the German economy was then nearly twice the size of the British economy. That type of simplistic macro analysis was very frustrating. And for a long time, it seemed that Foreign Office Ministers and some officials were not wholly convinced that the work of commercial sections was valuable, suspecting that it simply supplanted what could be provided equally well (although more expensively) by the private sector.

Here is an example of the Office's unworldliness in this area. Do you remember the PUS's monthly newsletter? This was a telegram sent to all posts giving a personal view of what was going on in the Foreign Office, from a policy and administrative perspective. Ministers were never aware of it, allegedly: it was classified Secret and Personal. We were

forbidden to discuss it and all copies were destroyed after every UK-based member of staff had read it. The practice was discontinued in the late 1990s.

We had a Market Information Request from a company who sold Elvis Presley memorabilia, run by a former locally-engaged member of staff in California, whom the head of our Consumer Goods section knew. We considered whether we ought to be supporting him. Yes, of course Elvis was not British and never set foot in Japan, but it was a British company, so even though it was never likely to break the bank as far as exports were concerned, we decided to do a little bit of work, and gave the guy a few leads.

It was a very brief report at what one might say, I hope not unkindly, was the eccentric end of the creative industries spectrum. And we had the loveliest letter back from the man in question saying how helpful we'd been, which he'd copied to the Permanent Under Secretary in the Foreign Office, who'd then promptly put it in his Secret and Personal message to the entire Diplomatic Service network, as an example of how commercial work was at the heart of what British Embassies should be doing. I was both delighted that Tokyo had got a bouquet and astonished that this – rather than work being done all over the world on major projects, big-ticket items, etc - would be the case in the Foreign Office's mind that demonstrated the importance of commercial work.

SR: You said there were a couple of things you wanted to add.

DW: Yes. I've spoken critically of how the Foreign Office saw commercial work in terms of public diplomacy. But of course, we had enormous set piece visits by successive Presidents of the Board of Trade — Michael Heseltine, then Ian Lang – with jumbo-jets full of businessmen - as well as other ministers from across government while I was there. Not just Ministers for Trade but many others, often with sectoral responsibilities.

And we did events that would fit naturally into any public diplomacy schedule: fashion shows for young British designers (I briefly modelled an Oswald Boateng shirt), and an event for the company that then controlled the Thomas the Tank Engine brand – very big in Japan, we calculated that they were at that time making more money through franchising than the Scotch whisky industry in its exports – with all the train models running on a toy track for children to play on in the Embassy gardens, Japanese TV cartoon voiceover stars, etc.

We had the last round-the-world voyage of the Royal Yacht Britannia in 1997, on the way to the handover in Hong Kong, with Princess Alexandra. This also left me a bit frustrated.

The conventional thing to say about Britannia is that it was a tremendous asset for promoting Britain around the world. Not in Japan. We have in Tokyo a beautiful Embassy in the centre of town, close to the Imperial Palace and the business quarter, easily accessible for politicians and business figures, with the opportunity, in uniquely attractive surroundings, to promote the best of Britain. With Britannia, we were lumbered with having to trek all the way out to the end of the pier in Tokyo Bay, the real back of beyond, and hang around for an hour or more until the Royal staff deigned to allow these captains of Japanese industry actually to board the yacht and enjoy a brief reception in a pretty tiny space compared with what we would have been able to lay on at the Embassy. No doubt I must be dutifully respectful of those who say that this is all tremendously important to making Britain great again. But it's not true.

I tried as Commercial Counsellor to make our support for British business in Japan more systematic. Each year, I used to go around all the major British companies — there were quite a number of them still in Japan at that time, car companies like Rover, aerospace companies like Rolls Royce and BAe, big pharma, GEC Marconi, the finance and insurance houses, and so forth — to understand what their business plans were, in so far as they could tell me, and how the Embassy's schedule of work (e.g. external engagement, major visits, public events, market information gathering, lobbying on standards and regulations, the support we were giving sector groups) might support their activities.

I was attempting a rather crude early version of customer relationship management with major British investors in Japan and trying to create a better understanding in business of the sorts of things that an Embassy can do. I had strong support for this attempt at a more structured and analytical approach from David Wright, my second Ambassador in Japan during this period, who arrived in 1996.

It was a propitious time to promote British investment in Japan. A number of British retailers were exploring the Japanese consumer market. Some, like HMV and Virgin, had already established themselves in Japan. Others like Boots tried to enter the market, but unsuccessfully.

Marks and Spencers was an interesting example. They had been trying to get into the Japanese market as long as I'd been dealing with Japan and had always gone with the wrong Japanese partner - too far up market, too far down. They had two young men doing market research for a couple of years in Tokyo. Their approach was terribly arrogant. They were assembling material to prove that Japan was a market ready to receive Marks and Spencers'

investment, rather than the other way around. I remember one of them saying to me, when I ran through our promotional work with the British Knitwear and Clothing Export Council: 'Once we're here, there won't be any more of those missions.' I asked why. He said, 'Because we will decide what gets sold from the UK. We won't need any of those Shetland hill farmers.'

At the very end of this process we had a visit by Sir Rick Greenbury, then Chairman of M&S. One of the Marks and Spencers managers said to me privately, 'When the Ambassador meets Sir Rick, could he encourage him to see Japan as an important market?' And I replied, 'But you've been doing detailed research into this market for the last two years, what do you mean he might not think it's important?' He said, 'Well, we're not certain that he really likes Japan, we think he's a bit antipathetic. We'd like someone to encourage him to look at it more favourably.' I said, 'Can't you say this to him?' He said, 'Oh, no! We couldn't do that, we wouldn't dare to. But maybe the Ambassador could?' In due course, they decided not to invest. Shortly afterwards, for other reasons of course, the Marks and Spencers share price went for a time into freefall and Sir Rick Greenbury was removed. I wasn't entirely surprised. From my limited exposure, it struck me as a very curious corporate culture.

The political context was also interesting. I mentioned sterling's ejection from the European Monetary System. I remember that as the Major government staggered through this unhappy period with everything going wrong — the 'bastards' making difficulties for him on Europe, struggling with the aftermath of the collapse of sterling — I was meeting small and medium sized companies on trade missions, saying to me over drinks: 'I'm never supporting the Conservatives again after what they did on Black Wednesday. The amount of taxpayers' money wasted trying to prop up sterling. You won't catch me voting for this shower!' When the Labour landslide came in 1997, we could have seen it coming.

We had a great trip by Tony Blair, early on in his Prime Ministership in 1998. There was a heavy commercial element to his visit: he opened the British Industry Centre in Yokohama, an incubator centre for new investors which we had developed with the British Chamber of Commerce.

Others can talk more about the political significance of that commitment to Japan so early in the new administration. I remember that I was told by Number 10 that he wanted to have a meeting with ten brilliant young Japanese entrepreneurs, very New Labour.

Twenty years ago it was quite difficult to find ten brilliant young Japanese entrepreneurs. There were brilliant businessmen. There were brilliant entrepreneurs. But on the whole they tended not to be young. So I searched around for people who were young, or at least might look young. We got a good group together and had an excellent breakfast discussion. There were a lot of floral shirts and long hair on display. However, as I looked around the room and worked out how old everyone was, I realised that, collectively, this group of ten young Turks was somewhere between six and seven hundred years of age. But they were young at heart. No 10 were happy.

One tiny vignette from that visit has stayed in my mind. There was a big banquet at a very posh Tokyo hotel, for hundreds and hundreds of top Japanese business and political figures, to be addressed by Blair. We were all at a reception in an ante-room to enable him to meet the most important movers and shakers. Suddenly, the door burst open. In came Alastair Campbell's assistant, who said urgently to us, 'Is the Prime Minister here?' 'Yes, he is.' 'Has he got his mascara on?' I didn't know how to answer that question, but Charles Humfrey, who was Minister, was on the ball much faster than me and said, 'Yes, he does.' 'Thank God for that!'

An inconsequential anecdote sometimes captures a moment of change.

It was a marvellous job, which I greatly enjoyed.

### **Head of Hong Kong, later China Hong Kong Department, FCO, 1998–2000**

SR: Let's now move on to Hong Kong Department. So back to the FCO, you'd had just over four years in Tokyo and you were Head of Hong Kong Department, just after the 1997 handover.

DW: Yes, about nine months after the handover. I oversaw the merger of Hong Kong Department with the China section of what by then I think was called Far Eastern and Pacific Department in the summer of 1998.

The main responsibility of the residual Hong Kong desk was working with the new Consulate General in Hong Kong, monitoring developments after the handover, staffing the meetings of the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group (whose work continued) and producing the Foreign Office's six-monthly report to Parliament on Hong Kong. We merged that work with that of the China and Taiwan desks to produce a new department, which we called China Hong

Kong Department. The Chinese Embassy complained about the name. They said that it should be called China Department. But we told them that Hong Kong needed to be in the departmental name: the only nod we made in their direction was not to call it China and Hong Kong Department (and thus appear to question Hong Kong's status as a Special Administrative Region of China).

Relations with China, Hong Kong and Taiwan proceeded down separate, sometimes converging, paths. With China, the expansion of the relationship which had previously been dominated by the arrangements for the Hong Kong handover. With Hong Kong, discharging our continued responsibility to ensure that the Joint Declaration was observed and that the 'one country two systems' the Chinese government had committed itself to in the Hong Kong negotiations was protected. With Taiwan, the opening up of closer commercial and other links and a *de facto* political relationship without this being overt, because of course we did not recognise Taiwan as an independent country, we could have no formal diplomatic relations, no Embassy - our contacts were through a trade and cultural office in Taipei (which was a quasi-diplomatic mission by another name, now headed by a senior diplomat).

The aim was to manage three relationships so as to ensure that they did not conflict and complicate each other; and to maintain the *status quo*, while advancing the latter as effectively as we could.

The initial focus of the work was the Prime Minister's visit to China in the autumn of 1998, which established the basis of the new relationship between the two countries, and the setting up of the UK-China Forum, with Michael Heseltine as Chair, as a sort of 'Track Two' organisation, to do between the UK and China what the 2000 Group had done for the UK and Japan.

It was a complex process, because there was continued concern about human rights in China. We're having this conversation in late 2020, at a time when the balance internationally between engagement with and challenge towards China has radically changed. There is much more concern, indeed outrage, about the harshness of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control over, and treatment of, dissidents and ethnic groups than was the case under Jiang Zemin in the late 1990s. We are seeing a brutal clampdown on the Uighurs in Western China, as well as the Tibetans, threats against Taiwan, and infringement of agreed freedoms in Hong Kong.

The mood in 1998 and 1999 was different. There was a desire to see China, not yet then the second largest economy in the world, become a more responsible and predictable international stakeholder; and to encourage both the Chinese government and the Communist Party to see the benefits of the sort of legal structures and respect for individual human rights in the political and spiritual field that would encourage foreign investment. Of course there was continued concern about the treatment of Tibet and the CCP's reluctance to accept, for example, freedom of worship, as well as their suppression of what they described as the 'cult' of the Falun Gong. So while I was there for two years during which our aim was to 'greatly improve' the relationship, there were always tensions below — sometimes above — the surface that made this more difficult.

SR: Did you have much contact with the Chinese Embassy in London?

DW: Oh yes, pretty constantly. We had a lot of Chinese Government visitors. But also on a regular basis as we moved towards the State Visit of Jiang Zemin in the autumn of 1999, which I'll talk about later.

The Chinese Embassy maintained regular contact with us, socially as well as politically. The avuncular Ambassador Ma Zhengang was in charge at that time. They would regularly come and complain when we did something for the Taiwanese that seemed to them to be pushing the relationship towards a more formal political status; similarly when we did something with the Tibetans that they objected to. When I'd been dealing with China eight or nine years previously, political leaders in Britain didn't meet the Dalai Lama. But when he came to London in 1999, Tony Blair did see him, as a spiritual figure: the formal status of the visit was that of a faith leader calling on a political leader, so as not to compromise the complex status of Tibet in UK Government eyes at that time (which was to recognise Chinese suzerainty rather than sovereignty over the region – an archaic distinction which we finally abandoned ten years later).

I saw non-governmental organisations pretty regularly. We maintained close links with the major NGOs and Tibetan support groups. I always made myself available to talk through the issues with them and listen politely and sympathetically to the concerns they expressed and ensured that these informed the formal human rights dialogue we had with the Chinese. Naturally, we wanted to ensure that this was more than simply *pro forma* lip service. There was inevitably constant frustration that it didn't automatically lead to direct outcomes on specific individuals.

We had a very effective junior minister responsible for China at that time, Derek Fatchett, who died very suddenly in the spring of 1999. He and I had been on a trip to China only a few weeks previously and his death was a terrible shock. He had complete mastery of all the detailed aspects of the relationship: he was a very, very impressive minister to work for. His successor, John Battle, was a nice man but less focused and organised and a bit more mercurial in some of his judgements.

Robin Cook was Secretary of State. He had, I think, been burned by the public criticism of the 'ethical foreign policy' at the outset of his Foreign Secretaryship, and was ashamed of a policy towards China that observed the language on human rights but was easy to present as one of compromising on these issues in order to develop commercial relations with a rising economic power. He was reluctant either to overturn it, because this was a policy very strongly made from Number 10, or to allow his fingerprints to be on the policy if he could possibly avoid it. So there was a sense in which I knew we were not going to get very much political cover from the Secretary of State, even if we had strong support from the Minister of State.

I remember once having a meeting with Robin Cook, where he was telling us we needed to be doing more with the NGOs. And I said, 'It would be good if we could actually get them into your diary, Foreign Secretary. It's proving very hard to get a meeting organised for you with the major human rights organisations.' He said, 'I'm delighted to hear it!' There was a touch of Pontius Pilate, I'm afraid.

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SR: Good morning, David. It's 9 November 2020. There were some extra subjects you wanted to talk about.

DW: Yes. Firstly, the residual work on Hong Kong that we did in the six monthly reports to Parliament on developments in Hong Kong. They accompanied the regular meetings of the Sino/British Joint Liaison Group (JLG) every three/four months, alternately in the UK, Hong Kong and London, to monitor the implementation of the Joint Declaration.

The question was raised, certainly by the Embassy in Beijing, as to whether the six monthly reports should themselves cease at the end of the work of the Joint Liaison Group, but we decided that it would be important to continue to report to Parliament. And indeed, the reports continue still and are available on the FCDO's website. On the whole, during my

time as Head of the Department, our reports confirmed that the Chinese were continuing to observe the letter and the spirit of the Joint Declaration and that the commitment to preserve 'one country, two systems' was being respected.

Issues arose all the time, particularly in relation to the legal structures that remained in Hong Kong with the Court of Final Appeal and the Court's rulings on issues of political sensitivity, like the Right of Abode, the ability of Hong Kong not to have to accept immigrants from the mainland, the question as to whether the Court derived its authority from the National People's Congress, in terms of the Chinese government's signature of the Joint Declaration. But the consensus at that time was that the Chinese had no interest in disturbing the status quo that they had agreed to in the Joint Declaration.

And the British Government's aim was to build a new relationship with China, which did not exclude continued pressure on human rights and the treatment of the Tibetans but nonetheless opened the door to a potential partnership rather than an adversarial relationship. There was a mutual interest in ensuring that Hong Kong did not become a cause of tension in this relationship, which meant that there was a shared objective in observing the letter and the spirit of the Joint Declaration. We were encouraged by the high degree of autonomy which the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region continued to observe, not least at a time of economic and financial instability with the Asian economic downturn in 1997/1998, and the ability of Hong Kong to manage its fiscal affairs in a very volatile economic environment.

Much of my work was ensuring that we were holding the balance between these competing priorities correctly and reporting honestly and transparently to Parliament about what was going on. Having re-read the reports that we wrote for this interview, I'm reassured that we covered the ground pretty comprehensively.

There were two major events during my time in the Department. The first was the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in the air strikes against Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War, in May 1999. This was accidental: NATO bombers, American, not British, hit the Chinese Embassy because of faulty target co-ordinates and a number of people were killed.

We went into an intense period of difficulty with the Chinese government over not only the bombing itself, but the terms in which we tried to make restitution for it. There was a tension between our desire to apologise in appropriate terms to the Chinese and prevent this tragic incident damaging the wider relationship and not compromising the objectives of the

NATO combat operation. The Chinese did not make it easy for us. Although British military forces were not responsible for the damage and loss of life in the Chinese Embassy, we were a much easier target for the Chinese government seeking to assuage popular opinion in China than the Americans were. So it was our Embassy which was stoned and it was our diplomatic contacts which were cut off and it was our Prime Minister who was assailed for not having apologised in sufficiently grovelling terms to the Chinese. We were in the doghouse for a period and it always takes a bit of time to find ways of getting back to normal service, which we eventually did. It was a difficult couple of months.

SR: What was Robin Cook's reaction?

DW: I remember being summoned to his office in the middle of the crisis to be asked what we should be doing to deal with the situation and help him to improvise ideas — special envoys, diplomatic contacts and so forth, at a time when it was not obvious that the Chinese were prepared to talk to us. He was concerned to limit damage as far as possible. He hosted a lunch for a senior Chinese visitor as the relationship began to be restored.

I've already spoken about Robin Cook's desire to distance himself from policy towards China. We saw this more dramatically, I suppose, with the State Visit of Jiang Zemin, the co-ordination of the preparations for which – and the aftermath - dominated my last nine months in the Department.

The State Visit, which took place in October 1999, had been lined up well before I joined the Department: the invitation had been extended at the end of 1997. But the Foreign Secretary made clear that he wanted nothing to do with any of the planning.

The preparations were a complete nightmare. The Chinese Embassy had no idea what they wanted by way of content. It's normal for a State Visit to be organised around certain set pieces: the welcoming ceremony, a banquet at Buckingham Palace, another banquet in the City of London, a return banquet at the receiving Embassy. Events in the rest of the programme are meant to symbolise, in one way or another, the nature of the relationship. We wanted to put stuff into the programme reflecting the desire to build a commercial relationship. We knew also that Jiang Zemin was a man of cultural interests, a lover of English literature, particularly Shakespeare, so we wanted to include something appropriate there as well. We wanted also to include an opportunity to talk about or at least advertise the potential for higher education contacts.

But the Embassy officials were extraordinarily insular. Partly because, other than at Ambassadorial level, they didn't really get outside Portland Place very much to engage with the wider world in the UK as an Embassy ought to - they tended to commune with themselves, analysing press cuttings, sending reports reflecting media views back to Beijing in a rather hermetically sealed way. And partly because, to be fair, they were terrified of getting it wrong. The risks of making a mistake for them would have been catastrophic.

So they came up with no practical ideas whatsoever, and all the ones that we came up with were rejected by them because they were too complicated or they didn't understand what we meant. At No 10's insistence, for example, we offered to organise an excursion to the Millennium Dome, a great New Labour project, but the practical idea of taking them over what was essentially then still a building site full of piles of bricks was – understandably – not attractive.

Eventually, we laid on an event at the Globe Theatre on the South Bank, a short Shakespearean performance with music. This was beautifully done by Mark Rylance, who I knew had grave reservations about it because of his concern over human rights, but did not seek to embarrass the Government, and behaved with great integrity throughout. We also organised a trip to Cambridge, where Jiang Zemin made a dull speech about the future of China and the world.

But the major problem that we encountered — and this became apparent when we got closer to the date of the visit — was the inevitability of protests. The Chinese authorities were very concerned about any protests that might represent some sort of public humiliation for the head of state. They made clear that this would be an unforgivable diplomatic transgression. But we were equally clear that there could be no question of preventing people's legitimate right to protest.

I recall first really beginning to understand this tension at the pre-visit press conference, in which I took part with Dickie Arbiter, the Queen's Press Secretary, and Kim Darroch, then Head of News Department. The journalists' questions focused on the possibility of demonstrations: elsewhere in Europe these had got close to Jiang and had made the Chinese very angry. I saw that the headlines were going to be either: 'Jiang Zemin's visit disrupted and Britain embarrassed by demonstrations' or 'Demonstrations suppressed and freedom of speech denied'. This meant that the visit became a tightrope along which one had to walk: we could not allow the visit to be derailed, but nor could freedom to protest be compromised.

I saw this at first hand outside the British Museum, where Jiang was to open the new Chinese galleries with the Queen. The demonstrators had been placed by the police right opposite the main entrance in Montague Place. A Chinese official stormed up to me and the Queen's Assistant Private Secretary two minutes before the parties were due to arrive, to say, 'This is outrageous. The demonstrators are too close. The President is not coming.' And we said, 'Well, that's a pity because the Queen is coming, so it will be a bit one-sided.' We called his bluff. The party arrived, the crowds shouted, an egg was thrown and missed, the party went into the museum and everything went smoothly.

One additional point for historical completeness. We were scrupulous in ensuring that the demonstrators were allowed to demonstrate. We couldn't tell the police where to put them: this had to be an operational decision. There was however one point I was very worried about, which was the possibility of demonstrators disrupting the welcoming ceremony on Horse Guards Parade. And I did recommend avoiding this risk by not opening the ceremony to the public. I was told firmly by the Palace that the Queen disapproved of anything which restricted access and therefore everything would go ahead as it normally did. It passed off perfectly.

The visit itself was completely successful in the terms we had set out for it. But there was an aftermath. In one or two places, the demonstrators said they had been moved on or moved back by the police from getting too close to Jiang Zemin. This became a story which was picked up mischievously and distorted by some Opposition politicians, as the Foreign Office trying to suppress demonstrations by instructing the police to restrict access. There were allegations that there had been some sort of 'conspiracy', there were attempts to discover the secret notes of meetings with the police etc. None of this was true, and some of the allegations were ludicrous: one MP said that the police had turned London into Tiananmen Square (in reality, just sixteen demonstrators had been arrested and released without charge). But the story ran on for some time in the press and Parliament.

I found that frustrating because we had acted properly. However, I came to understand that it is not enough to act properly; you have to be sure that the records show that you're acting properly. And you have to be armed against the possibility that what you have done may be distorted and misrepresented in some way. I dare say it's never too late to learn this lesson. I had a superb team in the Department handling the detail, and we were well supported and

helped by senior officials: John Battle was also very supportive. But it was quite a grinding time.

The Chinese Embassy had been, as I say, pretty dreadful to deal with before and during this period. But I was very touched by something that happened a few weeks afterwards. My father had been very ill that autumn. He was in his 80s and had had a stroke and a bad fall. Each night after I left work, I would drive to the hospital to see him. I was essentially watching him die: this happened finally just before the State Visit. I never mentioned this to the Embassy but afterwards the Political Counsellor phoned me up. They had heard about my bereavement from someone else in the Foreign Office, and wanted to express their condolences and apologise for how difficult it must have been for me, and how they realised that they would have contributed to that. I replied that it was extremely kind of them, and they shouldn't feel that they had to apologise - when you're going through grief, it's good to have something else to concentrate on. I thought it was a very kind and human touch.

The State Visit had its lighter moments, not least Jiang's propensity to burst into song, which he liked to do on certain occasions. He had a nostalgic and sentimental attachment to old light opera and musical songs he remembered from his youth. At the Chinese Embassy banquet on the last night, quite a jolly affair with a certain demob-happy atmosphere, he got into a sing-song with Betty Boothroyd, the Speaker, and the two of them did an old operetta number, 'When Our Hearts Were Young And Gay', with the Queen looking on. I'm forbidden to describe the expression on Her Majesty's face.

I haven't really talked about my bosses. I was working with Tony Galsworthy, Ambassador in Beijing and Andrew Burns, Consul-General in Hong Kong. In London, I reported to Robert Cooper, who was Assistant Under- Secretary for the Asia/Pacific.

SR: A stellar team!

DW: Yes, all excellent to work with. I much enjoyed working with Robert. Not everybody found his manner easy, but I really enjoyed the discipline of working for someone with a superbly organised and incisive mind, who gave his Heads of Departments a structure and focus for our work, and delegated with total clarity. I found it a very good experience.

**Director, Trade Partners UK, British Trade International, later UK Trade and Investment (UKTI), 2000–04**

SR: Let's now move on to your next job in London working on trade. Did you ask to go outside the Office on secondment?

DW: I went to work for British Trade International: it later became UK Trade and Investment. I was effectively head-hunted by David Wright, the Chief Executive, who had been Ambassador in Tokyo for the second half of my time as Commercial Counsellor: we had worked closely together on trade promotion at that time. David had throughout his career given a much higher priority to business support work from Embassies than many of his peers. He had been chosen to set up UK Trade and Investment in late 1999 and was brought back from Tokyo a little early do that. He mentioned to me that there were various jobs coming up at the Director/Under-Secretary level in UKTI and wondered if I was interested.

I need to set the context first. Trade promotion was the responsibility of the DTI, although it was mainly done abroad, in Embassies and High Commissions, by Foreign Office staff. Attempts had been made, through the Joint Export Promotion Directorate, to co-ordinate this more coherently. But there was constant pressure from business, particularly the CBI under Colin Marshall, ex-British Airways, to adopt a more strategic approach.

This was partly to improve the overall quality of services. But it was also because the Foreign Office tended to see trade promotion as an aspect of public diplomacy. Every time the Government wanted to advertise the commercial opportunities in a new and exciting market, hundreds of businessmen were dragooned to get on a jumbo jet with the President of the Board of Trade or the Prime Minister. Export campaigns were always being announced for different countries. It was all incoherent, confusing and poorly attuned to the needs of companies or industry groups.

Richard Wilson, Secretary to the Cabinet, wrote a report on this which recommended the establishment of a unified, Foreign Office-DTI organisation, initially called British Trade International. In due course, this became a separately (and not very successfully) branded trade promotion body called Trade Partners UK. When this merged with the part of the DTI dealing with inward investment, it became UK Trade and Investment.

The organisation was physically situated in the DTI, where I went to work, and made up of Foreign Office and DTI staff. Some FCO staff were on secondment to the DTI, others were in positions on the FCO establishment.

I worked there for four years. For the first two, I was the Director for the Business Group, which dealt with industrial business sectors. I then became Director for the International Group, which dealt with the country market desks. As Director of Business Group, I was a Foreign Office official on secondment to the DTI. As Director of International Group I was in a Foreign Office established position. But we were all in theory part of a joint Department.

I rehearse all this boring administrative detail because it was perhaps inevitably a bit Heath Robinson - complicated and stuck together with bits of Sellotape and string. UKTI had been set up to bring coherence to trade promotion. But it didn't have control of all the budgets it needed in order to do that. It controlled DTI budgets for trade missions, trade fairs, work to promote infrastructure development and support for companies abroad, projects, plants and so on. But it didn't have total control over all Foreign Office trade promotion resources i.e. the salaries and established positions in Embassies of people in commercial sections. Nor did we have adequate DTI accommodation, as David Wright had been promised.

So we were building a new organisation with one hand, sometimes both hands, tied behind our back. And we were trying to change the culture of an aspect of governmental work which was quite conservatively regarded within the DTI and not very well understood within the FCO.

I have to say I found it absolutely fascinating. It was one of the most stimulating periods of my career. I tend not to complain about the jobs I've done. But this was a very, very interesting job.

First, Business Group. This was a bit of a slapped-together Director's position. I had a section which dealt with infrastructure projects abroad, another which dealt with other sectors where government sponsored exports, like healthcare. A third team was a sort of strategy-setting planning staff, developing a kind of methodology of how Government should support specific sectors, how you chose which trade association you should work with and so on. Then I had two sections in Glasgow, one dealing with oil and gas exports (the old Offshore Supplies Office set up during the North Sea oil boom in the 1970s, originally in Aberdeen),

and one dealing with trade missions and trade fairs. I was up in Glasgow at least twice a month.

Trade promotion staff had enormous pride in their work. But there was a lot of silo thinking.

For example, our job was to help companies who wanted to export. If you worked on a particular country desk, you wanted them to go to your country, you wanted to get money to support a trade mission to your market. Anything which got in the way of that objective was to be deplored. I once said to a country desk officer, 'Maybe the companies on your trade mission would be better off going to country x: there might be more of a market for their goods there than in the country you're looking after?' And he said, 'No, I want them to go to mine. I don't want them to go anywhere else. That's my objective!' I thought this couldn't be right: we weren't even beginning to think about what was in the interests of the company.

When I'd been on my training course before becoming Commercial Counsellor in Tokyo in 1993, each DTI department dealing with trade had solemnly told us that they were the centre of the operation. What mattered was country expertise. No, what mattered was knowledge of the specific business sector. No, the bit of the central administration dealing with the budgets was in charge. None of them seemed to be talking to anybody else: all of them thought they were the centre of the web. It was that dysfunctionality that UKTI was set up to try and overcome.

I spent my first two years trying to systematise a lot of export promotion activity along the lines of what made sense for individual industrial sectors. Ambassadors, for example, would complain that they couldn't get approval for trade missions to come to their countries. And we would say, 'Because your country is not a priority for that particular trade association. The trade association dealing with healthcare products, or knitwear and clothing, or food and drink, they have certain countries that they want to focus on. And if yours isn't on that list, we shouldn't be spending time and resource in trying to change businesses' minds.'

The aim was not to sponsor trade promotion for its own sake, but to have a system which provided tailored advice, especially for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) that might be new to exporting, which would improve their competitiveness, and where we might actually make a difference.

UKTI set up nine offices in the English regions: the devolved administrations had their own export bodies. In each, a UKTI team worked with Business Links, one- stop shops for SMEs

to develop greater business professionalism. We were working with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), who were themselves often in flux. I remember on a visit to one, calling successively on three officials who all looked as if their minds were elsewhere; I went off for a cup of coffee, and came back to discover that the second had called the first and the third in to see her and sacked them.

Fairs and missions, in Glasgow, was a complex area. I had a strong team of DTI officials working there. Trade associations depended on putting company groups together for trade fairs and missions: getting government support for this activity could be the difference between keeping afloat and going under. And so if we had a budget which allowed us to have, say, 300-400 missions a year and however many hundred delegations at trade fairs, that budget would inevitably be heavily over-subscribed. If trade associations were unsuccessful in their bids, that would have a serious impact on their viability. And they would lobby ruthlessly if they wanted the decisions reversed.

This was a pre-algorithm era, but we took these decisions against carefully worked-out criteria. Overturning decisions as a result of lobbying was a danger area, as we didn't want everyone else on the list applying for a judicial review of the process. I'd never been anywhere near this aspect of government — the disbursement of large government budgets to small organisations: it was an interesting discipline to learn.

One of the other reasons UKTI was set up was that Ministers had lost control of the country prioritisation process. We'd ended up with 80 markets where we were running country-specific campaigns — far too many.

We decided to concentrate on a smaller number of countries. This meant that we had to look at the trade promotion budget holistically. Officials covering countries in Central Asia, for example, might complain that they were not getting a look-in on the country-specific budgets that were being shared out. But nobody was counting, in this process, the money that was going into countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan from the oil and gas team in Glasgow, because that was another part of UKTI and the two parts of the organisation tended not to talk to each other.

This was a complicated culture change process. We were not brilliant at it. At our regular conferences of our commercial managers from around the network, they would complain that

all we were doing was berating them for not being more strategic, rather than inspiring them with get-up-and-go.

Over the four years I was there, I felt we made good progress towards establishing the *raison d'être* of UKTI so that people inside and outside the organisation could understand it. But it was difficult initially. A staff poll a year in, I recall, found that only 19% of UKTI officials had any confidence in what we were trying to do. A businessman on the UKTI Board said to me – ‘A fifth of all staff at the outset of a radical reorganisation programme? Not a bad basis for change.’

The British Trade International Board had been a sort of continuation of the British Overseas Trade Board, but more operational and with a number of impressive senior figures on it: David John, who'd been Chairman of British Oxygen, Richard Turner, Group Marketing Director at Rolls Royce, Peter Mason, Chief Executive and later Chairman of Amec. These men had an absolute grasp of what we were trying to do, and the importance of our delivering discipline to a process which companies had come to see as incoherent.

Industry support could be double-edged, as I found when I moved to become Director of the International Group. We had appointed Area Advisory Groups for each part of the world. They were supposed to tell us how to export more effectively to Japan, India, Eastern Europe, Africa and so on. Of course these advisory groups had simply become lobbyists for resources. ‘We should spend more on India.’ ‘Nonsense, we should spend more on Latin America!’ I had to close them down — quite a complex process — because they were adding virtually no value to anyone's work.

But I found working with senior business figures educative, not least because it enabled me to learn how business works, and understand better how business leaders make judgements. I sometimes felt that officials could be naive about this. There was a tendency among some of my colleagues to imagine that businesses were sitting there, wondering how government could help them, not least to identify which overseas markets they ought to be looking at. My experience of talking to hundreds of directors of small and medium-sized companies belied this.

We were, as I boringly reminded everybody every time I spoke to any corporate FCO audience, a part of the Foreign Office. Kingsgate House, where I worked, at the bottom end of Victoria Street (now knocked down), and the regional English network of UKTI offices

which I travelled around regularly were technically a part of the Foreign Office footprint. When I turned up from time to time at the PUS's morning meeting, I was there as an Under Secretary in the Foreign Office. That concept eluded a lot of people. Friends would occasionally say, 'Wouldn't you rather come back into the main building to do some real diplomatic work?' There was a sense of not understanding that the work we were doing was part of the Foreign Office's presentation itself to the world. I probably took too purist a view of this, and allowed myself to become frustrated.

I think David Wright was even more frustrated: he felt that he was neither supported properly by the Foreign Office nor by the DTI in terms of the resources needed for proper accommodation and administrative support. This also reflected a feeling in the FCO that commercial work of this kind couldn't be that important. There is a Foreign Office assumption that if something is really important, the Foreign Office will be in charge of it, and if the Foreign Office isn't in charge of it, by definition, it probably won't be that important.

The Foreign Office culture I've previously described, which regarded commercial work as a little below the salt, changed a little with the Wilson Review. But the Foreign Office remained ambivalent. There were practical reasons for this. It feared a 'Balkanisation' of its resources. If it had to share control over the resources that applied to commercial work, would this also apply to, say, visas, where it shared responsibility with the Home Office, and other areas of activity which it undertook for other government departments? There was a danger that already extremely strained resources would be cut even further. This lay behind the equivocal reaction to UKTI's attempts to assert itself as something the Foreign Office should both own and share.

However, I found the process of getting to know the business landscape in Britain through regular trips to Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff, Belfast, exciting, stimulating, and educational. For example, all DTI Directors had to spend a week with a company: I went off for five days with Fullers, the brewers, based in Chiswick. It was a fascinating experience: sitting in a medium sized, well-managed firm, then family-run, listening to how it took business decisions, how it managed its resources, how it resolved the sort of inter-departmental problems we struggled with in government, how it prioritised training (everything from pub cellar maintenance to conflict resolution for bartenders), what it did daily to continue to be successful, competitive and profitable. As the operational

manager said to me after a crisis was resolved on the bottling line one day: ‘You are as strong as your weakest link’, adding (and quoting Aristotle) ‘We are what we habitually do’.

We suffered also from wavering ministerial focus. Export promotion tended to be a political graveyard: few incumbents moved on to greater things. In Tokyo, we had had a powerful trade minister in the form of Richard Needham. Richard could be very difficult, sometimes savage with officials. But he was a galvanising force in terms of getting us to understand how you can do things differently. His successors were not as strong.

We were fortunate initially to have two Ministers in the Foreign Office and DTI who were engaged in the detail and supportive of the work that was going on: Brian Wilson and Dick Caborn. David Wright lobbied hard for us to have one Minister, sitting in both Departments. And indeed after Brian and Dick moved on to other things, we got Liz Symons. But the joint minister approach never really worked. It proved difficult for the minister to sit equitably in both Departments simultaneously. And we found with Liz Symons, and even more with her successor Mike O’Brien, a reluctance to engage with the sort of questions I’ve described. I dare say much of this work seemed arcane from the point of view of ministers worried, as we moved into the second half of the New Labour years, about the government's reputation, its political support in certain areas, and how vulnerable they might be to any change of mood in No 10. This then led to the inevitable danger that Ministers become easy to lobby for difficult decisions to be overturned on grounds which seem to officials to lack robustness. And they sometimes then fail to support officials who are trying to make complex administrative judgments.

Robin Cook and Stephen Byers were our first two Secretaries of State, but Cabinet-level focus only occurred under Jack Straw and Patricia Hewitt, who were more engaged with the detail, philosophy and structure: a lot of the difficulties we were experiencing between the two Departments began to be ironed out at a meeting we had at the Foreign Secretary’s residence at Chevening in 2003. David Wright had by then retired, and Stephen Brown, who had been High Commissioner in Singapore, had succeeded him as Chief Executive. We launched UK Trade and Investment properly that October: I left in early 2004.

Over my four years there, we moved towards greater coherence, we saw a stronger corporate sense develop, as well as greater professionalism. In lots of ways, I felt it was a positive experience, even if we were pushing water uphill much of the time. But it was always ultimately going to be a relatively fragile structure, sitting in government between two

Departments and never wholly owned by either. The fact that it kept going for a decade and a half before being subsumed in the Department of International Trade after the Brexit referendum was not a bad achievement.

Three points for completeness. We were involved in the aftermath of the Iraq War, and there is a footnote in the Chilcot Report about this, referring to a document I wrote in December 2003. I pointed out in that memorandum that it took some time initially to persuade ministers that helping UK business was a legitimate objective that the government should be seen to be promoting actively after the Iraq conflict.

There were elements in business that were very gung-ho at that time, arguing aggressively that the government should be supporting British business to help the reconstruction. They were influenced by the belief that the likes of Bechtel and Halliburton in the United States would not be backward in pressing the US Administration (and the provisional administration in Iraq) to support their interests. They wanted Britain to follow suit. There were other business leaders who thought it was quite wrong to be thinking in those terms quite as overtly during what promised to be a bloody and difficult conflict.

There were moments of tension in meetings with the business community before and during the fighting. My job was to explain the government's position. I was struck when I did so that they were surprised by the line in my brief that the purpose of our invasion was not regime change. Their assumption was that the government's objectives were absolutely of a piece with those of the US. It followed also, of course, that ministers were concerned not to be seen to be focusing on the expectation of commercial advantage further down the line.

As I made clear in the memo, the Departments responsible for overseeing coordination on post-conflict Iraq made clear at an early stage that UK commercial interests were a lower priority than other aspects of reconstruction. This also meant that the contribution the private sector could make to post-conflict reconstruction was less well registered. It was all further complicated by Brian Wilson's leaving the government around that time and the Prime Minister's immediately appointing him as a special envoy to pursue reconstruction opportunities in Iraq which was, of course, Mike O'Brien's job as Minister for Trade. However, we did what we could within the constraints of government policy.

Secondly, I had an intriguing view of the run-up to the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, to include the ten Central and Eastern European accession countries. As part of the

constant need to see trade promotion in terms of haranguing business about export opportunities, we came under pressure from the Cabinet Office to make more of a splash about all the additional markets that were being created within the EU. I questioned this – the ten new countries amounted to a much smaller proportion of the EU economy than Spain and Portugal had in 1986. But my objections were ignored. When the Cabinet Committee paper came round in draft, it included a sentence saying that the A10 countries would increase the size of the EU economy ‘substantially’. I crossed out ‘substantially’ and substituted ‘by about 5%’. When I saw the paper in final form, I was amused to see that it read ‘by as much as 5%’.

And a word on the Duke of York, who was appointed Special Representative for Trade in 2001. The original intention was that he would take over the role that the Duke of Kent had held as Vice-Chairman of the Board of Trade, in which capacity he had led missions, undertaken visits to overseas markets and played a helpful presentational role promoting overseas trade. I saw the Duke of York occasionally during that period, at home, not abroad. With some UKTI business groups he could be good: energising and encouraging. With others, he could hit precisely the wrong note and be crass and laddish. I thought also, when I saw him at closer quarters, that there was a naivety: he wanted to be engaged in making a difference, but did not always understand how some business figures wanted to exploit his name and role for their own business objectives, which might not always be completely aligned with the government’s objectives. I felt that there was an area of risk there which was never sufficiently managed. Maybe it was impossible to manage it.

SR: Very diplomatic, David!

### **Director, Human Resources, FCO, 2004–07**

SR: Good morning. It’s 30 November 2020.

So today, David, we come on to what you describe as the most difficult job that you had in your whole career, as Director of Human Resources.

DW: Yes. I volunteered for it. I was keen to return to this area. I’d found my time in Personnel Policy Department 20 years previously very interesting. And I was always a little opinionated about the way in which we managed and appraised ourselves and developed careers. I was not one of those diplomats who thought that time in the Administration was a

distraction from the essential purpose of their career. I found it intellectually stimulating. So when the job fell vacant in early 2004, I applied and was successful.

The complexity of the problems with which we were dealing during that time, and the high incidence of difficult individual cases, some of which ended up being handled by the Director of Human Resources personally, made this job difficult. You are dealing with individuals at the most acute point of their careers; you're dealing with people who have pinned their hopes on specific outcomes, who are desperately disappointed not to have fulfilled what they believed to be their potential. You will therefore be dealing with people who may have become profoundly disaffected from their employer. You're also sometimes dealing with people who have transgressed in some way, and where the relationship of mutual trust has irretrievably broken down. You may be dealing with people who are at the end of their psychological tether. The HR person to whom they are talking is there to protect the interests of the Foreign Office, as well as being part of a process of helping individuals who are in difficulties: they may not always be seen, shall we say, as a human being.

SR: That's quite some introduction, David!

DW: Yes. This is an area, of course, where individual cases are engraved on my mind. But obviously we can't talk about them. So how would you like me to start?

SR: Well, it was a period of great change wasn't it? Was that finance driven, resource driven largely?

DW: It was driven by finance. But the financial constraints brought home the ways in which the system that had developed over many years was unsustainable.

I was fortunate. I inherited a new system which my predecessor, Alan Charlton, had introduced in 2003. This had fundamentally changed the organisation of HR, which had been a very centralised personnel function. Individual postings were decided centrally.

Individual careers were developed, insofar as they were developed, centrally. The business needs of the different parts of the Foreign Office — posts abroad, Directorates at home — were delivered by different parts of HR dealing with different parts of the Office, providing people for jobs and helping to sort out problems as they went along. There were Selection Boards at every level, which made decisions on the deployment of individual FCO officials around the world. It was very resource-intensive.

Alan introduced a new system. This embedded human resource managers in individual Directorates within the Office. These people helped to address HR-related problems and advised line managers on HR procedures. A call centre was set up in the Old Admiralty Building, where central HR was situated, called HR Direct. This dealt with routine enquiries from people around the network, usually to do with basic procedures and rules, helping people through the system and so on.

This had just got up and running when I took over as HR Director in February 2004. There were teething difficulties: there always are when you set up a new system like that, as people get used to it. But over time, it became, I think, an example of best practice in dealing with individual problems efficiently and cost-effectively.

As you say, the 2004 resource constraints were extremely difficult for us. The Spending Review settlement required us to find £25 million worth of cashable savings. That meant that we had to reduce our overall staff complement by about 350. The Foreign Office was never a very large institution — at that time, we had fewer than 6,000 UK-based staff worldwide. It also meant that we had to downsize the Human Resources Directorate, which had grown massively over the years - we had, I think, around 280 people when I became Director, a ratio to the FCO as a whole of around one HR person for every 24 FCO officials. In business and industry, the ratio was about 1: 100. This was clearly also completely unsustainable.

We found savings in HR of around 30%, just under a third of the positions in Human Resources. We had a project run by one of my assistant HR Directors, Simon Pease, which did a brilliant job at finding savings and pushing them through. Across the Foreign Office as a whole, while we had tried to recruit fewer people so as to keep in sync with reduced cash levels, there had been very little effective control over the creation of jobs in the Foreign Office over the previous decade or so. This meant that we had about 200 more jobs in the Office than we could fill with the people available to us. And around 300 to 350 more people on our books than we could afford to pay from the reduced paybill that had been devolved to us.

That was the basic conundrum that I found myself dealing with when I took over as Human Resources Director.

SR: So how did you deal with that? What was your approach?

DW: I spent time learning about it and understanding parts of the Office that I'd never worked in or had any experience of. I was blessed with a strong slate of Assistant Directors and dedicated and committed HR staff in every part of the Directorate. It was a high-performing group of people. I learned much from them.

I became a member of the Foreign Office Board of Management. One of the most interesting aspects of the job was to see how the Board changed its culture and became a much more effective corporate body. When I joined it, it felt to me like a group of senior officials, all highly capable men — and they were all men at that time — the Directors General of their respective areas - political, Europe, economic, security, the Administration and so forth. A lot of the discussions on the difficult resource questions seemed to me to be top men brokering deals with each other over what they could or couldn't agree to in terms of resources. 'I'm not going to give up my Grade 5 while you keep your two Grade 7s.' Not a group of senior corporate managers accepting that there was a collective problem which needed to be solved collectively.

That changed radically over the three and a half years that I was on the Board, driven by the two Permanent Under-Secretaries during that time, Michael Jay and Peter Ricketts. There was a profound change of culture. This was assisted by our non-executive Directors (NEDs). We had had people from outside the FCO on the Board for several years: I dealt primarily with the two NEDs who were there for nearly all my time: Alison Platt from BUPA and Alistair Johnston from KPMG. Both made a tremendous contribution to helping us to balance respect for the unique structure of the Foreign Office, while at the same time thinking in terms of corporate management disciplines.

It was a very conservative culture in the Foreign Office then, and quite cerebral. There was an assumption that there were clever solutions to all these problems that did not require people to change their behaviour. Or if radical action really was unavoidable, it should be better communicated so that people either accepted it or didn't notice that it had happened.

You can confront a culture like that, or you can attempt to move people towards recognising that changes need to happen and that the world does not end as a result, frustrating and perhaps upsetting though the changes may be. And that radical surgery will be appropriate when the platform is burning. When it is smouldering, it may be necessary to take what Michael Jay used to call a cannier approach.

Corporate communication did get better: the Board got the wider leadership of the Office to own much of the change that was happening. The Leadership Conferences were introduced in 2005, I think. They brought all Heads of Mission and a lot of other people together once a year for an annual session which enabled us all to discuss the issues, understand them better, listen to Ministers explaining the political context, exchange ideas and get a sense of best practice around the network. These mechanisms over time – the first couple were heavy going - were very valuable.

A Senior Leadership Forum was also set up - the Board of Management at home, senior Heads of Mission from abroad, to do the same in smaller and more private sessions. This enabled discussion with the senior people who were delivering British objectives in very different political environments around the world, and could feed back to us what did and didn't work. The first few meetings of the Senior Leadership Forum (SLF) were difficult, however. There was resentment of change, of the then Secretary of State (Jack Straw)'s insistence on cultural change, and of the Administration's alleged spinelessness in going along with all of this. And the atmosphere was very un-diverse. I remember a photograph of the SLF which appeared in one of the corporate magazines of us all on the grand staircase of Lancaster House, 25 (mostly) portly, middle-aged white men beaming condescendingly down at the camera. Awful.

So that's the context. I'll run through some of the specific issues we dealt with, and say a word about some of the difficulties we encountered.

I mentioned the centralised Board system. The No.1 Board (of which I was the Secretary) met monthly to agree the highest level of appointments — the most senior Ambassadors, and officials in London at Director level and above. The No.2 Board, which I chaired, decided postings at Counsellor level. There were other Boards further down.

We wanted to retain an ability to manage the careers of our top (and most expensive) talent. But it was clear that line managers should play a much greater role in selecting people for specific roles. So we moved, over time, to a system of interviewing for jobs. It took a couple of attempts to get the Board to agree. I didn't marshal the arguments as well as I should have done on the first occasion, and the Board rightly challenged us to develop this thinking a little more comprehensively.

We began to introduce pilots and by the time I left HR, the principle was becoming embedded through the system. Few of us had ever been interviewed for anything after we'd passed the Civil Service interview to get into the institution in the first place. So getting people to think of how to handle themselves at an interview, even just recognising that the interview panel would be focusing on how to fill a specific slot, rather than how the job might help the interviewee develop their skills and experience, was quite a cultural shift.

Another issue was the idea of a 'Foreign Office career'. On the whole, we thought of ourselves as joining the Foreign Office and staying in the Foreign Office. We tended not to appoint people to jobs from outside the Foreign Office. Inward secondees were balanced with outward secondees. From time to time, people would go off to the Treasury or to the DTI or the Cabinet Office, as I had done. But there was a fear that outside the Office you would be forgotten, and that only inside the Office would you be visible.

But the nature of a Civil Service career was changing. People no longer entered a Government department and stayed until age 60. They went off to do other things: they joined the private sector for a time, managed projects, developed professional skills, moved from department to department, from agency to agency. The Foreign Office was more of a hermetically sealed entity. And while there were obvious reasons why that might be the case – after all, we were a separate Service, we had a separate Order in Council - it wasn't a healthy mind-set for young diplomats seeking to develop their careers in a context of a rapidly changing Whitehall.

We trawled more jobs outside the FCO. We set an example by trawling jobs at the highest level. When Michael Jay retired as Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS), we trawled within Whitehall for his successor, although in the event all the candidates who put their names forward were from the Foreign Office. Some strong internal candidates were seen by an interview panel chaired by Jack Straw, including Gus O'Donnell, the Cabinet Secretary, which appointed Peter Ricketts.

I learned subsequently that one of the reasons we didn't have non-FCO candidates was because there was cynicism in Whitehall that the Foreign Office was serious about opening itself up to competition in that way. Well, we were. Interchange with other government departments and Foreign Office openness to appointing from outside and encouraging its own staff to go outside has accelerated considerably since that period. But the idea of appointing business figures as Ambassadors, which Ministers re-discover as if for the first time every

few years, never really got going: we tried, and there were a few credible external candidates (for Consul-General positions rather than Ambassadorships), but on the whole the internal candidates were stronger. The pay is always a factor for external applicants.

We extended a system that had recently been introduced – at the First Secretary to Counsellor level - which made promotion conditional upon passing Assessment and Development Centres (ADCs). Gerry Reffo was the Assistant Director who made much of this happen. The exercises were similar to those at the Civil Service Selection Board.

This system met some initial opposition: people prefer relative certainty to uncertainty. But when evidence began to come through that staff who were assessed for their promotability in this way were better managers and leaders than those who were simply promoted on the basis of their annual appraisals, it was accepted.

We were moving towards continuing assessment of a person's skills throughout their career, in terms of managing people, money, time, projects as well as their potential as leaders of teams, groups, Directorates, Embassies of increasing size and complexity. One of the most important changes during this period was embedding a sense of how staff could be coached and developed into becoming effective leaders. We began to use the word 'leadership' more confidently. This was not all the work of HR: there were a growing number of people in the Office who understood and embraced this agenda, under the leadership of the PUS and increasingly the Board.

When I joined HR, the FCO had a compulsory retirement age of 60. The law changed in 2006 in line with the EU Directive, so as to make retirement on age grounds alone illegal before 65. We decided to abolish the retirement age completely. We were the second Department in Whitehall to do that, after Work and Pensions. We recognised that if we introduced a new age limit, there would inevitably be employment tribunal cases as we approached it: mistakes are always made as you try to administer changing procedures, and you end up in court.

So we decided that we might as well go for broke and abolish the whole principle. We went through our lists, and looked at all the people who would now be entitled to stay after 60. We found that there was a very wide range of skills and experience that we wanted to retain, although not everyone would necessarily want to stay, as the civil service pension age remained 60. Conversely, if there were people whom we didn't want to retain, we had to

address whatever questions related to their performance transparently. This was a very important shift of policy, which I was delighted that the Board embraced and against which there was no pushback from the wider network.

We tried to hardwire diversity into our work. This is an area where I feel that I did not do enough. We had some good officials working in this field and I appointed a Diversity Director from outside the Office, who helped us understand diversity not simply as a legal and social requirement, but as an enhancement of an organisation's effectiveness. We began a process of greater gender diversity at senior levels, but slowly. Looking back, I feel that I should have — using management consultants' language — applied more 'relentless focus'. The Office now has a better record, as far as we can measure these things metrically, and a more diverse professional culture.

We did introduce a greater emphasis on mentoring and coaching. We set up — Michael Jay was instrumental in this — leadership groups of young officials who could become role models for the sort of diversity we wanted to encourage in career development.

We did some work on job sharing and flexible hours. One problem was that the Foreign Office was always a long hours department. It proved difficult to shift people away from this. People work long hours in part because Ministers give them a lot to do. But it can also be a choice: they work long hours because they want to, even if they call this syndrome 'commitment to public service': it's the satisfaction of a job well done. It can be difficult to get people to say to themselves, 'Actually, I don't need to do this. I could prioritise. I could work differently.' I was as bad as anyone at this.

But how people behaved did not always reflect the values they pretended to have. My personal assistant worked flexible hours: I would look after myself from half-past three. I was intrigued by people ringing me up in the late afternoon and saying, 'Oh, I didn't want to speak to you. I only wanted to speak to your PA', and when I explained she worked flexibly, saying sarcastically 'Oh, isn't she lucky?' Another senior official demanded the introduction of more flexible structures that could be seen to facilitate diversity, yet told women on their staff that they needed to be careful how they were seen to be benefiting from them, lest senior officials questioned their commitment to the Office. Some people talked a good game in public, and were less virtuous in private.

Diversity in general is an area where I should like to have left a stronger record behind me: I feel a bit guilty.

SR: Why should you feel guilty? On gender diversity, we now have a strong cadre of senior women Ambassadors. The groundwork for that was laid in your time.

DW: Some of it may have been. As advertising men say, we may have created a sense of 'strategic buoyancy'. You set the ball rolling and 15 years later, everything in the garden is a little rosier. We did a bit on gender, much less on ethnicity, a little bit more on disability. I learned a great deal myself from mentoring a disabled officer.

We took a more rigorous approach to poor performance: we streamlined our procedures for people who were not doing their jobs well. Also disciplinary cases: you would think that this would be obvious for any institution, but there was still a sense in parts of the Foreign Office that when difficult cases arose, they could be handled 'diplomatically'. Of course if you don't handle them correctly and something goes wrong and you end up in court, it will be the compliance or not with the procedure for which the institution will be found liable, not the kindness of your heart or the cleverness with which you thought you had resolved the issue.

I had excellent employment lawyers to advise on individual cases. The Board were very supportive. I was struck by the naivety of some people who'd been out of London for a long time and had not grasped the way in which the wider culture had changed. I remember at one meeting of the Senior Leadership Forum, a senior Ambassador saying in horror when we were discussing early retirements, 'But this is appalling! We could end up in an employment tribunal.' And I said, 'Well, we are already, a lot of the time.' I think we had around 27 employment tribunals in my first three years in the department. A tiny number by Whitehall standards, but much higher than most people in the Foreign Office would have realised. We didn't lose any, as I recall: we wouldn't allow a case to go to tribunal unless we were confident that we would win it.

One last point about centralization. As I was clearing my cupboard towards the end of my time in HR, I discovered a piece of paper going back 10 years or more, a fascinating document purporting to analyse the career potential of all 500 members of the Senior Management Structure. It talked about how far they were likely to get promoted, what level they were likely to reach, those who would get to the old SMS levels 1-4, what jobs they might do. It was admirable, comprehensive and completely unrealistic. The idea that

everybody's career could be developed meticulously in this way, everybody could be assisted to find the right niche and the most brilliant and capable among the cadre would become the leaders of the Office – it was a fine ambition, but in an Office that had to shrink, become more diverse, more porous with the outside world ..? The idea that you could by fingertip control deliver this perfect system seemed to me for the birds.

I see that in my notes I've referred to 'the difficulties and the controversies'.

SR: Were there no high points as well, David?

DW: Great question! The real high point was feeling that I had contributed, with the help of my colleagues, and having benefited greatly from the reforms that Alan had introduced, to leaving behind a more professional and effective structure. And when you are successful in helping to create an environment in which individuals can develop their skills and have fulfilling careers, that is also a high point. I worked with some impressive and dedicated people. But HR is a less heroic job than some.

SR: It's also human nature that people are very quick to criticise and find fault, and they're quite slow to say thank you.

DW: I think that's true. I found that people did say thank you. Most people understood and were appreciative of the problems we were dealing with. All I will say that I was occasionally surprised at the level of abuse that we sometimes received when administering the rules. I was disturbed by some of the things that people said when the anger poured out. This is human nature. It's not specific to the Foreign Office, and I'm not saying that it was worse in the Foreign Office. But I think we tolerated it to a degree that no private sector company would have done at that time. I'm talking about a small number of cases.

Much of my work from mid-2004 focused on the need to reduce the size of the Senior Management Structure (SMS).

The assumption was that unless you were very unlucky, your career would last until 60. You might not be promoted indefinitely but there would be enough jobs at the top of the service for you to have a career which would sustain you until your age-linked retirement. With the squeeze on workforce numbers that wasn't sustainable.

We had around 500 people in the SMS, which we had to reduce to around 390, in order to ensure that we had the right number of candidates for a reduced number of jobs. We had

allowed jobs to proliferate in the years immediately past and SMS jobs were not necessarily allocated around the world in a logical fashion. An SMS Pay Band 3 (Director-General) head of mission might have an SMS 2 Deputy. An SMS 2 (Director) Head of Mission would have an SMS 1 Deputy. These gradings were not rigorously linked to the actual importance of the Post.

So we had to cut some senior jobs. When we realised this in mid-2004, Dickie Stagg (Director-General of Corporate Affairs) and I decided that there was no point in going ahead with the next scheduled monthly Number 2 Board, at which we were due to decide a large number of SMS 1 (Counsellor-level) deployments, as we had no idea how many of these jobs would survive, and we didn't want to assign people to jobs which were then immediately cut. I put round a note saying the No 2 Board would be postponed until we had assessed the implications of the spending review.

I had not realised that all hell would break loose. The Number 2 Board was a fixed point on the calendar every month. Everybody was always looking at what jobs were coming up, and who was going where. Suddenly, horror! Shockwaves went around the Office. It was salutary in the sense that everyone realised that we had resource constraints. But less so in that it instantly demoralised a lot of people. I remember Michael Jay, the PUS, was annoyed with us for having done it, as he thought, too crudely, although I still don't see what else we could have done.

Culling jobs was a prelude to reducing the size of the SMS. This meant that there would be a higher proportion of existing SMS officers for whom we could not guarantee a job to take them through to age 60. It was not a question of 'poor performers': the majority of these individuals were perfectly competent, indeed good, officers. But more had to leave than we were bringing into the SMS through Assessment and Development Centres. Otherwise, promotion would grind to a halt. There was also — although the Board was always diffident about making this link publicly — a need to ensure that the SMS became more diverse, particularly in gender terms.

This meant a lot of very difficult conversations with individuals. In a differently functioning system, this would have been done by line managers. But the tradition in the Foreign Office, with its centralised personnel functions, was that the person to whom senior staff came for guidance on how their careers were likely to develop was the HR Director. There was logic to that: the reason that the HR Director in the Foreign Office, unlike anywhere else in

Whitehall, tended not to be a professionally qualified personnel officer was that the FCO was a community and you needed somebody who knew more or less everyone in the senior structure and could talk to them realistically about their options. But like so much else in our traditional approach, this had to change.

Some conversations were not difficult: some people in their mid-50s had read the runes, and said: ‘Okay, the terms for early retirement are good. There are other things I'd like to do with my life before I'm too old to begin to do them.’

SR: Did you have extra money from the Treasury to do this?

DW: There were compulsory early retirement terms which were Whitehall-wide. They were generous. Later on, budgets tightened and they became less generous.

There were always questions about whether people could be allowed to retire early: the earlier the departure, the bigger the package. It was not always a matter of cost. Sometimes it would be necessary to say: ‘You're going to have difficulty getting another job: the competition is too strong. So you should take the package now.’ In other cases, we would want to keep people, because there would be jobs, even if not imminently, for which they would be relatively strong candidates. These would sometimes be fine judgements. But not everyone had a crucial skill or so high a level of widely deployable potential for us to say ‘no’ if they decided to take the financial incentive.

There was inevitably unhappiness. At the SMS level, many loyal, hard-working officials whose career expectations, in some cases, had been encouraged to an unrealistic degree were disappointed to have to leave. At lower levels, as we rolled out early retirement more widely, individuals who wanted to be allowed to start something new were upset to be forced to stay.

The conversations were sometimes difficult because the messages were sometimes unpalatable. Sometimes more than one conversation was necessary. I tried to be as empathic as possible. Many of the individuals I knew very well: some were friends as well as colleagues. Some felt badly let down by the Office and by me personally. The majority — however painful they found it — were realistic. A small number became very angry, including people I'd known for many years.

I did not work alone on any of this. Most of my conversations were at SMS Director level and above. Three Assistant Directors dealt with the Counsellor cadre: successively Howard Drake, Greg Dorey and John Rankin.

There were lighter moments. One of the other things we inflicted on the Service was to close the Heads of Mission Section in HR, which had existed for many years. This unit – two or three people at full strength - looked after Ambassadors and High Commissioners back from abroad on leave or duty journeys, setting up appointments for them with people in Whitehall and outside. It was a hangover from the days when communication was much slower and less constant.

Well, when we were cutting down the size of HR, this was an obvious candidate. We thought, ‘Heads of Mission all have their own secretaries, they can do all this work as, if not more, easily themselves.’ The lady in charge of the Section was, I think, was about to retire and we could redeploy the other staff on higher priorities. We put the decision off for a bit because we knew it was going to be controversial. Oh boy. There was an explosion of incredulity from Ambassadors. I’d never received so many emails. Outraged rather than rude, but all saying it was intolerable, must be reversed immediately etc. One Ambassador observed in anguish: ‘It’s like axing the Archers!’ I’m afraid it brought home to me the general level of unreality.

We let the dust settle and I sent another email saying I was sorry that people were unhappy, but it had to happen, and then a few senior Ambassadors said, helpfully, ‘I think we should let the HR Director manage his own resources as he sees fit’. It was an instructive diversion.

Pay and pensions were part of the HR remit. On pensions, there was a difficult passage when Whitehall began to move the Civil Service pension system away from final salary-related benefits towards a calculation based on career-average salaries. This ensured that final benefits were fairer across the board, including to staff (mostly women) who took (often maternity-related) career breaks. It was also more equitable in terms of managing the longer-term actuarial risks. But it was controversial and unpopular.

Dickie Stagg and I had a difficult meeting in the Locarno Suite with Heads of Mission back for a Leadership Conference, where we tried to explain why this was necessary. There was understandable anger at the fact that we were moving away from defined benefits as people had understood them. There was also a lack of understanding that the Permanent Under-

Secretary was not the Service's shop steward, whose job was to tell the Cabinet Office that the Diplomatic Service had to be treated differently, but, as the head of the department, a corporate manager of a Whitehall-wide system whose responsibility was to ensure its sustainability. The alternative to defined benefits would be — as it had become in the private sector — a defined contributions system.

Ultimately the Cabinet Office backed down, faced with the probability of Civil Service unrest. But inevitably, as we know, pension systems had to change. All of this was after my time in HR.

We were successful on pay for the delegated grades (i.e staff below the SMS). The Pay and Benefits section under David Powell negotiated a superb three-year pay deal of 4.4%, finding money down the backs of various sofas within the system which could be recycled into a better-than-expected package. The most sleepless night I had in HR was when we went out to consultation with the unions. I was concerned that they would look this gift horse in the mouth. The Treasury was telling us privately we had to get this over the line before pressures intensified to bring the shutters down. Happily, the unions were sensible, staff approved it and we signed on the dotted line. That was another high point.

SR: Can you talk a bit about the closure of the Language Centre?

DW: We had had a Diplomatic Service Language Centre for decades. It was an impressive operation, by then administered by FCO Services. We got consultants to look at the way it was structured. We had a large number of very effective teachers, some of whom were constantly in demand for languages where we needed a constant supply of speakers, like French and Spanish. But others were working far fewer hours on languages for which the operational demand was intermittent but where teachers were still receiving full-time salaries for much less than 50% of full-time work – in one case, I recall, as little as 11%, even counting in research and preparation as well as teaching time.

So we concluded that we needed a new structure. Clearly, foreign language capability was crucial for diplomats. But it was not obvious that we should be running our own language school. We therefore decided to buy in the language tuition services we required from outside providers. Some of these, in due course, were provided by the language teachers themselves operating on contract rather than as full-time employees.

The business case may have been impeccable, but the narrative outside was that the Foreign Office didn't need to teach languages anymore. There were Parliamentary complaints, in part because (as we discovered) we were giving odd lessons to MPs on a private basis. The process that led up to the decision could not have been more careful and comprehensive. David Miliband was by then Foreign Secretary, and challenged us with a succession of penetrating questions about how other services did it, what our methodology was, what the figures showed. He interrogated this closely over several iterations of the plan. It wasn't a quick process. But eventually Ministers agreed.

Opposition politicians understandably found this a relatively easy area in which to score subsequent political points. They presented it as a classic example of the Foreign Office losing its way, deciding that languages were not important, which was a distortion of what happened. This surfaced even more recently in Michael Gove's Ditchley speech<sup>1</sup> about reforming the Civil Service, which misrepresented the decision as reflecting the Foreign Office's 'lack of deep interest in the language and culture' of other nations — equally false.

This was absolutely the right decision, well administered, and taken by ministers after proper consideration. No doubt we should have foreseen how it would be distorted later on. But there we are.

My last nine months in the job were dominated by the government-wide Capability Reviews which were undertaken in each Civil Service department. A mixture of civil servants and consultants came in and worked through every part of the Office to see how fit the leadership systems were for the challenges of government. It was a pretty brutal process. The Foreign

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<sup>1</sup>*'The Prime Minister has rightly argued that foreign policy-making is often weakened by the lack of deep knowledge of the language, culture and history of the nations with whom we are negotiating or whom we seek to influence. And as William Hague has pointed out, the decision to close the Foreign Office language school was an act of national self-harm and his restoration of it, along with his establishment a new Diplomatic Academy, was a necessary renovation.'*

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, in the Ditchley Annual Lecture on "The privilege of public service", 27 June 2020

Office came through quite well, a tribute to the change processes that had been undertaken over the previous seven or so years.

HR got a reasonable bill of health, but was seen as lacking a strategy for our locally engaged staff. This was indeed an area we had not tackled amid all the other change we had undertaken, because locally-engaged staff were employed by specific Embassies, not paid from the central HR paybill. But the Reviewers made the fair point that the Foreign Office's People Strategy, such as it was, needed to encompass the FCO's staff as a whole, not simply UK-based. It was a lacuna. The Review was kind enough not to give us a particularly bad mark for it.

Towards the end of my time in HR I also began to participate in HR conferences with other foreign ministries. My Canadian colleague started the process with a conference in Ottawa; I then hosted one the following year at Wiston House. I don't know whether they continue. As one of my colleagues said, they were a sort of group therapy session in which we all realised that we were up against identical challenges!

Final thoughts: we had quite strong ministerial interest while Jack Straw was Foreign Secretary, less so after him. He attached a lot of importance to the professionalisation of the Office, and took a close interest in what we were doing, encouraging the Service to address the need for greater professionalism, openness and diversity.

I've focused too much in this part of the interview on the negatives. It was an immensely stimulating and satisfying period in my professional career, but very exhausting. I am a person who probably invests more emotional energy in the jobs that I do than I should. A Foreign Office failing, I suspect.

But I'm very proud to have done this job; I learned an enormous amount; I drew from the strengths of many people, inside and outside HR; and we were all part, I think, of a record of genuine achievement. I have gone into some detail because I think it's important that this archive should deal with the administrative history of the Foreign Office as well as diplomatic policy and practice.

I had an excellent leadership coach throughout this period who was very helpful, to whom I could let it all out. I discovered a note from him I'd kept, as I was preparing for this interview, in which he said: 'Being HR Director is not a role that a psychologically healthy person could do for an extended period!' I did it for three and a half years.

SR: David, do you think this is a good point at which to finish?

DW: It certainly is.

### **Ambassador, Tokyo, 2008–12**

SR: Good afternoon. It's 14 December 2020.

David, you finished in Human Resources in 2007. And you started in Tokyo in 2008. So actually how long did you have to prepare for this new role, the first time you'd been an Ambassador?

DW: First and only time. I had about ten months to prepare. I spent some of that time trying to get my Japanese back up to scratch, because I hadn't been to Japan for 10 years.

My career is an oddly shaped one. I had four overseas postings, three in Japan. For personal reasons, we were quite happy to stay in the UK for prolonged periods; we weren't rushing to go abroad. I'd aspired to the Ambassador position since leaving Tokyo as Commercial Counsellor in 1998. But I was taking a chance, by not seeking to go abroad as a head of mission somewhere else first, like some of my predecessors. Although when I think about it, not all Ambassadors to Japan had been head of mission anywhere else.

SR: What about Graham Fry?

DW: He'd been High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur. But Stephen Gomersall had not, John Boyd had not. David Wright had been in Korea. John Whitehead had not, but he'd been Minister in Tokyo. There was no general rule. Anyway, I took the chance; and of course as HR Director recused myself from administering the competition for Tokyo and other conflicts of interest.

There was an interview, preceded by psychometric testing, with a session with an occupational psychologist, as well as written tests. We were doing this increasingly for a number of senior positions in the Office at that time. I dare say that the practice has become even more frequent since then.

It was an important assessment tool: the thought was that all ambassadorial roles involve what can sometimes be quite isolated leadership, and the more distant from London they are, the more intense this is likely to be. The Office wanted to assess how the candidates would cope with those stresses, even returning to posts that they knew.

SR: Can I just ask, David, how Pamela felt about this? How was her Japanese?

DW: Pamela had learned some conversational Japanese when we were there in the 1990s, but she was not a Japanese linguist. The frank answer is – equivocal. If it can be lonely being an Ambassador, it can be even lonelier as an Ambassador's spouse. The 'respect', bordering on sycophancy, with which the spouse can be treated – I mean outside, not inside the Embassy – intensifies this.

There has been a sea change in the way in which the Foreign Office views this role. When I was a young diplomat, social life and professional life were intertwined. That had disappeared, effectively, by the 1990s. But in a post like Tokyo, where the Ambassador has a grand Residence built in an era when a Head of Mission lived in a quasi-country house style, with extensive personal staff, entertaining visitors almost as his personal guests, drawing the dividing lines between social life and professional life became more difficult. I'll discuss this more when I talk about the way I organised this area of work, the use of the Residence, and so on. But my guess is that Tokyo was not untypical, and that it's changed more generally.

SR: Yes, very much so. So to get back to your preparations for Tokyo...

DW: I concentrated on the language because my Japanese was pretty rusty. I did a lot of briefing calls as well. I assumed that however well I thought I knew Japan - and I'd lived there for getting on eight or nine years and had been a language speaker for 30 years — Japan was changing and so was the work I would be doing there. I would have to relearn a lot of what I thought I knew.

So I saw key business contacts, Whitehall, politicians and so forth, as all heads of mission do. And leadership training - this was a time when the Foreign Office was concentrating on ensuring that its Ambassadors were effective leaders of their teams as well as managers of business and analysts of policy. I had a new leadership coach who helped me understand my strengths, my weaknesses (or areas of development, as we had to call them), and with whom I had telephone sessions throughout my posting.

I also had very useful training in how to deal with crises and emergencies, consular work and so forth. In the old days that had not traditionally been regarded as central to an Ambassador's work. But it had increasingly become the yardstick by which a head of mission's effectiveness was judged in public terms if, as indeed happened in Japan while I was there, a major emergency developed.

The language I found tough. I had learned Japanese, passed the exams, and I suppose I have a degree of superficial facility. But getting back into a comfortable, confident, conversational fluency was hard. Learning how to read it so as to be able to deliver speeches as well as reading newspapers and magazines also took time.

I spent a month in the middle of 2008, living with a family in Kyoto and going to a language school every day. It was a tougher gig to do this at 55 compared with when I had been a 25-year old at Kamakura.

It gave me an insight into the work-life balance, or lack of it, in the Japanese home, however; and also into how a family enjoyed themselves. We all went out one Saturday night with the kids (who were at college) and the grandfather who lived in an apartment attached to the home, to Grandad's favourite bar, where we were welcomed by the *mama-san*. A group of what to Western eyes would have appeared as *geisha* led the *karaoke* in which we were all invited to participate. I was asked to do a British song. I looked through the massive list of songs on the *karaoke* machine and finally found one that I thought would do. They really liked it, wanted encores, and we all ended up doing it as a group number, linking arms with all the *geisha*. And that is why, Suzanne, somewhere on the internet, you may find Her Britannic Majesty's Ambassador-designate to Japan, leading 12 *geisha* in a knees-up version of 'Maybe It's Because I'm a Londoner (That I Love London So)!'.

Finally, in August 2008, off we went.

SR: What was the first thing you did when you got there? Did you do something symbolic?

DW: I had an all-staff meeting to introduce myself, and then a meeting with all the heads of section to discuss the view of Japan from London. I wanted to find a way of ensuring that the work we did reflected not only what London needed to understand about Japan, but was positioned to connect with what was in Ministers' and senior officials' minds in London, in terms of their policy (and political) priorities.

It's perhaps an obvious point, and I'm not suggesting that my colleagues in Tokyo, who were an impressive team, weren't aware of it. But there is a tendency in an Embassy, and I've been part of this myself, to see your job as to remind head office why your country matters. Sometimes you forget that people in London are in a very volatile and fast-changing political environment. Understanding what the context was seemed to me very important if you're going to communicate effectively.

I also remember my predecessor saying to me that Ministerial and senior official visits define the way in which your Embassy will be seen in Whitehall and Westminster. Your credibility depends on getting these visits right. Obviously when planning a visit, you'll focus on its objectives, crawl over the briefing, and so on. But I also used to do my own research into the Ministers' recent speeches, their Departments' work, understanding the political thoughts that they were bringing to their Japanese trip, and so on. I probably went into too much detail. But I was consciously reacting against what I'd often felt during my early years as a diplomat abroad, in which Ministers' visits were too often irritants that interrupted the exciting work you wanted to do to get under the skin of your country and then nag London about how they just didn't understand it.

This may be a statement of the obvious, but it was a discipline I applied to everything I tried to do.

The first sections of the Embassy that I went to on day one were the Visa and Consular Sections. These were areas of work I'd never done before, and I wanted to learn about. And I thought it was important to demonstrate on day one that the public reputation of the mission depended upon them.

While I was in Tokyo, the Visa Section was effectively outsourced, as a result of the reforms to visa delivery in London. It was a bumpy process. Visa services in Asia were centralised in Manila, on a 'hub and spoke' basis, with Tokyo as a 'spoke'. UK Visas helpfully allowed us some flexibility: we retained a small team to deal with problems as they arose because, of course, the people who needed visas from Japan were high value individuals integral to Japanese investment in Britain.

Japan in 2008 was the second largest economy in the world, an important market for British goods and an even more important source of inward investment into the UK. It was a partner in science and innovation. And an increasingly important political partner, not only within the G7 and G20, but also on foreign policy dossiers where the Japanese might be less constantly visible than our European and American allies but were nonetheless important multipliers and actors with their own priorities and objectives.

SR: How frequently did you have ministerial visits?

DW: Ministers, senior officials from across Whitehall as well as the FCO, Select Committees, and other VIPs e.g. special envoys and so on – I would say about 20 visits a

year. Japanese ministers also travelled in the other direction, though they were more constrained by Japanese Diet (Parliamentary) sittings.

In one sense, Japan is a wonderful country to be an Ambassador in, because the relationship is strong and positive. One of my predecessors used to quote a former Japanese Ambassador in London who said the problem in the UK-Japan relationship was that there are no problems: the danger is that you can take each other for granted.

We nevertheless had a few bilateral issues which nagged away. They were not the sort of problems which inject particular difficulty into the relationship, but they were areas of difference.

For example, the UK and many other countries had a large number of consular cases in which, after marital or relationship break-up, children had been taken by a Japanese spouse or partner, usually the wife, back to Japan to live with the Japanese family. As Japan was the only developed country which hadn't signed the Hague Convention on Child Abduction, there was no agreed legal framework within which such cases could be addressed.

Behind this technical-sounding consular law issue lay many painful, individual cases. Embassies like ours were regularly phoned up by aggrieved fathers, shouting at us about what we were going to do to rescue their children from abduction to Japan. The Japanese Foreign Ministry had similar calls from Japanese families seeking protection for their children or grandchildren from allegedly abusive, violent, Western men. Agreeing on the appropriate legal framework took a long time to resolve: the essence of the Japanese approach to policy is that they will not be rushed into taking decisions, let alone shamed into taking the decision that the Western country thinks is right, until they have precisely analysed what legal obligations are involved in changing policy and practice, and have established a workable social consensus to do so - particularly if, as in this case, it involves signing an international treaty. Japan eventually acceded to the Convention after my time as Ambassador.

So that's one example. There were higher profile issues. The death penalty: Japan, like the USA, is a country which still executes criminals convicted of capital crimes: many Japanese are disdainful of liberal Western countries' attempts to persuade them not to, although public opinion (as in the US) is slowly beginning to evolve. Whaling is another, perhaps the clearest example where Japanese cultural and commercial practice conflicts with what most (but not all) Western liberal countries think is acceptable in terms of the treatment of animals. These

areas didn't necessarily take up a massive amount of Embassy time, but needed to be managed.

There was a strong UK-Japan relationship, but a very volatile Japanese political situation. I had five Prime Ministers in four years as Ambassador. Indeed, I wondered whether I was a jinx. I had an introductory audience with Prime Minister Fukuda (which not all Ambassadors did) and had an excellent talk with him. He resigned three or four days later. The Minister who was present when I presented my credentials to the Emperor had to resign soon afterwards because of a scandal. I shook hands with the head of the Air Self-Defence Force at a reception not long after I arrived and had a useful conversation with him. He was ousted the following day as an ultra-right wing revisionist and sacked from his post by the Prime Minister. I was surprised that anyone wanted to meet me because of my track record of dispatching senior figures.

I arrived at the end of a period in which the Liberal Democratic Party had effectively run Japan almost without interruption for the best part of 50 years. But its public credibility, and that of the 'iron triangle' of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, was exhausted in the face of the global economic crisis. And in the September 2009 election, they were thrown out and the major opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), voted into office.

The DPJ's politicians came from all parts of the political spectrum and were united only in the sense of everyone hating the Liberal Democrats. But the DPJ proved to be just as faction-ridden as the Liberal Democratic Party had been. They were also, for a time, pretty poor in government. There were some capable and intelligent politicians, but their determination to bring a new broom into the Japanese equivalent of Whitehall was a serious misjudgement.

I don't say that simply because I'm a bureaucrat myself. Outside the civil service in Japan, there was at that time less of the sort of policy expertise which you find, say, in Washington or London think-tanks. In the DPJ you had a group of politicians determined to rule by themselves without consulting the officials they had inherited from the previous government. When I called on DPJ ministers, I would find their desks covered with official files: they were so distrustful of the civil servants that had served the Liberal Democratic Party, they were revisiting all the major administrative decisions that had been taken to understand how they could reverse them. It was a recipe for disaster.

Having said that, there was also disloyalty on display from a number of senior officials in the early days of the DPJ Government: some senior civil servants were appalled by the DPJ's reform agenda, not least their stated intention to abolish the traditional *amakudari* (literally 'descent from heaven', whereby retired officials frequently get well-paid sinecures on retirement).

An anecdote: Peter Mandelson, who was President of the Board of Trade, came to Tokyo in the autumn of 2009 shortly after the DPJ victory. He knew Hatoyama, the DPJ Prime Minister, well: they'd both participated in the UK-Japan 21st Century Group. They had an excellent meeting which overran slightly. This angered the Japanese officials who had prepared the meeting, and who were very strict with ministers and visitors about sticking to their prepared plans. We were sensitive to this and at one point, Peter said: 'Is it okay? I don't want to overstay my welcome', and Hatoyama replied, 'Not at all: we have a lot to talk about', and brushed aside a note from one of his officials telling him that he had to wind up the meeting now.

I discovered shortly afterwards that a Japanese Foreign Ministry official, not present at the meeting, had emailed a Conservative MP contact of his in London to say what a disastrous meeting it had been and how much it had damaged UK-Japan relations. This was mischievous and mendacious. I emailed the Conservative MP privately telling him that what this guy had said was a load of rubbish. It was an example of some Japanese officials undermining their new Prime Minister, of whom they disapproved and whom they privately (actually, not that privately) called 'The Alien'. We would have been collateral damage.

Of course, having eyes in the back of your head is always an important anatomical requirement for Ambassadors.

The DPJ went through three Prime Ministers in three years. The final one, during my last year in Japan, was Prime Minister Noda. He was a very capable administrator but, by that stage the party was exhausted, the factions were at each other's throats and the country was even more disillusioned with the party they'd voted into office than they had been with the Liberal Democratic Party. So it was a very unstable political scene. That didn't mean that the government itself was unstable: for all the problems I've described, Japan is a stable, democratic polity with highly professional bureaucrats. But the politicians were at sixes and sevens. Inevitably a risk arises that Ministers in London will begin to ask why they should be

investing time in talking to them given that they will soon be replaced by another set of Bugginses.

Here is another example, from the area of climate change, a very important part of our work.

In 2010 the annual UN Conference of the Parties (COP 16) took place in Cancun in Mexico. It got off to a bad start because the Japanese Government initially refused to agree to a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol – the international agreement to cut carbon emissions. There was strong international pressure on Japan to moderate its position. The UK was part of that, and I lobbied accordingly with Japanese ministers and officials.

FCO officials in London pressed for a telephone call between the Prime Ministers – David Cameron and Naoto Kan (who had replaced Hatoyama). I had tremendous difficulty setting this up. I said to the Foreign Ministry, ‘My Prime Minister wants to call your Prime Minister’ and they said, ‘Well, he can't.’ I said, ‘Why not?’ They said, ‘Because this is a cabinet decision. The Japanese official in Cancun spoke from instructions agreed at cabinet level and there is nothing the Prime Minister can do to change them.’ I said ‘You must allow my Prime Minister to explain the British government's position to him and urge him to ensure that the Japanese government takes this into account in determining their negotiating position.’ ‘No, no, no. The Prime Minister has no authority. Japan's Prime Minister has no authority to change what has been agreed at Cabinet. There is no way in which this call could take place.’ They were adamant. In other words, officials were preventing Prime Ministerial contact, essentially on the grounds that the Japanese Prime Minister was a relatively unimportant figure in this whole process.

I did not report this to London. Instead, I banged away for a few days, as did other Ambassadors on behalf of their heads of government, and eventually, when it was clear that the Japanese negotiating position was beginning to change at official level, it was agreed that the call could now take place. I then got a plaintive call from Number 10 saying: ‘This call that David Cameron is supposed to make to Naoto Kan. Does he really have to? He's got a lot on his plate.’ And I said, ‘Well, my personal view is that I don't think it's going to make any difference one way or the other, but you're the ones who are asking for it.’ ‘Oh no, we're not. It's the Foreign Office.’ So I thought maybe there's a limit to how far we can lecture Japan on functionality in government. However, the call did go ahead, and there was a subsequent FCO telegram saying that it had been instrumental in securing a change in the Japanese Government line, of course.....

The defining relationship for the Japanese since the Second World War has been with the United States. It is impossible to over-stress this. When Obama defeated McCain and the US Ambassador (a Bush appointee, although a Democrat, interestingly) left Tokyo, the speculation in the Japanese press about who the new US Ambassador would be was intense. And I mean front page headline news. It would be unthinkable for people to worry about, or even take any interest in, who the new British, French or Canadian Ambassador might be. The US relationship is existential for the Japanese.

China was the next crucial relationship. I arrived in 2008 when Japan-China links were at their height. There were plans for State visits. There had been Prime Ministerial visits. The mood music was reasonably positive. But over the next eighteen months, China supplanted Japan as the second largest economy in the world. The idea that there would be a new international 'secretariat', the G2 — US and China — rather than the G7 or G20 - to run things was gradually supplanted by the realisation that this was not how the new Chinese nationalism would work.

Japan found itself in a conflicted position of having an increasingly integrated economy with the other East Asian superpower while, at the same time, recognising that the Japan-China relationship was inextricably one of rivalry and from time to time hostility. By 2012, when I left, the relationship had deteriorated badly because of the resurgence of a territorial dispute. All of this geopolitical context is well documented, as is also the threat posed by North Korea, and the history of that regime's abduction of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 80s.

There was a sense of Japan in Whitehall and to a degree in Westminster, as a developed, technocratic, broadly liberal society, yet also a country where social and economic norms did not automatically converge with Western assumptions. British politicians fell into two categories. Some understood intuitively why Japan was important and were often energised by the complexity of its social and political culture. Others understood all this but were frustrated by this sense of Japan's being fundamentally a very different kind of country. As somebody who finds Japan both fascinating and frustrating, I identify with both groups.

There were various areas of social policy where this divergence was very obvious. Japan still scores very low on international indices of gender equality. The perception, simplistic but not inaccurate, of Japan as a patriarchal society was a factor. Female MPs, particularly I would say at that time female Labour MPs, were critical of some of the attitudes they saw in Japan. The differing views of the importance of immigration was another factor — public

attitudes on this are evolving more slowly in Japan, but perhaps economic imperatives are beginning to drive some change. The importance of preserving social cohesiveness rather than pushing radical progressive policies is another aspect of this.

I've described the political context and the work on climate change. Encouraging Japan towards greater involvement in international conflict prevention was also a priority. Japan is institutionally a pacifist country: the US-imposed Constitution after World War Two enshrines this explicitly, albeit enabling the Japanese to have Self-Defence Forces which we would recognise as armed forces by any other name, purely for defensive purposes.

At the same time, I was not just promoting trade and investment, but pushing defence sales. I spent a lot of my time over the first three years of my ambassadorship trying to sell Typhoon (Eurofighter) as the next generation of Japanese jet fighter. Unsuccessfully: it was still impossible in political terms for Japan to envisage buying any major defence kit which wasn't American. However, I hope that the intense effort we and British Aerospace put into the campaign helped create a level of interest in potential defence partnerships with the UK - industrial as well as logistical - which helped open the door a bit for subsequent defence sales at a lower level.

I also promoted big-ticket items like Airbus, again a very slow process. We began to make inroads towards the end of my time in Tokyo. We also continued to attract inward investment, from the major automotive, pharmaceutical, electronics manufacturers, the next generation of models for Toyota and Nissan and Honda. We encouraged infrastructure project investment by Japanese firms, in renewable energy, and transportation - Hitachi committed to the manufacture of rolling stock for the UK rail network, when the decision was finally taken on the electrification of the London-Cardiff line. And nuclear investment, which has subsequently come to nought since Hitachi has had to withdraw from its participation in the Horizon consortium for two new reactors, because of the British government's difficulty in committing to the next generation of nuclear.

I emphasise all of that because while the political partnership was important, the key people that I was talking to day in and day out tended to be in business rather than government. Politicians came and went, but Japanese business, industry, finance were the core relationships.

On most foreign policy areas, there was broad alignment, but there was always an interesting edge to Japan's take on the big issues: the gradual democratisation of Burma/Myanmar, now of course thrown into reverse, the negotiations which led to the Iran nuclear deal, from which President Trump subsequently withdrew. These were areas where Japanese officials were both supportive of Western priorities but often also gently critical of what they saw as Western governments' insensitivity to the historical and cultural backgrounds. Their angles were partly informed by economic interests, but also by the Japanese government's being more attuned to Asian political priorities.

I gave about fifteen speeches a year. Some were policy overviews, to what the Japanese call *benkyo-kai*, literally study groups of senior officials and businessmen who met regularly to review developments inside and outside Japan. I also spent a lot of time trying to promote a sense of the UK today. I was always a little frustrated by traditional Japanese assumptions of Britain, its historical role, the British Empire, indeed, all the old symbols of British soft culture, which older (and some younger) Japanese liked to want to hear about. I preferred to talk about the way in which Britain had changed in my lifetime from being a deferential, patriarchal culture to a more informal, diverse, irreverent country.

I probably overdid it. I used to go around the country talking to the loyal Japan-British Societies where audiences tended to be older Anglophile Japanese. I wonder if they got fed up with my lecturing them about the wonders of modernity and youth culture, when all they really wanted was Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, and Downton Abbey? On the other hand, Pamela and I organised a performance of hip-hop and street dancing for the (ultra-traditional) Japan-British Society annual get-together in the Embassy, and everyone told me how much they'd enjoyed it!

I blogged a bit. Not what we would think of as blogging today, much more controlled and sedate, always thinking very carefully and redrafting several times before I pressed send, which is not how you're supposed to do it. I wimped out of Twitter. My successors were much more active in that area. I was the last generation for whom it was acceptable not to instantly tweet something.

I enjoyed the public side of the job, having the right to go anywhere I wanted to go and talk to anyone I wanted to talk to. Some Japanese sought to restrict me a little. When I called on the Prime Minister in my first week, I was surprised that the Foreign Ministry official accompanying me gave me a stern lecture on what I should and should not say when I did a

doorstep interview outside his office afterwards. I thought this was unacceptable, and in any event, I wasn't likely to trespass into controversial areas, so I just said what I wanted to say.

But there could be, shall we say, unexpected indications of how an Ambassador was expected to behave. For example, I was talking to a very experienced Japanese journalist once and I mentioned to her that I had enjoyed watching a satirical programme on TV which gave me an insight into Japanese politics from another angle – a sort of 'Have I Got News For You' kind of show. She was horrified. She said, 'You are the Ambassador. You should not be watching programmes like that. They are muckraking and rude!' And I said, 'But that's how you learn about what's going on.' She said, 'No, it is not! It is below your status!' Japan can be simultaneously an open and a controlling society.

But the opportunities to make contacts were almost unlimited. New Year is the great holiday in Japan and the New Year's parties or *shinnenkai* are where you meet people. Every industrial association, every major company, has one. You could meet everybody, and I do mean everybody from the Prime Minister downwards. I used to sign up for them all. I was amazed that most of my fellow Ambassadors seemed not to. They were bunfights, of course, with thousands of people in the room and you had to push, shove and use your elbows to wade through the throng to the guests of honour somewhere in the middle, present your business cards, and get a few words with the minister, the industrial magnate. But it was a golden opportunity.

We had a superb Residence in Tokyo from the point of view of entertainment. The compound in Tokyo dates back to the 1870s, shortly after the Meiji Restoration established the modern Japanese state: Britain got a prime site in the centre of Tokyo, close to Parliament, Ministries, the Supreme Court, the Imperial Palace, not far from the business centre. The Residence dates from about 1931: a large mansion, with a ballroom, reception rooms and a beautiful garden.

It was fantastic for parties, concerts, and dinners, but less satisfactory to live in, because there was no self-contained living area upstairs. Foolishly I didn't insist on this before we arrived: my successor, wisely, did.

SR: So there's no way you could make yourself an omelette or something?

DW: We could do that: there was a small kitchen and a living room. But all off corridors, so nowhere we could shut ourselves away, and when we had visitors, which was pretty

frequently (and of course I wanted to put visitors up wherever I could), we would end up cheek by jowl with private secretaries and accompanying officials: the bedrooms were on all sides.

There was little privacy. We had 15,000 people in the Residence for one event or another over the course of a year. Inevitably — even with sound screens and protocols which prevent them from sort of wandering up into your kitchen uninvited — it gets a bit complicated.

I don't want to harp on this. No one will ever be sympathetic to an Ambassador complaining about lack of privacy! But it was not ideal. I sometimes mischievously said that I would have been perfectly happy (and Pamela, I think, even more so) if we'd simply used the Residence as a small hotel and banqueting rooms and lived in a small flat somewhere else. There were tiny little houses on the compound where we could have very happily tucked ourselves away. A large number of guests probably have no idea that the Residence was a house that people lived in anyway.

Indeed, I moved towards using all the resources we had on the compound, the Ambassador's Residence and the other larger houses which were used for trade mission receptions and other events and so forth more systematically, with what we called a corporate entertainment team - essentially the staff of the Residence and some other locally engaged employees. In other words, the Ambassador's cooks and staff were not personal to him but available corporately. This meant that we could do more than one event simultaneously: I would give one lunch for a VIP and the Minister or the Economic Counsellor would give a second lunch for another.

SR: Was there pressure to rent out the facilities to make money?

DW: I did this aggressively, perhaps too much so. I made a lot of money for the Foreign Office by renting out facilities. A system called 'Selling Into Wider Markets' was used to charge people. Companies were happy to pay: I charged other organisations as well, including friendship societies, where it seemed to me that their rather old-fashioned social activities weren't quite central to the Embassy's core objectives. We were able to do this without causing offence and it helped us focus on what we were doing and why, and perhaps become a bit more professional delivering it.

I had inherited a beautiful lakeside villa, which the British Ambassador used to go to in the summer months on Lake Chuzenji, just north of Tokyo, which had been acquired for the Embassy by Sir Ernest Satow, the British Minister to Japan in the 1890s. It had been a

summer Residence for the Ambassador, although it had not been used full time for some years. It was a beautiful site. But it would have required an enormous amount of investment in order to make it health and safety-compliant, and I concluded that that was simply no longer possible. So I returned it to the local prefecture, and it is now a museum commemorating Satow.

The compound itself was by 2010 too large for the Embassy. In the 1970s there were about 60 UK-based members of staff. When I returned as Ambassador, the footprint in Tokyo and Osaka was down to about 40, and with efficiencies and localisations, we brought the UK-based headcount down to about 28 by the time I left.

We were also caught by the problem that, although we were paying a peppercorn rent to the Japanese government which had been set many years before, we were in constant arguments with the Finance and Foreign Ministries over the rent levels, and there was a strong case for our acquiring the freehold and releasing a certain amount of land which we no longer needed which could be converted into an attractively landscaped garden by the municipal authorities. I started the negotiating process, with the Foreign Office's agreement: my successor saw it through to conclusion.

Having spent a fair amount of my later career trying to manage our services, staff and resources more effectively, I brought a lot of those priorities to my work in Tokyo. There was increasing emphasis at that time in the Foreign Office on inculcating a sense throughout the network of there being one team, UK-based and local staff working together.

I felt that we had this in Tokyo. We had very highly qualified staff: in our consular and visa work, in science and innovation, particularly on trade and investment, where we had locally engaged commercial officers with MBAs providing an impressive service to UK industry and the regions.

But Japanese offices tend to respond coolly to constant self-analysis of corporate management issues. So it was frustrating that successive staff surveys of how much we thought of ourselves as a team always seemed stuck in the middle box – 'neither agree nor disagree'.

I don't think we were out of kilter with much of the rest of Japanese business. However, it became difficult to persuade London that our local staff were taking this agenda as seriously as London felt they should, because of these mediocre results. I spent a lot of time in my last

year or two in grappling with these issues, which were not susceptible to easy solutions. The metrics perked up a bit by the time I was leaving in 2012.

SR: One issue that I did want to ask you about was that very difficult murder case of the young woman.

DW: A young teacher, Lindsay Ann Hawker, had been murdered by a Japanese man to whom she was giving English lessons. It was, as you may imagine, a very distressing case. I saw her parents quite regularly when they visited Japan. I was profoundly impressed by their courage in the face of unimaginable grief. Eventually, after a very long investigation, the Japanese police were able to arrest the killer. He was brought to trial, convicted and received a long custodial sentence. Japan has the death penalty, but it's unusual for it to be applied in the case of single murders.

I had very professional consular and press teams who were able to support the Hawker family throughout.

SR: Do you want to say anything about the Imperial Family?

DW: We are two countries with hereditary royal families, so there is a kind of affinity. But the links between the Royal and the Imperial Families are not as close as would obviously be the case between the Royal Family and their European cousins. Hugh Cortazzi, whom I have mentioned several times in this interview, edited a book on links from the 1868 Meiji Restoration to the present day, which was published after his death in 2018, making this point.

I maintained links with the various households, particularly with those members of the Imperial Family who had been educated in Britain and who retained a close affection for their time there. The Emperor (who as Crown Prince attended the Coronation in 1953) and Empress came to London for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Indeed, the Emperor had only recently recovered from major surgery, so it was a mark of the importance he attached to responding to The Queen's invitation to come to Windsor Castle. Pamela and I met the Emperor and Empress on several occasions, formally and privately: they were unfailingly kind and gracious to us.

The Crown Prince — now the Emperor — was educated at Oxford, the first member of the Imperial Family to be educated outside Japan. I used to give the Cambridge and Oxford

Society reception every year (it's that way round in Japan) and the Crown Prince would always come as well as Princess Takamado (the widow of one of the Emperor's cousins, who had attended Cambridge, and maintained very close links with us). I also created opportunities for the Empress, who had been educated in London in the 1950s, to come to the Embassy for musical evenings. She's a very fine pianist and we used to give little parties for her to invite friends, and I would invite a few of my contacts. We were able to get Mitsuko Uchida once when she was in Tokyo to come as well.

These were lovely evenings. But they were private, not publicised. I was able to organise these events several times through intermediaries, keeping the Imperial Household, who were sensitive to any publicity suggesting that the Imperial Family were enjoying themselves, in the picture. We also had a visit by Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall not long after we arrived, which had mostly been organised by my predecessor, Graham Fry. We were able to take Prince Charles away from the megalopolis of Tokyo into the countryside and show him a Japanese environmental project (he made a speech on that theme during the visit), as well as the ancient capital of Nara. It was a successful four days.

Here are some other memories.

I was the first British Ambassador to attend the ceremonies to mark the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which take place in August each year. The Embassy had always, I think, been represented at these events, but the timing had meant that the Ambassador tended to be out of the country. In August 2012, I decided to attend.

These are ceremonies which commemorate massive loss of life and the horrors of atomic warfare. And of course, they mark the importance of working for peace. But they are also political events, because of the theme of nuclear disarmament. This is not contentious in itself, but because there are still arguments over the historical memory of the war and the decision of the Allies to use the atomic bomb, the presence of American and British representatives attracts attention.

I knew Hiroshima well, having visited it many times: Nagasaki less well. The ceremony was fine but there was quite an aggressive press conference with Japanese journalists over the British government's position on some of these issues. It was a challenge but an interesting experience.

I was delighted whenever we were able to do promotional things that connected with what we really loved. Drama and the arts, particularly. I was thrilled to be able to host Shakespeare's First Folio in the Residence. We brought the British Library's Folio out for Shakespeare's birthday, through the then Vice-Chancellor of De Montfort University, a theatre specialist, and organised events with schools and universities, showing off the book, bringing in our contacts to see this precious object, organising lectures and performances.

We also hosted events each year for the Praemium Imperiale Awards, bestowed by the Japan Art Association on distinguished international laureates in the performing and visual arts. Ted Heath had been the British representative on the international advisory council for many years, and I approached Chris Patten, successfully, on the Association's behalf to succeed him. We had regular British, or British-associated, laureates – Judi Dench, Alfred Brendel, Anish Kapoor, Tom Stoppard, Richard Long, Zaha Hadid. To welcome artists like these to the Embassy was a real privilege.

The Tom Stoppard visit was particularly memorable. Pamela and I had met in Nairobi when we were appearing in plays together, in a semi-professional company. One of them had been Stoppard's 'The Real Thing', in which we had played the main couple, Henry and Annie. We decided to tell him this, a bit nervously, as we wondered whether it was just too corny an anecdote ... He listened in total silence and when we had finished, leaned forward and said: "I don't believe a word of it, but it's a wonderful story". And the next day, a play-text of 'The Real Thing' arrived, with a personal inscription to us.

I've talked about trade, but also want to mention a fascinating day I spent with the local British manager of Tesco stores in Japan. As an Ambassador, there's really no part of the British footprint that you can't put a Union Jack on; but Tesco, interestingly, who had been in Japan for some years not making much money, was concerned not to be seen as a British company. They had never asked us for any help. They didn't want the British Ambassador to cut the ribbon at the opening of a store. They wanted to be seen as a supermarket company providing services to Japanese consumers in suburban areas, the same sort of supermarket facilities that a Japanese company would be providing: Japanese goods at Japanese prices, not foreign goods at inflated prices. The Foreign Office was not always sensitive to the need to promote British companies in the way that they want to be promoted, not just in a way that complements our public diplomacy objectives.

It was a constant whirl. Of course, it is for any Ambassador. But towards the end of my time in Tokyo, I really began to feel the pressure of constant activity. I was back in Britain for a short trip, and I popped into my local bank on the Friday afternoon just before leaving for the airport to return to Japan. The lady behind the counter said to me: “Got something nice planned for the weekend?” The honest answer would have been: “Well, in half an hour’s time, I’m heading for Heathrow, where I’m flying to Tokyo; on Sunday I’m attending a fashion show with Paul Smith; on Monday, I’m holding a reception for Judi Dench and Anish Kapoor, before finalising the arrangements for the Prime Minister’s visit and hosting a musical evening with the Empress and Mitsuko Uchida.” But I didn’t quite feel that I could say this. So I just replied: “No, nothing special.”

I should mention Brexit. EU membership, or more specifically, the benefit of frictionless trade derived from membership of the customs area and the single market, has been fundamental to Japanese investors in Britain. Many of these companies were encouraged to come to Britain in the 1980s in order to be able to manufacture within the single market and to sell to Europe. Brexit doesn't mean Japanese companies will automatically leave, and we have already seen Nissan, the most important Japanese industrial investment in Britain over the past forty years, commit to stay on the basis of the December 2020 deal. But the terms of the new EU trade relationship will determine how they calculate their interests over the longer term. Japanese firms will be pragmatic in judging that and making a balanced cost-benefit analysis as these become clearer.

The referendum and Brexit negotiations came after my time as Ambassador. But the political arguments within the UK on EU membership during my time were reported in the Japanese media and closely observed by Japanese policymakers and business people. In July 2012 David Cameron published an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* in which he said that, if elected, he would explore the possibility of holding a referendum on Britain's membership of Europe in order to settle the political debate once and for all.

I was going out to a dinner that Sunday night hosted by Deutsche Bank, with a lot of very senior Japanese bankers, including Kuroda, later Governor of the Bank of Japan, then with the Asian Development Bank. Several European Ambassadors were there. I had read this article online just before I went out.

I walked through the door of this sophisticated Japanese restaurant to meet the assembled guests and was instantly pinned to the wall by detailed and penetrating questions from the

Japanese about the meaning of this article, what exactly was in the Prime Minister's mind, how likely it was that there was going to be a referendum, etc etc. My European *chers collègues* could not restrain their amusement and delight at my discomfiture. No guidance telegram, of course. I said, 'Look, I've just read this article myself. This is a party political thing. The Prime Minister has to go through a number of hoops before this becomes reality. Not least he has to win the next election. So far too soon to speculate. But you will all know that there is an argument going on within the UK about our future orientation towards Europe. This should come as no surprise to any of you, but we'll see what we will see.'

I remember also that year I had a visit by an all-party delegation of British MPs. The briefing meeting began with one of them complaining forcefully: 'Ambassador, I would like to know why the Union Flag is not flying outside this Residence'. In fact, we had two Union flags flying that day: one over the front door of the main Embassy building, and one on a flagpole in the corner of the compound. We used to change the flags outside the Residence from time to time and on this day, unwisely, I had the European Union flag there. This was a red (or blue) rag to a bull. The MP was polite, but insistent. He said, 'Why is it there?' Trying not to sound condescending, I said, 'Well, we're members of the European Union.' And he said, 'Well, we're members of many international institutions. I want to know why you don't consider it fit that you should fly the Union Flag!' This went on for quite a long time until the Chairman of the delegation said, 'Oh, give it a rest, Adam! Can we move on to something else?' And then we finished the briefing and all went into lunch the best of friends.

But I— we — should have seen the writing on the wall much earlier, in terms of the intensity of anger from the sovereignty advocates on this issue. I saw his concerns as a bit obsessive and eccentric. I was not alone in that, even among his own delegation.

SR: But wasn't it really the psychodrama within the Conservative Party? I don't think many Labour politicians picked up any of this grumbling dissent?

DW: You're right. But the Conservatives won the election and the psychodrama has continued to dominate.

I might add that there were runes I could have read on the other side of the debate. I recall going to a briefing on the negotiations for the EU/Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, hosted by the excellent EU Ambassador in Tokyo. A visiting delegation of Brussels officials brought European Ambassadors up to speed on the talks. At one point, a Head of Mission –

not me – made the mistake of referring to Japan as the third largest economy in the world. The European official exploded in anger. It was not the third (after the US and China), it was the fourth (because the EU should be regarded as one bloc). He made this point about as rudely as he could have done, battering the Ambassador with repeated strictures about how unacceptable, ridiculous, pathetic it was to talk in those terms. The arrogance was quite shocking.

So there has been bad behaviour on both sides. Nonetheless, the Japanese were appalled by what happened – not least because they saw the UK as an important source of influence within the EU. But as I've said, they are also coolly pragmatic about what it means. Japan is a country which rarely strikes heroic attitudes, in terms of its values and interests. It will carefully examine the pros and cons of issues that may seem existential questions of political morality. There are benefits and disbenefits in that.

SB: You experienced the terrible crisis of the earthquake. How did you learn about it? What were your initial feelings in the first few moments of the crisis?

DW: I wrote a detailed article about this in February 2016 for *Japan Forum*, the periodical of the British Association of Japanese Studies, so I won't repeat everything in that piece [the manuscript of which is attached as an annex to this interview]. I'll concentrate on a few essential points.

The earthquake took place at 2:46pm on Friday 11 March 2011. I was visiting Nissan's headquarters in Yokohama, just pulling into the forecourt in the ambassadorial Jaguar. Even hundreds of miles away from the epicentre, off the north eastern coast of Japan, the impact was massive. It was the strongest earthquake in Japanese recorded history, force 9. Earthquakes are frequent in Japan, often very strong ones that shake houses and break things. But it was obvious that this was completely different from anything we had experienced before.

How did I react to it? By worrying for the next four minutes about how I would now be able to get in to see the vice-president of Nissan, with whom I had an appointment at 3.00, because obviously the elevators wouldn't be working, and how rude he would think I had been by turning up late, because it probably wasn't safe to get out of the car while the earth was still shaking.

It then dawned on me that I obviously had to turn around and go straight back to Tokyo. I realised later that for those four minutes I had been in complete shock. We turned around and drove back to Tokyo. It normally took 40 minutes, but the railways had stopped running, the expressways had been closed and the roads were soon in gridlock. I got back to the Embassy, having walked the last mile, just before nine o'clock, to assume the leadership of the crisis centre which had been established.

There were three crises, very quickly, one after the other. The first was the earthquake. The second was the tsunami about an hour later, which swept over the eastern seaboard of the country, from just north of Tokyo up to the Tohoku (North-East) agricultural region. Many coastal villages were destroyed by the tidal wave: most of the nearly 20,000 fatalities in this disaster were as a result of the tsunami. And thirdly, there was a nuclear crisis following the destruction of the Fukushima nuclear reactor, on the coast some way south of the epicentre. This was swamped by a tidal wave which overrode the tsunami defences, swept into the reactor, knocked out the electrical and cooling systems and threw the plant into meltdown. It was the escape of radiation and chemicals from the reactor that triggered the third crisis, which was managing the nuclear fallout.

The Embassy crisis centre was immediately reinforced by dozens of rapid deployment specialists from elsewhere in the network. We had three major priorities.

One was to offer help to the Japanese authorities, who of course are very experienced at dealing with earthquakes, but there were things that we could do at the margins of the relief effort, not least provide search and rescue assistance in some of the towns destroyed by the tsunami, and with specialist equipment.

Secondly, to help British nationals caught up in the disaster. There were several hundred in the area affected, often long term residents, people who had been there for many years, with Japanese partners, families and so on. Many of them wanted to be at least temporarily evacuated. And of course, we were concerned about the possibility of British fatalities.

And thirdly, we had to be in a position to offer travel advice to people either wanting to travel to Japan or who were already in Japan as to whether it was safe for them to come, or to stay. That was a very complex set of judgments over the succeeding two to three weeks as the nuclear situation in the wake of Fukushima worsened before it stabilised.

The courage, dedication and commitment of the teams in the Embassy crisis centre, the rapid deployment teams who supported us, and the consular teams who deployed to the areas affected were beyond praise, extraordinary. Some locally-engaged staff in the Embassy had family members living near those areas, but started crisis management work that afternoon before they knew that they were safe. Our drivers ferried staff and supplies back and forth to the region of the disaster for some weeks.

SR: Did you have to deal with a lot of press inquiries as well?

DW: Yes, I did. We had a very good press team. But a head of mission's role in the first instance is to be the public face of the emergency support we were giving to British nationals and of the Foreign Office response to the crisis. I had had good Foreign Office training in consular emergency response, crisis management and media handling. I won't say I felt comfortable: I never felt comfortable at any stage during this crisis, which was as it should have been. But I felt that I had been given all the tools in my training that enabled me to deal with this.

The press will of course be very tough if deficiencies are perceived and we had one or two bumpy moments, as will always be the case in crisis responses when people said 'Why isn't this happening more quickly?', but on the whole, the media were sensible and indeed appreciative of everything that we, the Foreign Office team were doing, so it was not as aggressive a media environment as I know it has sometimes been for heads of mission.

I gave three, four, five press interviews every day for the first week to the major outlets, trying to be calm and clear in response to a confusing and difficult set of crises, conscious always that people in the UK were watching TV, worried about their family members and loved ones who had not yet made contact, conscious also that there was a danger in appearing to be too reassuring, if it transpired that there were British fatalities. In the event, there were none, but we didn't know that at the outset of the crisis, and some foreign nationals did die in the disaster.

The other point I came to understand was that you must not, as Ambassador, get involved in the micro-management of every aspect of the crisis response. David Fitton, my Deputy Head of Mission, a very experienced crisis manager who had been Assistant Director for Consular Affairs in London made clear to me that I should not be trying, as some heads of missions do, to get into all the detail. Your job is to lead the team, set the tone, identify the key priorities,

and be available for media and ministers (I attended a number of meetings of the COBRA group in the Cabinet Office, by telephone.) You don't need to get into the detail unless you feel something is going wrong.

I went to the Tohoku with the first consular response team to Sendai, the major town in the worst affected region, on Sunday 13 March. It was important to be on the spot so that ministers could say that the Ambassador was there, overseeing the immediate response in the area directly affected by the disaster. I have described our work more fully in the article.

One of the memories I have of these days in the crisis is that the wall of our emergency room in the Sendai Holiday Inn was covered with white paper, one which we had the names of all the British nationals whose families or friends had reported them missing, and whom we couldn't find and feared might be fatalities. Gradually, we were able to draw lines through their names as they all emerged. I got back to Tokyo on the Wednesday (16 March), and was getting up in the middle of the night to go down to the hotel where we were bringing the evacuation buses in and meeting them as they got off the bus and talking to them about their experiences and working out how we could continue to help them and what accommodation they needed and so forth. To meet people who had just been names on a list of possible victims of the disaster was very moving.

The really difficult administrative part of this was the constantly changing travel advice. The precise impact of the nuclear disaster at Fukushima was not immediately apparent. There was fear that what appeared to be a worrying but localised problem of radiation leakage might, as the weather changed, affect other parts of Japan, including Tokyo, a couple of hundred miles south. Then what would we have done? Would we have been required to evacuate thousands of British nationals?

Some European Embassies did evacuate to Western Japan, fearing deterioration of the situation that would prevent them from remaining in Tokyo. We did not do that. At no point did it seem to us the appropriate response, although of course we kept these judgements under constant review.

The person in London who was crucial in all of this was Sir John Beddington, the Government Chief Scientific Adviser. John's objective, rigorous analysis of scientific probabilities and risks was enormously important in enabling COBRA to make the right judgments, as well as reassuring - although his aim was accuracy, not reassurance. We had a

very large British community in Japan, with thousands of Brits working in Tokyo. We did several teleconferences with John Beddington talking to the major representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, the British expatriate societies, our networks of emergency wardens, and so forth. It helped to establish the reality - that the risks were manageable. We tweeted that, which in turn helped the Japanese government, who re-tweeted the Chief Scientific Adviser's assessments, which helped to steady nerves more widely within the Japanese government and beyond.

There's an interesting point of comparison here with the current pandemic crisis. The Scientific Advisory Group in Emergencies (SAGE) was the key group for us as well, advising on the implications of Fukushima. There is a tendency for politicians, certainly in Japan in 2011 and in Britain in 2020-2021, to want to shelter behind scientific judgments, and to say, 'The scientists say this is safe, therefore we can do it. The scientists say this is unsafe, therefore we should stop.' We did a lot of follow-up work after the crisis to explain how scientific advice is given to government, and I constantly made the point that you can't get away from the responsibility for politicians to make political and ethical judgments about what should happen.

Should evacuation take place? Is it not necessary to move to that level? What are the risks and how do we mitigate them? These are ultimately are political judgments. Scientists can simply give you what they believe to be the facts or the balance of probability. I felt that Japanese politicians at that time were quite weak on making that separate set of judgments confidently. But having seen how British politicians also sometimes have difficulty in knowing where to draw the line in these areas, this may not be a specifically Japanese problem.

SR: Concluding thoughts?

DW: Well, like everybody else who's been interviewed or at least whose interviews I've read, I'm glad to have been part of the Foreign Office and to have had a diplomatic career. It wasn't the career I'd expected to have when I was at school and university. But I found myself enjoying it and stayed in.

One can always look back on one's life and think of different directions one could have taken. You have no means of knowing whether you would have been more or less satisfied at the end of different careers. But I was happy to be part of this institution. I had, and have, great

respect for its values, and professionalism. Like all institutions, not everybody in it is perfect. But I worked with some nice, congenial and impressive people, for the most part, over 37 years.

It has of course changed beyond recognition. That is a good thing. It was always, in my early and middle years, a bit of a club in which I never felt entirely comfortable as a member. That is a personal thing: it might well be that I wouldn't have found myself comfortable in any club. I'm not an enormously clubby person.

I do have criticisms. The Office was for a long time quite complacent, a little, shall we say, precious, easily wounded that its value was not better recognised by politicians, the media and the public. It could be upset and bewildered that it was not in some way insulated from all the constraints on resources and pressures for change that have sandbagged every other institution in the country.

I was looking through the papers I'd retained from my time on the Trade Union Side in the 1980s. This was a difficult period with ruthless clamping down on government resources, the need to make cuts not just to find savings but as part of continued pressure for efficiencies and changes in the way in which government operated. What comes out of a lot of the trade union papers was a sense of anger and hurt that we, with our dedication, commitment, loyalty and patriotism, should be subjected to this unfairness. At the same time, when the more objective members of the Foreign Office talked to MPs and some members of the public, what came across was the sense that the Foreign Office was seen as a rather aloof, arrogant and ivory-tower institution.

Maybe that was unfair. But, equally, there was a sense which persisted certainly into the early years of this century — I saw it when I returned to the Administration in 2004 — that criticism was unfair and that the world owed us more loyalty. I think that the leaders of the Office during this period did an impressive job in navigating their way through an exceptionally difficult political and resource climate. I suspect that we now have in the Office, with a much younger, much more diverse (in all senses) population of equally dedicated and committed diplomats, a very different atmosphere and culture, and one which is better aligned with a very different Britain. That seems to me a very healthy change.

That will sound unkind and critical of a lot of very decent people from earlier generations. I don't want to be unkind, but I am going to be critical - of myself as well, because I was part

of that culture. The changes I'm describing are changes in me, as much as in the Foreign Office. I am not the same person that I was in the first half of my career.

As far as policy content is concerned, my career has been mainly Asian and economic: I have had much less exposure to other areas of policy, such as defence, conflict resolution and Europe, although I have admired my colleagues' work in all these areas. I'm delighted that Japan was my career anchor: I'm pleased also to have spent so much of my career helping my country earn its living in the world through supporting British business and industry.

In Anthony King's and Ivor Crewe's book, 'The Blunders of our Governments', which eviscerates the failures of the British Government over the last fifty years, they identify securing the Nissan investment in Sunderland in the early 1980s as one of the (they argue, rare) governmental success stories. I can't claim credit for that: but I have played some part in sustaining the trade and investment relationship with Japan over that period, which is, I think, something we should be proud of.

There wasn't a minute of my time in the Foreign Office where I didn't find something intellectually stimulating somewhere in what I was doing. That's a great thing to be able to look back on at the end of a career.

## ANNEX

The 11 March 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear crisis: the British Embassy's response

[Article by David Warren published in Japan Forum, 2016]

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On 11 March 2011, Japan was struck by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, 250 miles northeast of Tokyo. Much of the north-eastern seaboard was devastated by the tsunami which followed. The subsequent explosions at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant led to evacuations from the affected region and concerns about the possibility of wider radiation contamination.

I was British Ambassador at the time. This is a personal record of the Embassy's response during this crisis, and how the main decisions and risk assessments were made by the British Government. Except in passing, it does not deal with Japanese Government actions, or the continuing controversies in Japan about TEPCO's management of Fukushima and the future of nuclear policy.

I emphasise the word "personal". My own experiences, however stressful, do not compare with those of the many thousands of individuals and families whose lives and livelihoods were destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami. This is an account of how I and my colleagues responded to the disaster, and what it felt like at the time.

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On Friday, 11 March, 2011, I went to a lunchtime reception at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo to celebrate its 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary. There was a rumour circulating that the governing Democratic Party of Japan was about to meet to discuss an allegation that Prime Minister Naoto Kan, whose popularity was already falling, had received an illegal political donation. Somebody told me that Kan might be out of office by the end of the afternoon. I

anticipated sending a note to the Foreign Office that evening if developments proved as dramatic as some were predicting.

I had an appointment with the senior British executive in Nissan, Andy Palmer, at 3.00 pm, to discuss the company's investment plans in Britain. Attracting Japanese investment to the UK was among my most important responsibilities. I left the Embassy, in my official car, at 2.00 pm. Masamoto Shimizu, the Embassy's senior inward investment officer, accompanied me. We headed for Nissan's headquarters in Yokohama. At 2.45, the car pulled into the Nissan forecourt, a concrete and glass skyscraper not far from the stylish Minato Mirai waterfront development.

My driver, Jun Yanagiya, felt the impact of the earthquake first, and reacted instantly. "*Jishin* (Earthquake)!" he exclaimed, and then "*Tsuyoi* (Strong)!". I had experienced many earthquakes in over thirty years of either living in or travelling to Japan, but nothing as powerful as this. Yanagiya-san manoeuvred the car as close to the tower block as possible, saying "*Kōji* (Construction works)!". He pointed to the cranes on the roof of the building next door, which were swaying and buckling from the impact of the earthquake. We sat in the car for what must have been two or three minutes, waiting for the shaking to recede. Eventually, it did; and the cranes stopped swaying.

I puzzled over what to do next. My appointment to see Andy was at 3.00. I did not want to be late. But the force of the quake was such that the elevators in the Nissan building would certainly have shut down. Andy's office was on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor, I thought, which meant quite a climb.... But my Blackberry was not functioning. How was I to speak to Andy and apologise to him for not making our appointment? It took me five minutes before I decided that I should return to Tokyo straight away. I felt ashamed that I had not grasped this immediately. Much later, I realised that for those five minutes, I had been in complete shock.

Shimizu-san lived in Yokohama, and made his way home to see that his family was safe. Yanagiya-san and I returned to Tokyo. What was normally a relatively short journey took hours. The motorways had shut and rail services had closed down. The roads filled up with traffic. I tried unsuccessfully to contact the Embassy on my Blackberry. Intermittently, we

felt aftershocks of surprising strength. I felt frustrated and guilty. I should have been at the Embassy, not uncontactable in an endless gridlock of cars.

We got occasional radio and television reports of the unfolding disaster. I saw hazy pictures of what appeared to be a tsunami. It was difficult to piece together what was happening. Eventually, one of the repeated telephone calls I was trying to place connected with my wife (who was in the UK and who had heard the early morning BBC radio news). I reassured her that I was safe. I began to receive e-mails. One of the first was from an Embassy colleague. All Embassy staff were accounted for, except me: was I all right? I had not realised that they might be as worried about me as I was about them.

I got back to the Embassy at 9.00 pm. I walked the last mile along the Imperial Palace moat. The streets were full of thousands of people walking home. There were no trains, no subways (until a few services resumed just before midnight), and the roads would remain blocked for many hours. I hurried into the Embassy compound and was handed my helmet and high visibility jacket. Everyone had moved to the building which normally housed our commercial, science and consular staff: we were in Crisis Centre mode, where we would stay for the next month.

Although the savage impact of the tsunami was clear, it was too early to make more than a preliminary assessment of casualties or of the consequences for British nationals. There were reports of a nuclear power station at Fukushima, 70 miles south of Sendai, having been damaged by the tsunami. I took a call from William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, enquiring about the welfare of Embassy staff, and seeking an update on what was happening in Tokyo. He focused on the developments at Fukushima, and the importance of making a fuller risk assessment as soon as possible.

Our main operational problem was that our telephones had not been working effectively since the earthquake. Even in ordinary circumstances, we would not have had the handling capacity to deal with the surge of calls from people in the UK worried about friends and relatives in Japan. The British Consulate-General in Osaka, in Western Japan, acted as our initial call centre. Our technical team did a heroic job in ensuring that we were able eventually to switch calls through to a call-handling centre in the UK.

After midnight, I gave the first of what, over the next ten days, would be several dozen media interviews, to BBC Radio 5 Live, Sky and BBC News 24. I could say little other than to give my personal impressions of the earthquake, and highlight our offer of assistance to the Japanese Government and our efforts to establish how many British nationals might have been affected.

I went back to my living quarters in the Ambassador's residence. The upstairs landing was strewn with books, upended plants and broken picture frames and ornaments. I went to bed about half-past one, and slept for four and a half hours.

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Approximately 130 staff worked in the British Embassy in Tokyo and our Consulate-General in Osaka in western Japan. About 30 were British diplomats, the others mostly Japanese nationals.

Our normal work in Japan was to promote British interests – political, military, commercial and industrial, scientific and technological, environmental, cultural and educational. We also assisted British nationals in distress or in difficulties with the Japanese authorities. Japan is the second largest developed economy in the world, a member of the major diplomatic groupings (the G7 and G20), and an important political and economic partner of Britain. The pace of Embassy work, with high-level visitors, constant reporting of major developments, and events on everything from climate change and cancer research seminars to cyber security workshops and fashion shows, was brisk.

All this stopped when we became a 24-hour crisis centre. One team focused on consular support to British nationals, one on gathering information from all available sources, and one on media handling. All were backed up by admin support, and overseen by a crisis manager. Staff worked three shifts a day of eight hours each. We were reinforced by Rapid Deployment Teams stationed in the region, as well as staff from London and other diplomatic posts. Approximately 80 people from around the world flew to Japan over that weekend to provide the necessary resilience. I became the crisis leader.

An Emergency Unit was opened in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, with whom we liaised throughout. We established a "battle rhythm" of telephone conferences

every four hours, preceded by situation reports, taking key operational decisions and feeding these into inter-departmental meetings in London, chaired in the COBRA committee (so named from its meeting in Cabinet Office Briefing Room A). Tokyo was connected to COBRA by telephone; when these were chaired by the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary, I took part myself.

Our response focused on three areas.

Firstly, liaison with the Japanese Government: what assistance could we give them? As the crisis developed, this contact would cover all areas where our decisions and deployments might affect perceptions of how the Japanese Government was responding.

Secondly, support for British nationals. How many might be caught up in the disaster? We assumed that most of those affected would have been in the three prefectures where the impact of the tsunami had been greatest – Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima. But there were fires and fallen buildings elsewhere. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of British citizens might be living or travelling in areas where there had been some damage. Around 17,000 British people lived in Japan - most in Tokyo, but thousands working, studying, or simply living, elsewhere. We had no accurate database. We encouraged people to register with the Embassy in case of emergency, but only a small proportion had done so. We thought that there were about 600 or so British passport-holders in the worst-affected areas.

Thirdly, travel advice. All Governments continuously update assessments of travel risks abroad – from terrorism, crime and natural disasters - coupled with advice on how to avoid problems. We would clearly need to revise our travel advice for Japan, not just to the region affected (which was immediately sealed off by the emergency services) but other parts of the country. This would be our risk assessment for British citizens.

Our work was carried out under conditions of intense public scrutiny: Those we were seeking to help, and their families in the UK, had constant access to social media, and for the traditional broadcast and print media this would be the major news story for at least the next week and possibly beyond. The nature of the crisis was complex. The earthquake was of terrifying intensity. But most of the destruction and loss of life, and the need to find and help British nationals, arose from the tsunami. And as the problems at Fukushima

deepened over the first weekend, it became quickly apparent that the issue for which we would be held most accountable would be the advice we gave on the dangers from radiation.

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The British Government's statement after the earthquake promised all the assistance we could give to the Japanese as they responded to the crisis. Japan is a highly developed country with ample resources to deal with such disasters, and there is a high level of expertise and experience in this area. But there was an outpouring of public concern in the UK at what had happened, and the Department for International Development made emergency resources immediately available, in the form of a search and rescue team drawn from fire brigades and ambulance services across the UK, with two sniffer dogs, to look for survivors.

It took time for the offer to be accepted. The Japanese Government wanted to align offers of aid with actual needs, which were not instantly clear - and decisions were being taken centrally by the Prime Minister's office, whose attention was understandably focused on the worsening situation at Fukushima. In the course of the Saturday morning, my deputy Head of Mission, David Fitton, broke this logjam, suggesting that we should fly the UK team, who were on standby at Manchester Airport, to the US air base at Misawa in Northern Japan, which would not require Japanese permission and would actually be closer to the affected area. When I told a senior Japanese official that this was what we would be doing, he responded that this was exactly what he hoped we would decide – but he could not have suggested it himself.

The search and rescue team arrived at Misawa on the Sunday evening and deployed to Ofunato City in Iwate prefecture, where they worked with US and Chinese teams until the end of that week, returning to the UK on 19 March. In due course, the British Government was also able to respond to separate Japanese requests for supplies of bottled water and radiation survey equipment to assist overstretched emergency teams.

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The possibility of British casualties was the main focus of UK media attention. Reports appeared immediately of individuals feared lost or missing. Calls to the helpline from people enquiring about friends and loved ones began to grow. We made initial contact with the local authorities over Friday night. They reported no British casualties at that point, but this could be no guide to the eventual outcome. Most of our wardens in the area – British residents with whom we maintained an emergency network – were uncontactable. Telephone calls to evacuation centres in Sendai were difficult. There were reports of foreigners sheltering there, but no confirmation of British evacuees. By mid-morning on Saturday, the police were reporting around 500 dead. It was obvious that the final toll would be considerably higher.

Slowly we began to establish a clearer picture. Social media helped – one teacher living in Sendai reported missing in the British press responded to our Facebook message. The key question was: how quickly could we deploy to the region?

This was a personal judgement for me as well. I had spent most of the Saturday overseeing the establishment of the fully-staffed crisis centre, dealing with the Japanese Government on our offers of search and rescue (as well as nuclear) assistance, and later in the day doing media interviews (usually at UK breakfast time). But in my evening tele-conference, it became increasingly clear that I now needed to move to Sendai, however difficult the conditions on the ground there might be. The first British correspondents were already broadcasting from the scene of the disaster. The British Ambassador and his team had to be close behind them if we were to avoid media criticism.

We therefore decided that the first consular team – six of us in all - should deploy early on Sunday 13 March. By this point, following the explosion at Unit 1 in the Fukushima nuclear reactor, the Japanese Government had imposed a 20 km exclusion zone around Fukushima Dai-ichi. Our route to Sendai did not pass that close to the danger area, but colleagues in London insisted that a proper risk assessment involving all staff deploying should take place before departure. In the meantime, an instruction came through from the Foreign Office press centre that “the Ambassador must make every effort to get to Sendai before Jeremy Browne [the FCO Minister for Asia] does Radio 5 Live at 0700 UK time”. Crisis management

in a 24/7 media world means that an effective response and public presentation are intertwined.

We had clearance from the Japanese authorities as the main road to Sendai was blocked to all but emergency vehicles. It took us seven hours to reach the city, stopping on the way to pick up what supplies of food we could – mainly *o-nigiri* rice cakes from a motorway service station. We knew that essential supplies would be difficult (and until word came through that we had managed to get some rooms in a small “salaryman” hotel, we had no idea where we would be sleeping).

We drove into Sendai at about 3.30 pm and established our base. I had expected to see devastation, and was surprised that the centre of the city, superficially, seemed almost unaffected by the disaster. But then I saw the cracks in masonry, the broken windows in still-standing buildings, the queues for food and fuel, and realised that the power supplies, though beginning to be re-connected, remained intermittent.

Two of the team set off for the main hospitals: I went with two others to the *kenchō* [Prefectural Headquarters]. The main entrance hall had become an improvised emergency centre for evacuated families. We found the office which co-ordinated the JET programme – the scheme which brought thousands of young people to Japan every year to teach English, and on which a number of British teachers were working in or near Sendai. We learned that all had been accounted for, and met senior prefectural officials, to whom we expressed our condolences for what had happened. Everyone was extraordinarily kind and courteous – they must have been shattered, but there was no sign of anything other than stoical resilience.

By the Sunday afternoon, the death toll was mounting. Over three thousand people had called the helpline. At the UK end, the Police Casualty Bureau was handling calls, with the Gwent force in the lead. With many British still missing, I felt that it was inevitable that there would be casualties. I was more worried about giving too reassuring an impression than alarming people with the danger of bad news. I was wrong – in the event, there were no British deaths in the disaster - but there was no way of knowing that at this stage. So I erred on the side of caution, even if the result was always to be grilled on why I couldn't be more specific.

Over the following two days, we drove out of Sendai along the coast which had been devastated by the tsunami – to the suburb of Tagajo, where we knew that at least one British family had been living; Kessenuma, 80 miles north, one of the worst-affected communities, and on the Tuesday Minamisanriku, another coastal town destroyed by the huge wave. To drive through miles of beautiful, undulating Tohoku countryside, and then to emerge from a valley, catch sight of the sea, and then what seemed a moonscape of debris and matchwood - a thriving community obliterated in minutes – was profoundly disturbing.

The frequency of the aftershocks also made us nervous of further tsunami. Our mobile coverage was intermittent, and colleagues in Tokyo had to monitor earthquake warnings and notify us on our cumbersome iridium satellite phones of any danger. Back at base, I found that the constant, severe tremors weighed much more heavily on my nerves than any fears about radiation, although eventually I found I could sleep through them.

Five more teams made the journey from Tokyo, and spread out across the region. We had been evicted from our hotel by a large CNN contingent on the Monday, but were able to move into the Holiday Inn – no food or drink, but a space in the atrium where we put up a Union Jack, and established a helpdesk. We secured a large conference room, where we mounted a handwritten spreadsheet on the wall, with the names of individuals identified as at risk, who had not yet been found.

Gradually, we accounted for most of those listed as missing, and made contact with a substantial number of British residents, some of whom did want to be evacuated, at least temporarily. In all we found more than 170 people. We organised coaches – by a circuitous route via Yamagata prefecture, as by then the worsening situation at Fukushima had meant that the exclusion zone had widened and now cut across the highway to Tokyo. The first left on Thursday 17 March, arriving in Tokyo in the early hours of the Friday morning. We repeated this on the following two days.

I was back in Tokyo by the time the first evacuees arrived, and met each of the buses on arrival. To see in the flesh people who had simply been names on our list, and whom I had assumed might have died in the tsunami, was very moving. I was discovering that at moments of intense crisis, one can be constantly surprised by emotions that are difficult to control. I was also in awe at the combination of unimaginable destruction and an

extraordinary spirit of calm endurance and resilience among the Japanese that we met. I tried to reflect this in my press statements, without giving way publicly to the emotion I felt: privately, it was different.

And I was still giving media interviews, in which I explained what we were doing, gave the telephone numbers that people should ring for help, talked (as far as I could) about the problems at Fukushima, and paid tribute to the efforts of the Japanese Government and people. There were surreal moments. On the Monday afternoon, I spoke to the ITV Breakfast show from a service station outside Sendai. Connected with the studio during the commercial break preceding my interview, I eavesdropped on the hosts' cheerful, showbiz banter with Ant and Dec, their star guests, before it was time for me to update everyone on the unfolding disaster. I felt – indeed I was - in another world.

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I had intended to spend two nights in Sendai, but in the event spent three. By the time I got back to Tokyo at midday on Wednesday 16 March, our travel advice was coming under intense scrutiny because of developments at Fukushima.

Following the Unit 1 explosion on 12 March, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency announced a Level 4 incident (accident with local consequences). Seawater was used to cool the reactor. There was a further explosion in Unit 3 on the Monday, and venting of steam and hydrogen from Units 1, 2 and 4, with elevated radiation levels. On Tuesday, there was an explosion at Unit 2.

Our initial advice had been straightforward. There was clearly no possibility of anyone visiting the affected region. British nationals should observe the exclusion zone imposed by the Japanese authorities. We advised against non-essential travel to Tokyo, given the interruption to air services, and shortages of essential supplies, occasional power outages and other disruption to normal life there.

The advice was kept under review in our teleconferences, and in London by the Foreign Office under the scrutiny of COBRA. The scientific assessments underpinning it came from the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE), an inter-departmental group of scientists, from Government and academia, chaired by the Government's Chief Scientific

Adviser, Sir John Beddington. A monitoring group was set up through the Met Office to assess how the weather was likely to develop – if it moved in the wrong direction, the possibility of radioactive material reaching centres of population would increase.

The initial assessment was that there were no concerns about human health outside the 20km exclusion zone. In the event of a “reasonable worst case scenario” – a meltdown caused by the Japanese being unable to cool the reactors and keep the pressure in the containment vessels at an appropriate level – there was a danger of explosion. But SAGE still saw no unmanageable problems within 20kms.

At David Fitton’s suggestion, Sir John briefed members of the British community by telephone conference on Tuesday 15 March, together with officials in the Department of Health and the Health Protection Agency. The transcript was disseminated by social media (and re-tweeted by the Japanese Prime Minister’s Office). This helped to calm everyone’s nerves. But as radiation levels on site continued to rise, Self-Defence Force helicopters carried out seawater drops to cool units 1, 2 and 3, it appeared to little effect, and concerns about the water level and shared fuel storage pool temperature at the reactor grew.

This led to a change in our advice, both to align ourselves with the US’s insisting on an 80km exclusion zone around the Fukushima plant, and to nuance our position on whether it was safe to remain in Tokyo. This was complicated by the fact that some European embassies had already reacted to the worsening crisis at Fukushima by deciding to move from the capital, and advising their citizens to do so too. The first to do so was France, citing the probability of a further earthquake and the uncertainty of the nuclear position: others followed, although a number (including Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Ireland) joined us and the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in staying in Tokyo.

The new concern related to the vulnerability of the spent fuel rods at Fukushima, which could generate a higher level of radiation through fires or minor explosions. SAGE was asked to re-assess the “worst case scenario” – a simultaneous release from the ponds containing the equivalent of six reactor cores and the three at-risk reactors at Fukushima, and a change in the weather (the wind at this point was continuing to blow eastwards towards the Pacific). Its conclusion was explained by Sir John in another teleconference with the British community on 18 March: “Even in that worst case situation and I would

emphasise that this is an extremely unlikely case ... the level of radiation around Tokyo would be extremely modest. Although there would be radiation increases, even in this extreme case the effect on human health could be substantially mitigated by just taking very simple precautions. By essentially staying indoors while the plume of radiation passed over, not having your ventilation on, and keeping your windows closed.”

The scientific advice had not substantially changed. But the danger of leaving British citizens in harm's way was always uppermost in Ministers' minds. When I briefed the Prime Minister, from Sendai, on the Monday evening, immediately before he made his statement to Parliament, I had been dismissive of some other European governments' implementing evacuation scenarios precipitately, and on the basis of no clear scientific advice. But he pointed out that we did not yet know exactly what sort of incident this might prove to be. Nuancing our assessment, from “manageable” to “manageable with mitigations required in extremis”, inevitably raised a question about the possibility of a worst-case scenario. How could we take an approach that was precautionary, without unintentionally panicking everyone into behaviour that would make the worst-case scenario a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Wednesday and Thursday 16 and 17 March were therefore the most difficult and tense days of the crisis. We had not started to evacuate British nationals from Sendai, where the weather was beginning to worsen; we were being asked to explain why we were not following the example of some those EU countries who were leaving Tokyo; our following the US lead on the 80km exclusion zone meant that we could no longer use the Sendai-Tokyo road, but would need to take the long route via Niigata; we still had teams searching in the region; and our own staff in Tokyo were understandably nervous and uncertain about the nuclear implications, particularly as the EU were not speaking with one voice.

We had already begun, privately, to plan an emergency relocation of the Embassy to our Consulate-General in Osaka; but I frankly had no idea how we would evacuate over 11,000 British nationals from the Tokyo area, if the worst case scenario materialised, we had to advise them to leave, and air services immediately ceased because of the unavailability of insurance.

The upshot was that our travel advice was changed overnight on the Wednesday/Thursday, following discussion at COBRA, from recommending against non-essential travel to

suggesting that British nationals should “consider leaving” Tokyo, without actively recommending them to do so. Some foreign citizens – particularly those working for multinational companies - had already left over the weekend. And while the worst effects were being felt along the eastern seaboard nearer the earthquake zone, constant aftershocks and fuel and food shortages were making life in Tokyo less comfortable.

COBRA also authorised the issuing of iodine to British nationals, as the scientific advice had been that this should form part of any mitigating actions for vulnerable individuals, for example pregnant women and small children. The first supplies arrived in Tokyo on the Friday, and we set up an ad hoc distribution point in a hotel near the embassy, as well as distributing some supplies in Sendai and Niigata. Uptake was steady rather than brisk; by the middle of the second week we had switched to handing it out at the consular counter or by post.

By then we were also bringing the evacuation buses out of Sendai. We also chartered flights to Hong Kong for British nationals who had decided to leave Tokyo as a result of our upgrading our travel advice: four flights left in all, but only a small number of British nationals took up the offer of assistance.

We adopted a line that was appropriate in the circumstances, and avoided precipitating an exodus. It was not ideal: it meant that we had to withdraw our emergency teams from the 80km zone and could not support those British nationals who had decided to stay inside the 80km but outside the 30km zones. But it protected us against accusations of complacency or panic. I gave a BBC television interview on the Thursday evening, in which I was quizzed on why we were not taking the crisis as seriously as the French appeared to be, and moving to an evacuation. When I next spoke to BBC TV on Sunday, the questioning focused on why we were handing out iodine and thus worrying people. This reassured me then that we were taking the right line – and retrospectively, it is clear that in staying in Tokyo, we made the correct call. Doing my TV interviews out of doors also helped to get the message across that Tokyo was not at risk from radiation.

We had to ensure that what we were doing for our staff and families was consistent with the advice that we were giving to British citizens. The Embassy is an employer: many British officials had spouses, partners and families with them. Some families had already made

arrangements to leave Tokyo after the initial earthquake. We offered voluntary evacuation terms to families who wished to leave. Some chose to take up this option, others to stay.

Most members of the Embassy were Japanese nationals. A number of them had family in the region affected by the earthquake and tsunami. All assumed their posts in the crisis centre and began work before they knew that their families were safe. No words are strong enough to praise the courage and professionalism that they and indeed all the members of the crisis centre showed during this period of sustained effort and pressure. A number of officials, including our three very brave Japanese drivers, who ferried people and supplies back and forth between Tokyo and the Tohoku, were recognised in the 2012 Honours List. We were strongly supported throughout by a very professional team in Whitehall.

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By the end of the first week of the crisis, we had evacuated a number of Britons from the region and from Tokyo; we had agreed travel advice that was appropriate to a situation (outside the exclusion zone) that was uncertain but not unstable; and we had effectively established that there were no British casualties. (The latter point sounds straightforward, but it took weeks before we could confirm that every name on our lists of “missing” people had been accounted for: most people re-contacted their families without, understandably, telling us.)

The pace of work began to lessen. But the crisis centre remained operational for some weeks, particularly to monitor the situation at Fukushima, which the Japanese authorities took a long time to get under control. On 18 March, the NISA rating of the severity of the incident was raised to 5 (the same as Three Mile Island in 1979), and later in April it went up to 7 (the highest available). This made it harder to relax our travel advice to reflect the fact – as John Beddington and the SAGE scientists had correctly assessed at the outset – that however grave the position around Fukushima Dai-ichi, the dangers elsewhere were minimal. Slowly, normal Embassy work and life began to resume.

I formally recommended relaxing our advice in a note to the Foreign Office on 31 March. I was already concerned, with the British School in Tokyo reopening the following week (as the French Lycée already had), that our advice was now out of kilter with people’s

behaviour, and thought to be too restrictive by the British community and by businesses in the UK. Of course, we remained concerned about the situation at Fukushima. But our view was that the information being put out by the Japanese Government was reliable, and at a meeting of the US, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Ambassadors on Tuesday 5 April, we agreed that there was no longer any scientific evidence of a health risk to Tokyo.

There was a general consensus at the COBRA later that day that we should relax the advice. We worked out the detailed lines overnight. There was a last-minute glitch on the Wednesday afternoon when we picked up a report that TEPCO, fearing a build-up of hydrogen in the containment vessels, was announcing an injection of nitrogen to prevent an explosion. But the team in London was able to agree new travel advice with the Foreign Secretary, enabling us to announce it in the early Thursday morning Tokyo time.

This was an important moment. It was not just that we were moving back towards normality. It also showed solidarity with Japan after a period of terrible suffering. I had been shocked to hear from some visitors from the UK that there was a general perception in some quarters that the whole of Japan was a danger zone. This was frankly crazy. In part, it reflected irresponsible and melodramatic press comment, in part misunderstandings of what the press were actually saying. It was important to correct this. Re-establishing contacts – commercial, cultural, political – between Britain and Japan became the focus of our work over the next couple of months.

As of February 2016, nearly 16,000 people are confirmed to have died in the disaster. Another 2,500 are still missing. The British business community, members of the Embassy, and organisations in the UK promoting friendly links with Japan, including the Japan Society (of which I am now the Chairman) have taken part in much practical activity to fund and assist the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the communities which had been destroyed. The work continues, as do the attempts to manage the aftermath of Fukushima, and the continuing build-up of radioactive water on the site.

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I have focused in this paper on the British Government's administrative response to the crisis. I believe that we made the right judgements, in terms of protecting our citizens and

not destabilising an already volatile situation. These were strengthened by the expert scientific advice of Sir John Beddington and his colleagues, and by Ministers, who never allowed expedience to override balanced judgement. On the whole, the media, which can be unforgiving in many such situations, were balanced in their comments; there were not too many criticisms; and those we were able to help were generous in their appreciation.

There were no UK fatalities; but people from a number of other countries did feature in the overall death toll. Had the situation been different, we would have been dealing with an even more harrowing set of circumstances. As it was, many of us found the events of March 2011 exhausting and distressing. But teamwork, admiration for the courage and resilience of the Japanese people, and relief in eventually coming through an unpredictably complex and stressful set of crises, were sources of strength at a very difficult time.