

BDOHP Biographical details and index

Lord Wright of Richmond (28.06.31-06.03.20)

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Lord Wright of Richmond

This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Lord Wright of Richmond at his home in East Sheen on Monday, 16 October 2000.

MMcB: “Lord Wright, you were born in 1931, educated at Marlborough and Merton College, Oxford, you did a couple of years’ national service in the Royal Artillery, and then joined the Diplomatic Service, presumably after going to Oxford, in 1965. Did you come in through the open competition?”

Lord Wright: “Yes, I did, and not, I am bound to say, because of any particular passionate desire to involve myself in foreign affairs. It was very largely to meet the challenge of the Foreign Service exam, which, I hasten to say, I genuinely did not expect to pass, and was rather astonished to find out that I’d come out equal top. I was already quite a good French speaker, no credit to me but credit to the people who taught me from an early age. I had read Classics, and I was later to discover, rather surprisingly, that a knowledge of Latin and Greek was an extraordinary help in learning entirely unrelated oriental languages. So I had an interest in languages. I had, I suppose, a moderately intelligent young man’s interest in what went on in the world, but I had actually, I suppose like most of us entering the Diplomatic Service in those days, if not now, a fairly vague idea of what it was I was trying to get into, or, rather, what it was I was seeing whether I could get into.”

MMcB: “There were no family connections with the Diplomatic Service?”

Lord Wright: “None whatsoever. I come from a family almost exclusively composed of schoolmasters, and although I went to school at Marlborough College, I was actually brought up at Wellington College where my father was a housemaster. I was born and bred there. In fact, it was my home for the first twenty-one years of my life, a school of

which I'm now a Governor. I had Colonial Service relations, an uncle who'd been a district officer in Northern Rhodesia, and a great-uncle who'd been Surveyor-General of India, a man who married a widow in his late middle age, a widow with four children. It was said of this great-uncle, whose name was Couchman, 'Typical of old Couch, he always was the laziest man in India.' But that apart, father, grandfather, and two great-uncles, were all schoolmasters."

MMcB: "So you took this simply as a challenge to your intellectual ability? What about your national service. Did you go anywhere with the Royal Artillery?"

Lord Wright: "I was a gunner in Germany. Actually, to be accurate, I was only in the Royal Artillery for a year and a half because I managed to get myself in as the last intake doing 18 months' national service before it went up to two, which involved leaving school two weeks before the end of my last term in order to get up to university the next autumn. But yes, I was in Germany for a year, and I'm afraid rather to my shame, when I later became ambassador in Luxembourg, I did not have a fluent knowledge of German."

MMcB: "National service was a bit like that, wasn't it."

Lord Wright: "It was, and in those days, in 1950, living a very sort of enclosed, almost monastic community inside the mess."

MMcB: "You got a national service commission?"

Lord Wright: "Yes."

MMcB: "And then, having joined the Foreign Office, they sent you off to MECAS" (Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies).

Lord Wright: “That’s right. I had really only one close acquaintance in the Foreign Service, considerably older than myself, who warned me on no account to allow myself to be drafted in to learn a hard language. He said, and I think this very much reflected feelings higher up in the Service at that time, that if you were made to learn a hard language, you would miss all the glamorous and exciting bits of Foreign Service life. I now think this was totally, totally false advice, which happily I didn’t find myself following. But I think there was a picture then that in the Service you either went and did a sort of Levant Consular job, speaking abstruse languages to the fuzzy-wuzzies, or you spent your life in the glamorous chancelleries of Europe.

It is worth noting, and I haven’t actually done a real check on this, but I think I’m right in saying that my predecessor as PUS, Antony Acland, was the first hard linguist to reach the top of the Service. Others, of course, had learned languages, and Paul Gore-Booth probably spoke Burmese from his time as ambassador in Burma. But Antony Acland, like me, started off at MECAS as an Arabist. He actually rather rapidly was de-Arabised and never went near an Arab posting again after Kuwait.”

MMcB: “You were saying that your Classics education, or study, fitted you to master an Oriental language.”

Lord Wright: “Well, I think it helps, not only because, as you know, learning Latin and Greek to quite a high standard, and of course philosophy and the other things which go with a Greats degree at Oxford, is quite an intellectual task, but also because an understanding of grammar and the structure of language (although, as I say, Semitic languages have virtually no connection at all with Latin or Greek), meant that one could understand what language and grammar was, which I think some of my colleagues actually found very difficult to do.”

MMcB: “Indeed. So you were referring to Arabic?”

Lord Wright: “Yes, that’s right.”

MMcB: “What was your impression of MECAS?”

Lord Wright: “Well, I was there, luckily, at a time when it was taken rather firmly by the scruff of the neck and given a complete change of direction under Donald Maitland as Director and, perhaps even more significantly, under James Craig as Principal Instructor, whom I was later to succeed twice as ambassador in Syria and ambassador in Saudi Arabia. But James, in those days, was still an academic from Durham on loan to the Service, and not a career diplomat. James Craig and Donald Maitland really beefed up the syllabus. In fact, they were responsible between them for producing an entirely new MECAS grammar and word list, and it was really taken very seriously. With no disrespect to the late Mr Trott, who was the director before, he was actually primarily a Persian expert. He did also speak Arabic, but was very much an old-school Arabist who regarded Arabic as a classical language as opposed to a spoken means of communication. So certainly, my colleagues and I benefited enormously.”

MMcB: “Is it still going?”

Lord Wright: “No, not in Lebanon. I’m not absolutely certain what the current arrangements are, but there is still an arrangement to teach people Arabic.”

MMcB: “I would hope so.”

Lord Wright: “I would hope so. Indeed, we’re going to need them very badly. One of my colleagues, Peter Mansfield, later became a writer on the Middle East, was a journalist and wrote a definitive work on the Arabs and on Nasser. Anyway, Peter was a contemporary of mine and entered the Service at the same time, and resigned over Suez. I think he was the only member of the Service who did.”

MMcB: “A lot of other people thought about it.”

Lord Wright: “I know.”

MMcB: “But you had only just joined.”

Lord Wright: “That’s right. I was in the Lebanon the whole way through Suez, not of course having any idea what was going on, any more than the British ambassador to Egypt knew what was going on, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan. Peter Mansfield wrote a rather cheeky letter to the head of Personnel Department, submitting his resignation and saying that he didn’t think the Service need be too distressed at losing an Arabist since, if British policy in the Middle East continued as it was, they wouldn’t have any need of Arabists at all. And, of course, immediately after Suez, we had diplomatic relations broken with almost every country in the Middle East, though there were still diplomats there, in the shape of interest sections.”

MMcB: “Yes, it really was an incredible disaster, wasn’t it?”

Lord Wright: “But, actually, just looking back over my career, and particularly with the current disaster going on in the Middle East, it does seem to me that successive governments have allowed their policy towards the Middle East to be quite distorted by domestic opinion on Israel and the Jews. I may say that I was delighted when Barak became Prime Minister of Israel, because I thought the disasters of Netanyahu would actually be behind them. Sharon must bear heavy responsibility for what’s happened over the past month, but it has depressed me, the extent to which British and European opinion, but of course much more significantly, United States’ opinion, has tended to see the Middle East through a really very distorted vision.”

MMcB: “Well, through domestic United States policy.”

Lord Wright: “Absolutely, and particularly New York opinion, of course.”

MMcB: “It’s outrageous to me that international affairs can be governed by domestic opinion.”

Lord Wright: “I’ve quite often quoted a remark made by Bernard Shaw, who said that he had some sympathy for the devil because God had written all the books. But, you know, there aren’t many devils writing the Arab case. In fact, I’ve very recently been functioning as a judge for the annual prize awarded in memory of David Watt. I don’t know if you remember the name, but David Watt was political correspondent of ‘The Times’ and, at different times, ‘The Financial Times’ and ‘Spectator’, and tragically died in an accident. He was a very close friend of mine; we were at school and university together. But, the reason why I am one of the judges is as ex-chairman of Chatham House, because David was director of Chatham House. We have, this year, awarded the prize to Edward Said. I don’t know if you’ve read any of his writing.”

MMcB: “No, but I was listening to him on the radio this morning.”

Lord Wright: “Were you. Well, he is one of the few people I would regard (though of course not everybody would) as balanced, and very brave in putting forward the Arab case.”

MMcB: “He speaks English with a fairly strong American accent.”

Lord Wright: “Yes, he does. Well, he is American now, he lives in the States, in fact he teaches in the States. I think he teaches at Columbia, I’m not sure.”

MMcB: “That would explain that then. That proves to me why they need to do their proselytising.”

Lord Wright: “That’s right. I mean, I suppose I was more conscious of this pro-Israeli bias during my time as private secretary to Harold Wilson. I don’t think even the Foreign Office across the road realised the extent to which Wilson was influenced by his direct contacts with Israelis, many of whom, I think, were brought to see him by Marcia Falkender who was extremely close to the Israelis. In the year I worked for Harold Wilson, I doubt whether a week went by without Wilson seeing either an Israeli minister or the Israeli ambassador or some Israeli personality.”

MMcB: “How strange. I wonder what the reason for that was. He was Leeds born with a Liverpool constituency.”

Lord Wright: “And didn’t have the reasons that Mrs Thatcher had, as MP for Finchley. Mrs Thatcher, actually, conducted a rather balanced foreign policy on the Middle East, and, of course, it was under her that we concluded the various deals with Saudi Arabia.”

MMcB: “Do you think that the extent of our indebtedness to the Americans in the post-war world was one reason why we were so anxious to accommodate their views?”

Lord Wright: “Yes, I think partly indebtedness, partly a real understanding of our defence and intelligence and nuclear relationship, which is, of course, still of an entirely different dimension from our relationship with our European partners. Where, I think, public opinion, and government opinion, very often went wrong, was to see our relationship with the United States, the so-called Special Relationship (it has become rather unfashionable to call it that now), to see that relationship as an alternative to our European status. On that, I would draw attention to what I think is really the locus classicus on the American view, and that is in Ray Seitz’s book ‘Over Here’ (I don’t know if you’ve read it). I was checking this morning and it’s on pages 333, 334. He gets, I think, an absolutely masterly statement of the American attitude to the British relationship with Europe. Basically, this is that the Americans have supported a degree of European integration, with some caveats, but think that Europe will be a much more sensible place if Britain is in it rather than if Britain is out of it. I happen to think that this talk about a North American Free Trade Area is nonsense, but we all have different views on that. I think, looking back on 36 years in the Service, the two distortions that have distressed me have first of all been on our Middle East policy, and the second of course, on our European policy where we have successively missed the bus, again and again, since Messina, and look like doing it again. Well, not look like doing it again, but doing it again.

I was, of course, at No.10 during the referendum on renegotiation in 1975, and saw Wilson, in a sense at his best, as a political operator. Wilson claimed that he had entered that campaign with an open mind. I don't believe it at all. I think he was determined from the start that the government should win the referendum and remain in Europe, whatever his hesitations about Europe, in public, and particularly his relationship with the Germans, in public. It's very interesting that, in a sense, one saw (this is not the only echo one saw of Wilson in Mrs Thatcher's time), the sensitivity about being seen to be cosy with the Germans, and perhaps an even greater sensitivity about being seen, or indeed being cosy, with the Japanese. I put that down to a generational gap; but it was also, certainly in Wilson's case, a belief that British public opinion did not want to see its leaders cosying up with the Germans."

MMcB: "It's surprising though, for a leader, to be so sensitive to opinion instead of leading it."

Lord Wright: "You could, I think, say the same for the present government, in its attitude to the European currency. I deplore the fact that this government has not given more of a lead on the European currency. If it wanted to make up its mind that it shouldn't join the European currency, then say so, but not to have steered public opinion more is very sad. But I should say that for all the talk in the last few weeks, in the last year, of personality conflicts in the present government (and I only know about them from what I read in the press), they are as nothing to the personality conflicts which I saw at first hand in No.10 in 1975 and 1976, which of course is the only time I had the chance to see them at close quarters. During the rows that went on in Cabinet (and as Foreign Affairs Private Secretary, I sat in on most discussions on foreign affairs, defence and Northern Ireland), Ministers were astonishingly rude to each other. And not only because of political differences. Wilson's relationship with Roy Jenkins, whose views on Europe he probably more or less shared, were actually as bad as his relationship with Tony Benn, whose views he hardly shared at all."

MMcB: "And what about George Brown? He was still around then wasn't he?"

Lord Wright: “No, George Brown had gone by then. I once met George Brown at a reception in the Dorchester, I think it was. I went up to him (he was standing in a group), and he seized me, and introduced me to the people he was talking with as ‘this is one of the people who buggered my career’. I know exactly why he thought that. He realised I was Private Secretary at No.10, and he did a transposition to Michael Palliser, whom he certainly might have accused of having buggered his career, because Michael was Wilson’s Private Secretary when the great row happened. I think of more interest to me as an ex-diplomat, and perhaps to you, is George Brown’s time as Foreign Secretary and his relationship with the Permanent Under-Secretary, whose private secretary I was, Paul Gore-Booth. I was able to see the really appalling result of a foreign secretary and his permanent under-secretary in a virtually non-speaking relationship, happily a situation which I did not find with any of the three foreign secretaries to whom I was permanent under-secretary.”

MMcB: “Perhaps you would like to comment on the position that Paul Gore-Booth found himself in.”

Lord Wright: “Well, a very, very difficult situation, which I’m bound to say (and I speak as a great admirer of Paul Gore-Booth, I was extremely fond of him), I am not sure that he always handled it very sensibly. Did you ever know him?”

MMcB: “Yes.”

Lord Wright: “He was, as you know, a very upright Christian Scientist and had very firm views on morals and so on, and, of course, a teetotaller. In almost every respect he was about as different from George Brown as it is possible to be: rather reserved and, as I say, very upright, a non-drinker, and made the mistake, which I tried gently, and I hope tactfully, but ineffectively, to get him to change, he tended to dress in black jacket and striped trousers, rather like a ‘Daily Express’ cartoon of a British diplomat. Although I never attended meetings (because as his private secretary I was down looking after the office) which he and George Brown attended together, I was told George Brown was consistently offensive to him. Eventually, Paul Gore-Booth virtually gave up going to

the meetings. I used to get accounts from other members of the office of the appalling rows that happened.”

MMcB: “Of course Paul Gore-Booth was far too gentlemanly to respond.”

Lord Wright: “That’s right. But, of course, George Brown saw this Old Etonian, Oxbridge graduate, striped trousers, non-drinker, gentleman, everything that got under George Brown’s skin.”

MMcB: “Does that deal with your time as Private Secretary to the PUS?”

Lord Wright: “Yes, I suppose so, really. It was a fascinating job. I’ve been extremely lucky in having a whole series of fascinating jobs in my career, but I suppose the Private Secretary to the Permanent Under-Secretary (one of the few people who knows the combination of the green safe), has as good an insight into what’s going on in the Service, generally and over policy, but particularly the running of the Service, has an almost better view, perhaps, than the Chief Clerk. It is an extraordinarily central and pivotal and privileged position to be in. So you can imagine, as Permanent Under-Secretary, it was slightly worrying for me to have as Foreign Secretary somebody who’d already done that job. I used to tell Douglas Hurd that I was in the rather unusual position of having absolutely no secrets that I could reveal to him because he knew them all.

I should just say on Douglas Hurd, and I don’t want to talk about personalities too much, I never actually felt as close to Douglas Hurd as I did to Geoffrey Howe, or indeed to John Major. I have enormous respect for him. I think he was one of the best Foreign Secretaries we’ve had, but there was a barrier which I was conscious of. I don’t know to what extent the late David Gilmore was really conscious of this (I’m not sure that I ever discussed it with him in detail), but I think Douglas Hurd was very conscious of the fact that he had been a member of the Diplomatic Service, and very worried that we would therefore regard him as “one of us”, with all the complications that would have for his relationship with Mrs Thatcher. So he always tried to keep a certain arm’s length. It may

just be that he's a political animal, but it may account for the fact that he never really showed close interest (frankly, I welcomed this) in the administration of the Service in personnel matters. He very much let the Permanent Under-Secretary, Chief Clerk and the administration, get on with it. It did have some disadvantages, particularly when it came to the public expenditure round. Of course, he was not an ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer, as Geoffrey Howe had been, or, as John Major had been, Financial Secretary, but Douglas Hurd was, I think, bored by the annual round, and certainly his first year, I found it quite difficult to get him really involved in the negotiations, the very difficult negotiations which the Foreign Secretary has to conduct with the Treasury. That, virtually, would be my only criticism, if it is a criticism, of Douglas Hurd, who was, as I say, a very remarkable and of course extremely experienced, not just because he'd been a diplomat as a young man, but as an ex-Minister of State."

MMcB: "Before we get on to that, we've skipped over your period as private secretary to the ambassador in Washington, at a very formative time in your career."

Lord Wright: "I was private secretary to two ambassadors in Washington. I went there as private secretary to Harold Caccia, who of course came back then to be Permanent Under-Secretary. I don't know if you ever knew him, but he was hyper-active, a workaholic, and an interventionist. I can illustrate this by one story. A letter once came in to the ambassador about Cuba (this was some time before the Cuban missile crisis) and he handed it to me and said, 'Would you do me a draft reply.' I took the letter away, and instead of sitting down to do a draft reply, I took it along the corridor to Jill Brown who was the desk officer for Latin America in Chancery. I said to Jill, 'Could you very kindly do us a draft reply for that?' I got back to my office to find Harold Caccia standing in my office, saying, 'How are you going to reply to that letter on Cuba?' I said, 'Well, I'm not actually, I've asked Jill Brown to do a draft.' So he walked along the corridor to ask Jill Brown how she was going to do it. That's just a silly little story, but Harold Caccia, of course, had been an extremely successful career diplomat and thought, with considerable justification, that he could do everybody's job a great deal better than they could themselves."

He was, of course, succeeded by David Ormsby-Gore, later Lord Harlech, who, as an ex-Minister of State, expected me, as his private secretary, to operate like a ministerial private secretary. When I would say to him, 'Denis Greenhill (who was the Minister) would like to come and see you,' he'd say, 'What does he want to see me about?' Now, such a thing would never have occurred to Harold Caccia, who indeed, if Denis Greenhill said he wanted to see the ambassador, would probably have walked straight down the corridor to find out what Greenhill wanted. This is not a surprising contrast at all. Ormsby-Gore was a politician. We might get on to the question of professionals versus politicians in the Service, but to my mind it was an inspired appointment. He already knew Kennedy well, and indeed there was a rather indirect family relationship, but that's all well-known. Actually, it wasn't well-known at the time, and I don't know how much it's really covered in, for instance, the biographies of Macmillan. But there was this extraordinarily close relationship which led Kennedy to consult Ormsby-Gore on things that were absolutely nothing to do with Britain. He regarded Ormsby-Gore as a trusted political adviser."

MMcB: "Apparently he had that sort of relationship with Harold Macmillan too."

Lord Wright: "Yes, I think he did. It was, of course, a more, in the genuine sense, a more nepotistic relationship. I mean, 'Uncle Harold' was very much the older man. It became something of a joke in Washington, this extraordinary play-acting, as it was, this sort of avuncular adviser to Kennedy. I don't know genuinely how much at ease Kennedy felt with Macmillan. I never saw them together (other than at the Nassau Conference) but I did see Ormsby-Gore and Kennedy together. They were extremely close."

MMcB: "Do you think that operated in Britain's advantage in any way?"

Lord Wright: "I don't know the extent to which Ormsby-Gore was able actually to make an input into the Cuba missile crisis. Kennedy certainly was very closely in touch with us over the Cuba missile crisis and it was, as I'm sure you remember, the nearest (I hope) that any of us will ever have come to nuclear war. It was extraordinarily sensitively

handled, both by John Kennedy and by his brother Robert. David Ormsby-Gore's relationship with both brothers was extremely close, and Robert Kennedy certainly kept closely in touch with Ormsby-Gore when he, Robert Kennedy, was talking to the Soviet ambassador, Dobrynin. Yes, I think it did work to our advantage. I think Ormsby-Gore was able to benefit from his official and social contacts, and this didn't just apply to the two Kennedys, it also applied to people like Sargent Shriver. Ormsby-Gore had a very close relationship with that whole circle. They used to have sort of salons, in rotating places. Again, I think this is well-known, but I can remember these occasionally being held in the embassy in Washington. The private secretary went nowhere near it, I hasten to say. They used to read books to each other."

MMcB: "A bit like the Bloomsbury set."

Lord Wright: "That's right, yes. What was that book by Rachel Carson (The Silent Spring), was one of the first environmentalist books, and was certainly on their reading list. I don't think they read the book to each other, but they read it beforehand, which is quite a common practice, and then had a discussion. This really was a sort of family affair, with Kennedys and Sargent Shriver, and perhaps a few others, probably McGeorge Bundy."

MMcB: "That's fascinating. I suppose that is an aspect of the special relationship that we made a lot of, but in actual practical terms, one wonders how far American interests were neglected. I don't suppose they were for a moment."

Lord Wright: "No, I don't suppose they were at all."

MMcB: "But it certainly got us back on the right lines after Suez."

Lord Wright: "Yes. Before I arrived as private secretary, but when Nicholas Gordon-Lennox was his private secretary, Harold Caccia had a fearfully difficult time, picking up the pieces post-Suez, when large parts of the American administration were virtually not speaking to us. In fact, they were probably under instructions not to speak to us above a

certain level, an experience which happened, incidentally, to a very close friend of mine, who was New Zealand ambassador in Washington many years later, and who, as a result of New Zealand's nuclear policy, was banned from being received by anybody above head of department level in the State Department. I literally don't know to what extent there was a formal boycott of the British Embassy post Suez, but the atmosphere must have been extremely bad.

While I think of it, can I just move on to 'politicos versus professionals'. You're well aware of this, but I think perhaps later generations may not realise the extent to which, during your and my careers, there have been remarkably few political appointments to head missions in the Diplomatic Service. I suppose, as professional diplomats, we would say that was a good thing, wouldn't we? But I do happen to think it is a good thing. I think it is entirely right that exceptions should be made when there is a good reason for it, as with Ormsby-Gore's appointment to Washington, as with Christopher Soames's appointment to Paris, though that hit the rocks a bit over l'affaire Soames. Nevertheless, I think it was an extremely interesting appointment, and an interesting appointment if only because Soames was sent to Paris by a Labour administration, just as Alistair Goodlad has been sent to Australia by a Labour administration. Alistair Goodlad is, I think, apart from Chris Patten's appointment to Hong Kong, and I suppose David Waddington's appointment to Bermuda many years ago, the only political appointments of recent years. Patten and Waddington were the only two political appointments during my time as Permanent Under-Secretary, and both of them, I thought, eminently sensible. What else have we had? We've had Ivor Richard in New York, not perhaps totally successful, but quite a reasonable appointment. What I feel very strongly about is that we must never, ever get into the situation of the United States where ambassadors are appointed as a reward for political or financial services, or as compensation for failure. There have been, I'm afraid, far too many cases in the United States administration where that's happened."

MMcB: "That's because they don't care about international relations. It doesn't matter."

Lord Wright: “Exactly. But, of course, we must remember that the same applies to top appointments in the State Department where the whole top hamper is changed every four years. I suppose, during my time as PUS, the three foreign secretaries, probably not John Major, because he was there too short a time, but Douglas Hurd and Geoffrey Howe would occasionally raise with me the possibility of a job for ‘X’ who was quite interested in the idea of getting a mission. I certainly didn’t say, ‘For God’s sake, no,’ but it so happened actually that in the very, very few case of ‘X’ that I can remember, there literally was not a suitable post for them to go to, and this was accepted.

Perhaps we could just have a word about Margaret Thatcher’s attitude towards the Service. This is perhaps stating the obvious, but there is an extraordinary contradiction in her distressingly open contempt for the Service and for its tendency to compromise or, as Norman Tebbit once put it, to argue for the interests of foreigners, and her admiration and respect, almost devotion, for almost every individual in the Service that she ever met. My troubles with Margaret Thatcher were first, her attitude to the Service, and the fact that she made very little secret of the fact that she held the Service, in some respects, in open contempt, and secondly, that I hardly ever saw the Prime Minister, unlike my predecessors. Michael Palliser, who was PUS when Callaghan was Prime Minister, had been Callaghan’s, not his PUS actually, but had been in Brussels, so Callaghan knew him. Tom Brimelow, I don’t know how often he saw Wilson, probably not very often, but what was different from those days from my time was that, with Charles Powell as Private Secretary at No.10, very few members of the Foreign Office ever got into the building. If Callaghan received an Israeli or Egyptian, or whatever it was, in my day, Michael Weir would always be invited to come and sit in. None of us was invited in during Margaret Thatcher’s time. I thought this was a great mistake, partly because I think an official who knew the subject would have helped, but perhaps also because it would have brought Margaret Thatcher into more contact with the Service.

The problem I had was that when Margaret Thatcher travelled, she’d meet ambassador X, say ambassador McBain, and she’d come back and, if I had a chance to see her, and I was usually invited to social events so there was usually an opportunity for a few words, she would say to me, ‘Why are you wasting that excellent man, McBain? He ought to be

ambassador in Paris.’ She probably knew, what, ten people in the Service at all well? And she thought I was wasting all of them. Why wasn’t that excellent man ambassador in Washington, ambassador in Paris? And I’d say, ‘Prime Minister, I don’t think you know who the other people are. Perhaps I could introduce you to them.’ This was a real problem.

The other contradiction between her very public attitude to the Service and her knowledge of individuals, was the regularity with which she appointed diplomats and ex-diplomats to places of great favour in No.10. You had Tony Duff, Tony Parsons, Percy Cradock, and of course her successive private secretaries, and Michael Palliser who was appointed to the Falklands War cabinet. All her three private secretaries, from the Foreign Office, were all described successively, as ‘the best private secretary I’ve ever known’. When Michael Alexander left, I can remember Margaret Thatcher saying, ‘I shall never have another private secretary like that. He was absolutely superb.’ John Coles then succeeded, and John Coles describes his farewell dinner at No.10 when Margaret Thatcher made a ringing speech of praise for John. She then glared down the table where Charles Powell was sitting, and said, ‘And Mr Powell is going to have a very difficult time succeeding.’ But of course, as we all know, Charles became her blue-eyed boy.”

MMcB: “Do you think Charles Powell was instrumental in not connecting up with the Foreign Office?”

Lord Wright: “Yes, I think very much so. I don’t want to criticise him too much. He’s an extremely intelligent man and he gave extremely good service to Margaret Thatcher, and as far as I know, he may have tried to instil a little balance in Margaret Thatcher’s view of the Foreign Office. In yesterday’s ‘Observer’, you see the irony of the top 300 most influential people in this country judged by a panel which includes Charles Powell, and I see that instead of Charles Powell appearing among the 300, which no doubt he has in the past, his brother has been put in place 47. But, you know, it is heady stuff, and I’m not surprised that the ‘Observer’ describes him constantly, and everybody describes him constantly, as a Foreign Affairs adviser to Margaret Thatcher, when he was private

secretary. I have very strong feelings about this, having been a private secretary three times in my career. I used to warn private secretaries designate, of whatever sort, of the dangers of a disease called private secretaryitis, which is a tendency to think that you're actually as important as your boss, and even sometimes that you are able to interpret your boss's wishes and present them as your boss's wishes. I have known cases where that has gone badly wrong."

MMcB: "I'm sure that happens a great deal."

Lord Wright: "I believe it happens in Royal circles quite often. This does not include the Queen who, I think, has a very correct view of the place of bureaucracy, but I think some other member of the Royal Family, understandably, don't treat private secretaries in the way that ministers do. Indeed, I think many of them spend weeks trying to avoid seeing them, which ministers might find rather more difficult to do."

MMcB: "Fascinating. Have you now dealt with the question of political appointments versus professionals?"

Lord Wright: "I think so."

MMcB: "Why would you think that perhaps a professional appointment might be better than a political appointment?"

Lord Wright: "I think the answer is in the word 'professional'. I think far too many people (not of course yourself or myself), tend to regard the job of diplomacy as a job that any old fool can do, because it's merely a question of actually being moderately polite to people. I think that there is an inadequate realisation that diplomacy is a profession, and it's a skill that needs, in my view, years of varied training and experience. A politician may be fine in terms of actually getting along with the top people, but Ormsby-Gore, to take an example, who was brilliant at what he'd been sent to do (which was developing top relations with the United States' administration) was, of course, supported by very experienced and high grade diplomats (and, of course, other public

servants from Whitehall). But in a medium-sized embassy, what you want is for the entire mission to build up contacts which can be used, not just to help promote our political interests, but also to help, for instance, visiting businessmen. Now, I don't see Ormsby-Gore involving himself very much in the sort of nitty-gritty of introducing businessmen to the right contacts. Perhaps I'm maligning them, and perhaps Alistair Goodlad is doing it already in Australia, but I think that, almost by definition, a professional is more likely to do it. I think, also, that a professional is more likely to take advantage of, and pass on, his contacts. As you possibly remember, I used to issue instructions to the Service that they were to record their contacts for the benefit of their successors. I don't think a politician, and most of the politicians I've known, would be temperamentally inclined to pick up their predecessor's contacts. A professional damn should. So I think it's very important that the whole mission understands, particularly since we tend to post people too rapidly from post to post, the mission needs to have a continuity of contact, at all levels, whether it's the local customs officer to help get supplies into the embassy, or whether it's the minister of nuts and bolts who needs to be invited in for a drink to meet a businessman."

MMcB: "I certainly recollect being instructed to keep a list of contacts and handing them over. It was obviously very, very helpful."

Lord Wright: "Well, I'm glad you remember it because I think it was I who issued it."

MMcB: "I'm thinking back to the 1970s."

Lord Wright: "Oh are you, well I can't take any credit for that!"

MMcB: "That was by way of entertainment. I think the businessman would keep those things to himself. If you helped a businessman, if there was some deal or other, then he would go back to his company and claim the credit for it, and not dream of saying that he was given help or contacts by the Commercial Secretary, for example."

Lord Wright: “Well, we might just have a word about commercial work. I used to get frustrated, bored, by the frequency with which I was told that the Foreign Office regarded itself as too smart to indulge in trade. There were frequent reminders all through my career that we must take this criticism into account. There are two things I’d really like to say. One is that I believe that some of this criticism actually misunderstood what the Diplomatic Service should be asked to do to help trade. This is a statement that will be blindingly obvious to you, but it may not always be obvious to everybody.”

MMcB: “Oh no, it’s not obvious to politicians.”

Lord Wright: “Politicians very often think that diplomats should be there to dirty their hands in real trade and to get contracts, as if the businessman could relinquish his responsibility to the diplomat. The truth is, I believe, that the diplomat should be there to facilitate a businessman’s job. The second thing I would say, and this particularly applied to my time as ambassador in Saudi Arabia where, while I was there we concluded the largest single overseas deal that’s ever been concluded by Britain, i.e. the Tornado contract. I’m not claiming credit for that, but it’s an obvious fact that, with a country as rich as Saudi Arabia, commercial work played a very, very large part of my job. But I regarded my job, my ambassadorial job, as advising British businessmen about what was going on in Saudi Arabia, and trying to help them to meet the people they ought to meet. But again and again, I would first hear of a business’s activities in Saudi Arabia when a trade deal was going badly wrong, and then they expected the embassy to pull them out of the mire far too late. This is not a universal criticism.

The other thing that used to distress me, although this is, in a sense, irrelevant, was the frequency with which large companies would send representatives from two entirely different bits of the company to Saudi Arabia in succeeding weeks, without either knowing that the other was there or was going to be there, and totally mystifying the Saudis who would say, ‘But I saw somebody from your company last week.’ And they’d say, ‘Did you?’ Of course, some of the criticism of the Foreign Office’s commercial acumen is justified, but then criticism is always justified to some extent. But I do think there are widespread misunderstandings of what diplomats are there for.

Can I just say a word about frequency of postings. I came back from Saudi Arabia to be Permanent Under-Secretary and paid my first call on Sir Geoffrey Howe, as he then was, and he said, 'Patrick, there'll be lots of opportunities to discuss all sorts of manner of things, but there's one thing I'd really like to say straightaway, and that is that we must, must, must slow the merry-go-round. We're moving people around the Service much too rapidly.' And I said, 'Well, if I may say so, Secretary of State, that is music to my ears. I absolutely agree with you. But could I please, at the risk of being rather cheeky, point out two things to you. One is that you've just moved me from Saudi Arabia after a year and a half, and the second is that Mrs Thatcher's administration has so far had twelve Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry in thirteen years.' But I tried, as Permanent Under-Secretary, and the Chief Clerk and the administration tried, in general to keep heads of mission in post for an optimum of four years, but of course it doesn't work - people get ill, or diplomatic relations are broken off, or somebody is suddenly needed for an urgent job. You know this as well as I do. How long were you in Madagascar?"

MMcB: "I did the balance of my service life there, but I had to go when I reached 60. I should have been there for much longer, in my opinion, to be useful."

Lord Wright: "Perhaps also, we could just have a word about retirement age. There have recently been questions in the House of Lords from Greville Janner, not on his differing views from mine on the Middle East this time, but asking whether the government will extend the retirement age for the Diplomatic Service to 65."

MMcB: "Good."

Lord Wright: "Well, I don't think it's good. In fact I got up and argued with him about it, in the form of polite questions to a minister. I said that I, and my predecessors and no doubt my successors, had spent a long time trying to bring forward younger members of the Service earlier, and I thought that to change the retirement age by five years would cause enormous dismay lower down in the Service, and a real drop in morale, and possibly, though I didn't say this, quite a lot of resignations."

MMcB: “You would need fewer people I suppose, fewer very bright people for the top jobs.”

Lord Wright: “I also questioned whether it was consistent with the Prime Minister’s expressed wish to see some 45-year-old Permanent Under-Secretaries. I have often wondered, though it didn’t apply to me, whether we should follow the Scandinavian example of appointing people to the head of the Service at an earlier stage in their career, and then go on to prestigious posts afterwards. The Danes, Norwegians and Swedes quite often do that, in fact I think we’ve had a succession of Scandinavian ambassadors in Washington who had come from being Secretary-General of their Foreign Ministry.”

MMcB: “Yes. I suspect that somebody posted to some place abroad over the age of 60 would probably be inclined to take things easier than a younger man would.”

Lord Wright: “Health, again, is also relevant. Let us remember, and I think I made this point in the House of Lords, that retirement age should be treated flexibly, and has been. Antony Acland was extended for an extra year. Nico Henderson was extended.”

MMcB: “Wasn’t he a political appointee rather than a Diplomatic Service appointee?”

Lord Wright: “Well, he was still a member of the Diplomatic Service. Oliver Wright, of course, was re-appointed after retirement. I don’t think it should be too rigid. I discovered how rigid it was, and perhaps you did too, when I was sent a minute by Personnel Services Department when I was 58, pointing out that, because I had what used to be called ‘scheduled service’, I was entitled to retire on my 58th birthday, if I so wished. If I did not so wish, then a submission would be put to the Secretary of State asking if he was prepared to continue to employ me until 60. This was a rather cheeky minute from an extremely junior member of Personnel Services Department. So I minuted back that on further consideration I would like to stay until my 60th birthday if the Secretary of State so decided. I think that they must have relished keeping the old sod

waiting, because I didn't hear anything more for about two months. I then got a minute back saying that the Secretary of State had agreed that I could continue until by 60th birthday, but pointing out, in fact, that I was due to retire on the eve of my 60th birthday, which I thought was a precision almost verging on the offensive."

MMcB: "I got one of those when I was 57. It came right out of the blue. I'd just been sent to some post, and suddenly this thing came up saying you're due to retire, more or less hinting that that was what they wanted me to do."

Lord Wright: "Well, I think since your, and my day, a lot of people have been encouraged to retire early, precisely for the reason to bring on younger people. These things tend to vary in generations, but certainly when I retired as PUS in 1991, we had coming on in the immediate next generation (I suppose that's 25 years), but in the immediately next few years, a formidably bright combination of people, for whom there were not going to be enough jobs. Charles Powell being one of them, not that he was encouraged to leave the Service (and in many ways it's a pity that he did). But it was a very, very strong year group that followed."

MMcB: "Do you think that the Service is continuing to attract a sufficient number of the right sort of people?"

Lord Wright: "Indeed, and this is a very interesting subject. I pulled out, today, an article in 'The Times' about a young man at Cambridge from a state school, saying that his impression of Cambridge is entirely different from what he was led to expect, both by Chancellor Gordon Brown and by his own school, where he expected to be surrounded by a lot of snobs. He says that it took him several weeks to discover that his next door neighbour and close friends were Etonians. I only pulled that out because I think there is indeed a problem, and there has been a problem, and I'm afraid there will continue to be a problem, of schools and, even more, non-Oxbridge universities positively advising their pupils that the Foreign Service is no place for them. I'll tell you an anecdote. I met at my parents-in-law, many years ago, a young lady who was a student at Manchester University, very bright, very sociable, and genuinely interested in foreign affairs, and she

asked me about getting into the Foreign Office. I strongly advised her to try and told her, as I understood it, the procedures for applying and so on, and who to apply to. I saw her again about three years later and asked what had happened. She said, ‘Oh, I didn’t bother to apply.’ I said, ‘Why not?’ and she said, ‘My supervisor told me that there was no hope in hell of the Foreign Office taking anybody from Manchester, least of all a woman.’ Now, if you’ve got intelligent supervisors, presumably intelligent supervisors, advising their pupils like that, it’s very depressing. This article makes the point, perhaps fair, that Cambridge are probably not doing enough to publicise the opportunities for applicants from state schools. I think the Foreign Office have done an enormous amount of work in publicising the arrangements for joining the Foreign Office, and are concentrating, I think and hope, on non-Oxbridge, but without forgetting Oxbridge.”

MMcB: “I think that’s vitally important. It does seem to me that it should continue to attract the best.”

Lord Wright: “I had an interesting discussion with somebody the other day, I think it was somebody involved in education, who was commenting on the extent to which the young now, particularly university students, are absolutely desperate, some of them of course because they go down with £10,000 in debts, but are paying enormous attention to what their salaries are going to be. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I even inquired about what I was going to be paid by the Foreign Office when I took the Foreign Office exam.”

MMcB: “It was 1949 when I finished my national service. I just thought that in the civil service it would be a fair amount. The idea of working for a high salary just didn’t come into it.”

Lord Wright: “I suppose there is the social risk that people will assume that only public school and Oxbridge can get into the Foreign Service, and there’s the financial risk that people will now feel ‘I already owe my bank £10,000, I’m not going into a career that starts me off with x’.

MMcB: “These are serious problems. Did you note the attitude of the press towards David Gore-Booth at the time when he was up before the Foreign Affairs Committee? He was treated abominably I thought, mainly because he was Eton and Oxford.”

Lord Wright: “Reminiscent of George Brown’s attitude to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, his father. Still, if you look at cartoons of diplomats in the ‘Daily Express’, ‘The Evening Standard’, they’re always still pinstripes, cartoons of Lord Curzon.”

MMcB: “Anyhow, let’s get back to your career. I’d really like to go over your period in 10 Downing Street, which was early 1974. You covered the departure of Harold Wilson, which came out of the blue.”

Lord Wright: “Not to me.”

MMcB: “Not to you?”

Lord Wright: “Not to me, no. There are varying accounts. What I know for certain is that in about July 1975, Harold Wilson told two people in the Office of his intention to retire sometime in the following spring. Those people were Ken Stowe, Principal Private Secretary whose office I shared as the Foreign Office Private Secretary (the office next to the Cabinet room), and Joe Haines, his Press Secretary. Both were told under the strictest secrecy. None of the rest of us was told, including Bernard Donoughue, who was Policy Adviser, or myself, the Foreign Affairs Private Secretary. I was constantly trying to get decisions out of Wilson about his foreign visits programme, and with boring frequency was asking the Foreign Office for advice and putting advice to Harold Wilson as to when he should go to Yugoslavia, Egypt, Israel, possibly Mexico. Anyway, we had a sort of tapis of foreign visits, and I was finding it extraordinarily difficult to get decisions out of him. Finally, I think in October 1975, Ken Stowe got authority from Harold Wilson to tell me that Wilson was going to resign in, what was then, about 6 months’ time. I was, of course, not allowed to tell anybody else, so I still had an extremely difficult hand to

play with the Foreign Office, who kept phoning me up and saying what's happened to our advice, and when is the PM going to go to such and such a place?

I think in these days where everything is leaked and no secrets are held (a slight exaggeration), it was actually rather a thrill and a privilege to have been privy to a secret that was actually held up to the last moment. On the day before the announcement of his resignation to Cabinet, on a Wednesday, Ken Stowe, Joe Haines, myself and a few select garden room secretaries, were engaged in drafting all sorts of messages, statements and so on. I was engaged in drafting telegrams to every post, with messages to the relevant head of government announcing Wilson's resignation. I got these cleared through the Prime Minister on the morning of the day on which, at 11 o'clock, he was going to announce to Cabinet his intention to resign. I rang John Kerr, who was Michael Palliser's private secretary, and said, 'Can I come and see the Permanent Under-Secretary at 11 o'clock?' He said, 'No, I'm terribly sorry, you can't because there's a No.1 Board starting at 11.' And I said, 'Well, I know as well as you the difficulty of changing the time of the No.1 Board, but I'm sorry, I must insist. I won't take more than a quarter of an hour of his time, but I would like to come and see the Permanent Under-Secretary at 11.' So I came over and saw Michael Palliser, told him what was happening at that very moment, and handed over to him a sheaf of telegrams, then left an astonished PUS to conduct his No.1 Board. I got back to the office to find a succession of telephone calls coming in from all over Whitehall by some extraordinary bush telegraph, Private Offices (and this was in the days before mobile telephones) ringing up to say, 'There's an extraordinary rumour going around that the Prime Minister has resigned.'

There's a lovely story, which you may know, of Roy Hattersley visiting Hungary, or Romania, on an official visit. He arrived in the capital on the morning of the resignation, met by his opposite number and the British ambassador, who came up the steps to greet Hattersley, and said, 'Minister, I should just let you know that the Prime Minister has resigned,' to which Hattersley said, 'Now, I'm sorry, remind me. How long has he been Prime Minister?' And the ambassador said, 'No, Mr Hattersley, not the Hungarian Prime Minister, the British Prime Minister.' He then had extreme difficulty getting Hattersley not to stay on the aircraft and fly straight home. But that's anecdotes.

I had a year and a quarter working for Wilson, a very different experience from working for Callaghan, in various ways. Wilson was, in some respects, a dream to work for. He was a workaholic, he absolutely loved work, he hated holidays. It used to be a joke, when he went off to his supposedly beloved Scilly Isles holidays, we used to time him to see how soon it would be before he telephoned the office, in the hope that we were going to summon him back. He completed his boxes with extraordinary regularity. He was, contrary to the public image, a very consistent politician. I never knew him to contradict himself in minutes. He had a phenomenal memory. So why did he resign? George Thomas told me himself, when he was Speaker and came to Luxembourg when I was ambassador, that Harold Wilson had told him two years before that he was not going to remain in No.10 for more than two years. I certainly know for a fact that he had decided a good year in advance to resign. So why did he do it? Well, what he said to us was that he was getting bored. He had been Prime Minister longer than any Prime Minister this century (in two administrations), he had done it all, and he actually began to feel stale. I think that perhaps because he was beginning to feel stale and bored, he started to drink too much. There were worries about his health. He had possibly had a heart attack, or a very minor stroke, at a European Council meeting in Paris in December 1974, as it happened, about two weeks before I took over from Tom Bridges. Tom Bridges himself tells me he was unaware of this, but Wilson's doctor, Joe Stone, who came on all the foreign visits, certainly thought that Wilson had had some sort of attack in Paris, but it hadn't visibly, or noticeably, left him with any impairment. I think his doctor probably got worried about overwork, and so on, but then all prime ministers overwork. There were no signs that we saw of Alzheimer's, if that's what he got later. His memory seemed to be good, but he was slipping, he wasn't actually functioning well as head of government. He was becoming very garrulous. I don't know if you ever met him. He tended to reminisce appallingly, particularly about his 47 Australian cousins, and so on, or his dealings with Mikoyan when he had worked for a wood merchant, and one used to dread the trigger that would set him off on these when he was actually supposed to be conducting government business. But I had great respect for him, great affection for him."

MMcB: “You don’t think it was connected with a sense of failure to deal with the unions?”

Lord Wright: “No, that was much more Callaghan’s problem.”

MMcB: “Well Callaghan came in with the idea of the social contract.”

Lord Wright: “Yes, he did, that’s right. But that would not account for a decision two years in advance, and, as I say, I think it’s pretty clear that he had decided two years in advance. One must take into account, also, family pressures. Mary Wilson loathed the job of being Prime Minister’s wife, she was not suited to it at all, she had very strong views about most foreigners. Again and again, when co-hosting official functions at No.10, she would say, ‘Do I really have to sit next to that ghastly person?’ She didn’t like it. She was a poet. She was a lady I much admired and liked, but she frankly thought that wogs started at Calais.

Wilson was, of course, a consummate operator. He tended, as Jim Callaghan did after him, to be much kinder to his opponents than to his friends. This was particularly striking with Jim Callaghan, who could be extremely brutal to Mervyn Rees in Cabinet, Mervyn Rees being one of his closest friends and associates, as opposed to Callaghan’s kid gloves when dealing with Wedgwood Benn or Michael Foot, with neither of whom he was at all in sympathy. This was very interesting in the case of Wilson during the run up to the referendum, when he had great difficulty, of course, controlling the opponents, the ‘No’ faction, which was, I suppose, Benn, Barbara Castle, Peter Shore and Michael Foot, to name a few. And Varley, although I think Varley changed views later.”

MMcB: “Varley was anti, was he?”

Lord Wright: “Yes, for a time, but changed his views. Wilson had a very difficult role in allowing them sufficient head not to cause too much trouble within the Party, but not allowing them so much head that they could actually disrupt the outcome of the

referendum that he wanted. And, arguably, since he got a two-thirds 'Yes', he succeeded. He did, actually, play a significant role in the outcome.

Wilson was, in a sense, a pretty unreconstructed European. I've quite often told the story of his arrival in Paris. I was walking down the steps behind him, carrying his red box, and I was electrified to hear him say to a group of journalists, both British and foreign, 'Do you realise this is the first time I've been in Europe for three months?' I'm sure you've heard similar comments by people. People talk about Europe as if it's a place that you occasionally go to for your summer holidays.

We've talked already, I think, about Germanophobia. Wilson enjoyed his relationship with Helmut Schmidt, Callaghan even more so. I suspect that Schmidt liked Callaghan better than Wilson. I don't think he ever quite trusted Wilson, and of course that was quite common for people to feel like this, which was not always fair. Wilson was extremely sensitive about being seen talking to Germans, and I can remember rows about whether there should be photo-calls at Chequers of himself with Schmidt. I don't remember this happening vis-à-vis the Japanese, because I don't remember any Japanese coming to No.10. I suppose they must have come for economic summits. Actually, the economic summit at No.10 was in Callaghan's time, and although Callaghan fought in the war, which of course Wilson hadn't, Callaghan was, I think, much less sensitive to charges of Japanophilia than Wilson was."

MMcB: "Well, Callaghan did seem to be a fairly convinced European after a fairly shaky start."

Lord Wright: "Yes, but most important, of course, he'd been Foreign Secretary. That, I suppose, was the most significant difference between Wilson and Thatcher on the one hand, and Callaghan and perhaps even Major on the other. Although Major was only Foreign Secretary for three months, nevertheless, I'm sure he still regards it as a baptism of fire. Nevertheless, to have actually been inside the Foreign Office, and to have known the people, if only a few of them, made a big difference. But Callaghan had not only been Foreign Secretary, he'd also of course been Chancellor of the Exchequer with

Giscard and several other ex Finance Ministers who had then become heads of government.”

MMcB: “So that sad period came to an end and you were still Permanent Under-Secretary for the first two years of Margaret Thatcher’s time at No.10.”

Lord Wright: “Three years I suppose.”

MMcB: “Three years?”

Lord Wright: “Well, when did she “

MMcB: “1979.”

Lord Wright: “I wasn’t Permanent Under-Secretary then.”

MMcB: “That’s right, sorry. She finished in 1990, didn’t she?”

Lord Wright: “In 1990, so I was her Permanent Under-Secretary when she was Prime Minister, for four years, nearly the whole of my time as PUS. I first met her when I was Head of Middle East Department, but I suppose I got to know her first when she came to Luxembourg at the very end of my time as ambassador, to give the Churchill Memorial Lecture in 1977, just before I went to Syria.”

MMcB: “What were you doing in Syria?”

Lord Wright: “I was ambassador in Syria. Actually, it was quite amusing. I don’t know whether you’ve filled in one of those Post Preference forms, but I was encouraged to do so every now and then, and on one Post Preference form I put in a preference for a posting to Damascus. I should just explain that my posting to Luxembourg followed a posting of Antony Acland to Luxembourg, having been Callaghan’s private secretary. I don’t know whether the idea of my posting to Luxembourg actually occurred to

Callaghan, but the Office had decided that it was time to start sending younger (if I may say so immodestly) high-fliers, rather than people on last posting, to Luxembourg. I should say that John Roper, our predecessor, was an outstandingly successful ambassador, having not only fought in the war but having helped liberate Luxembourg, and got a Military Cross for it. So that wasn't bad in terms of relationships with the locals. Antony Acland really set a new pattern for ambassadors to Luxembourg which I followed. I think it was not only considered a good thing to send a high-flier as a first ambassadorial experience, but also, frankly, as a bit of a rest cure after two and a half years at No.10 working 18 hours a day. I can't pretend that I would have wanted to stay there more than two years. I did, but it was a wonderful experience; I loved it.

I was telephoned one day by, I think, Richard Parsons to say, 'I don't know whether you remember, but you put on your Post Preference form a post beginning with 'D', are you still interested?' I said, 'Yes, very.' Well, when Luxembourgers heard that I was going to Damascus, I think they all assumed that I must have been found with my hand in the till! I should also say that I think the Queen thought the same, because when I went to kiss hands on appointment to Damascus, the Queen was obviously intrigued to know why I was being moved from a nice comfortable monarchy under "Johnny Lux" to those horrible Ba'athists in Syria. Although she was far too polite to ask, I think she must have wondered quite what I'd done wrong. It may even be difficult for you to understand this, but for an Arabist, Syria is a dream posting, and I'm bound to say, if I was asked to say which of my foreign posts I've most enjoyed in my life, I'd be hard put to it actually to judge between them, but Syria comes pretty high on the list. Horrible government, wonderful people and wonderful country, but quite a challenge, which I don't think I lived up to, to get anybody in London to get remotely interested in the place, least of all British business."

MMcB: "Quite. Where there must have been quite a few opportunities."

Lord Wright: "Yes, absolutely. And not just British business, but British politicians. It was embarrassing, the frequency with which MPs, in those days, would fly to Lebanon and then overfly Syria to visit Jordan. Hardly ever did it occur to them to come and visit

Syria, in spite of my pleadings for ministerial visits, which no doubt drove the Foreign Office crazy. We did, occasionally, achieve it. Ian Gilmour came as a Minister of State. But it was a faraway country of which most people in Britain knew very little,”

MMcB: “It was an ex French territory, and I think they assumed that the Syrians spoke no language other than French?”

Lord Wright: “Chasse Gardée.”

MMcB: “Yes. Untrue.”

Lord Wright: “Quite untrue. As Algeria, sadly now in a very sad state, but as Algeria actually showed even more markedly where they changed the second language of the country from French to English. The Syrians never did that quite so officially, but it is, of course, an anglophone country now, insofar as they speak any foreign language. The joy for an Arabist, as opposed to, say, Lebanon or Jordan, is that it is entirely natural to Syrians that a foreigner should speak Arabic. In Lebanon, it’s the language of the servants. This is less so now, but no Christian in my day would have been seen speaking Arabic to a foreigner. If you greeted them in Arabic, they answered ‘Bon Soir.’ It was not like that in Syria at all. The Lebanese used, irritatingly, to say in a rather condescending way, ‘Ah, you speak Arabic better than I do,’ whereas the Syrians paid one the compliment of just talking in Arabic, as the Saudis did. Saudis less so, because they’re much more anglophone than the Syrians, and they do a lot of their business in English. Nevertheless, this is the joy of being in Syria and then Saudi Arabia where I did become, by the time I left, fairly fluent in the language because I was using it all the time.”

MMcB: “And you really were? Did you conduct official business in Arabic?”

Lord Wright: “Not very often in the Foreign Ministry, because the Foreign Minister was a graduate of Yale, and most of the senior officials had been to American universities. So

I can't pretend I did a lot of business with the Foreign Ministry, but, yes, with other ministers and other officials, I spoke Arabic all the time."

MMcB: "They would love it of course."

Lord Wright: "Yes. And socially I spoke it a lot. But to revert to a point we made earlier, it was something of a shock to the system to find an ambassador to Saudi Arabia being appointed Permanent Under-Secretary. I suppose Paul Gore-Booth came from India, but in terms of importance, in those days, New Delhi was in a totally different category from Saudi Arabia. But most of his predecessors had come from posts like Washington, Paris, Bonn."

MMcB: "Yes, that's right. But of course there was Morrice James."

Lord Wright: "Yes, who became Commonwealth Permanent-Secretary. Also from India, or did he go to India afterwards?"

MMcB: "India was certainly there. I think he came from Australia, as a matter of fact. He went from Delhi to Australia and then PUS. But I always regarded him as an ex-India hand because of the time he spent in the sub-continent."

So, do you have any reflections to make about your time in Riyadh? We've touched on the very large contract."

Lord Wright: "Yes. I think, in some ways an immensely rewarding job, because one really was regarded as an expert in a country on which there was remarkably little expertise in this country. I don't know whether you felt the same in Madagascar, but Saudi Arabia, to most people, with justification, appears an extremely arcane society. In many ways it's medieval still. A lot of its social customs, as I frequently reminded my British friends and colleagues, actually were not so very different from Victorian customs. Nevertheless, as seen from here, very out-of-date, politically incorrect and weird."

The job benefited because one was able to offer London, and indeed was frequently asked by London, expertise on a society which I think was very little understood in this country. Similarly, I think the embassy was required to give advice to visitors, normally more than you would be in a post, because the visitors really didn't understand how this place works. There are often comments on the Foreign Service that it's no longer necessary, because ministers speak to each other on the telephone, or by e-mail. Well, the fact is, although probably not Luxembourg, because ministers didn't really pay as much attention to Luxembourg as perhaps they should have done, but ministers quite often pride themselves on their contacts with ministers in other countries, and may occasionally take the mistaken view that they don't really need the ambassador's help. Well, I don't suppose any minister has ever picked up a telephone and spoken to a Saudi minister, even Douglas Hurd with Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal, who was, as I've said, a graduate of Yale or Princeton. Douglas Hurd, incidentally, once told me that Sa'ud al-Faisal was, in his experience, the most impressive opposite number he met during his time as Foreign Secretary. I may be slightly misquoting him, but that was the drift of his comment. Of course he was still Foreign Secretary when I retired. He may have revised his opinion later, having got to know other foreign ministers better. But I don't think Douglas Hurd ever picked up a telephone to talk to Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal. If he did, I never got to hear about it. Indeed, there was one occasion when, and I was told this by one of my successors, it may have been Alan Munro, who went to see a minister in Saudi Arabia to say that his British opposite number would like to talk to him on the telephone, and the minister said, 'Well, yes, but you know we would much prefer that our contacts came through you.' A healthy realisation that direct contacts can actually go dreadfully wrong."

MMcB: "Yes. They're quite wise about things like that."

Lord Wright: "Anecdotal again, but going back to Callaghan's time as Prime Minister, I can remember an occasion when, after some encouragement, he agreed to entertain Helmut Schmidt at Chequers, entirely a deux. And with everybody's agreement, including his private secretary's, none of us was there; it was an entirely private piece of

hospitality. Callaghan was absolutely brilliant at giving subsequent records of his private conversations, a gift which he exercised frequently during European councils when ministers were by themselves. He would come out, very often able to hand over his notes like that, and they would be good enough to transcribe. But in the case of Schmidt, of course, he wasn't taking notes, but he gave a very full account to Ken Stowe afterwards, agreeing that I could see them but they were not to go to 'Whitehall' for the next two weeks. It was a time when we were having very difficult arguments with the Germans about Offset. Of course, every department in Whitehall - Ministry of Defence, Foreign Office, Treasury - wanted to know what had been said on Offset, to which we replied that the Prime Minister has not vouchsafed any details of his conversation. Michael Palliser, who had been private secretary at No.10 and therefore knew a thing or two, gave up pressing me after a bit because he knew he wasn't going to get anything out of me. It was an interesting example of a face-to-face contact where officials were cut out. I'm not quite sure what moral I draw from that except that, in my experience, I have known officials encouraging telephone conversations between ministers rather more than discouraging them. But ministers don't like doing it, very often because it involves language problems."

MMcB: "With Helmut Schmidt it would be English because his English was excellent."

Lord Wright: "Yes, but even with Giscard it was English. Giscard and Schmidt always corresponded in English, because Schmidt didn't admit to knowing French, and I don't think Giscard admitted to knowing any German. Even so, Jim Callaghan never really felt easy, in my time, with Giscard on the telephone. He did feel quite easy with Schmidt, and Schmidt, of course, loved cutting out his officials, which, to be fair, Callaghan didn't. He used to like teasing us about it, and I think he relished the idea that the Foreign Office were not being told what he was saying to Schmidt, but he was entirely proper in telling his own staff."

MMcB: "He probably made sure that they knew in the end."

Lord Wright: “That’s right. But going back to Saudi Arabia, I think there was a sort of status for the ambassador. I don’t mean in the pompous sense, but there was a *raison d’être* for the ambassador in Saudi Arabia of a sort which, sadly, probably is diminishing, or risks being diminished.”

MMcB: “But here we have in Saudi Arabia this country with this fantastic leverage on the world economy over their ability to restrict or increase the flow of oil, so it’s vitally important that we get that one right, isn’t it? How did you assess the likelihood of the Saudis taking one line or the other with regard to their oil leverage?”

Lord Wright: “Well, when I was there, they tended to argue that, although they had leverage over oil supplies and so on, nevertheless, Britain also had leverage, and that we ought to be playing our part, as a major oil producer, in stabilising the price of oil. To some extent, that’s a nonsense because, of course, in contrast Saudi Arabia, and OPEC generally, are in a league of their own. The Saudis, in my day (no longer I think), tended to rebut arguments that they were swing producers. They clearly are swing producers now, and have acknowledged that they’re swing producers, though I think they’ve found it quite often a bit difficult to operate that swing, particularly when Venezuelans and others take a rather different view.

But there was a very good dialogue. I had the advantage of being ambassador in Saudi Arabia when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, and the Saudis regarded Margaret Thatcher almost as a god. I shouldn’t say a god, because that would be blasphemous in any country, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, but quite a senior Saudi once said to me, which actually is almost blasphemous in Saudi Arabia, ‘Any time you want to swap prime ministers, tell us.’ The Prime Minister is, of course, the King in Saudi Arabia, and my interlocutor would probably have had his hand chopped off if he’d been heard. Margaret Thatcher paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia when I was ambassador, and she played it beautifully, not just because she curtsied right down to the ground, quite ignoring the sniping from the British press of the sort which Tony Parsons faced, if you remember, when he bowed to the Shah. She handled the Saudis very well and, I’m bound to say, really treated me as an adviser, which was very satisfying because it’s not

very often that any of us are put in a position where we know more about something than Margaret Thatcher did. She was, of course, always outstandingly well-briefed. But I think even Margaret Thatcher admitted that there might be one or two things she could learn from the British ambassador.”

MMcB: “I don’t think she knew too much about Japan.”

Lord Wright: “No, and I don’t think she wanted to know a great deal about Japan.”

MMcB: “But it’s vitally important. Anyway the Saudis keep their own council, you reckon, on oil matters?”

Lord Wright: “No, I think there’s quite a good dialogue.”

MMcB: “Via the oil companies?”

Lord Wright: “Certainly via the oil companies, and I am still a director of BP, which has not been outstandingly involved in Saudi Arabia, rather to its shame. We go back to the days when BP concluded that actually there was not much oil in Saudi Arabia, in the days of Anglo-Iranian. But yes, the oil companies are in very close touch with the Saudis. Shell, of course, are heavily involved in petrochemicals in Saudi Arabia. I’d be pretty confident that Derek Plumbly, the new ambassador, and his deputy (who is, I should say, my son-in-law) are, I would hope and believe, in daily contact with the oil ministry. I am, incidentally, chairing a meeting at Chatham House next week with Yamani, who was oil minister during my time.”

MMcB: “What’s it on?”

Lord Wright: “On oil. I’m not sure whether he’s actually given a title. He now runs an energy institute in London.”

MMcB: “How fascinating. And how fascinating that he should choose London for it.”

Lord Wright: “Yes, but then a lot of Saudis have homes in London. He lives here; he’s got a house at Wentworth or somewhere. His daughter, Mai Yamani, a very remarkable lady who works for the Middle East department of Chatham House, has just produced what is, for me, a very interesting book about opinion among young Saudis, a whole series of interviews, unlike yours, anonymous, but a whole series of interviews with young Saudis and what they think about Saudi Arabia.”

MMcB: “No wonder they’re anonymous.”

Lord Wright: “I recommended to my son-in-law that he should buy at least fifteen copies for the embassy library.”

MMcB: “That’s good. I wonder whether we’ve got anything much else to add because we’ve covered everything.”

Lord Wright: “I jotted some notes before you came. Can I just flick through them to see if there’s anything that I think might be worth touching on.

The Foreign Office image that we’ve talked about a bit, you know, out of touch, not prepared to dirty its hands with trade, all Etonians and Oxbridge, stuffy lot. I think out of touch with UK domestic politics is actually a reality sometimes that does affect its image, and I, of course, saw this, as one does, if you have the good luck to be private secretary at No.10. It was brought home to me, which I hadn’t already grasped, that in those days, less so now, the Foreign Office was very little involved in parliament. Ministers had to go and answer questions on foreign affairs, there were debates on foreign affairs, but virtually no legislation. The Foreign Office in those days, I think, though I say it of myself too, didn’t really understand how parliament worked, and were very much out of touch with UK domestic politics, which one was brought up sharp against in arriving at No.10. Many things have changed since then, including the setting up of a Foreign

Affairs Committee, which I believe has been an admirable thing and has considerably helped a realisation in the Foreign Office of parliament, and vice versa. I think it was an important innovation by David Owen.”

MMcB: “But there’s always been a fair amount of informal briefing, hasn’t there? Leaders of the opposition, or opposition spokesmen on foreign affairs, as well as private backbenchers who took the trouble to make enquiries after the facts.”

Lord Wright: “Yes, but I think there was a change during my career which was that, early on, there was quite strong resistance from ministers to officials having contacts with MPs. They felt it was for ministers to do that, not officials. That was considerably relaxed as time went by. Geoffrey Howe, certainly, was totally relaxed about it, whether they were government or opposition, provided obviously that anything of significance was reported to ministers.”

MMcB: “You date that back to Geoffrey Howe, do you?”

Lord Wright: “I think probably Geoffrey Howe, though David Owen must have relaxed it a bit, insofar as David Owen relaxed anything.

I think there’s another point about the Foreign Office image as seen in the rest of Whitehall, and that is (leaving aside the alleged snobbery of the Foreign Office, Eton and Oxbridge), the clubbability of the Foreign Office. It is something that I was very conscious of when I became Foreign Office private secretary in No.10. I felt, and actually had to do quite a lot to try to reduce, I felt a loyalty towards the Foreign Office which my colleagues in the civil service thought, and I think they were right, was quite inappropriate for one of the prime minister’s private secretaries. I put this down partly, and you are as well able to explain this as I am if indeed you think it’s true, I think it’s partly because as a service, and we are a service in a way the civil service isn’t, we live with each other abroad, we live with each other’s families, we’re a community. And, on the whole, a pretty uncompetitive community. There seemed to me very little back-biting in the Foreign Service as opposed to some of the back-biting I saw in the civil service.

But it took me some time in No.10 to stop talking about 'us' and start talking about 'them' and I think that does affect the view of the Foreign Office.

Incidentally, John Major came across from the Treasury to be Foreign Secretary with a lot of Whitehall inherited prejudices about the Foreign Office. He was very anxious to present himself, as he did publicly, as the boy from Brixton, and very much, I think, defensive about how 'you lot' were going to see a mere boy from Brixton, which of course was George Brown's problem too. I remember the pleasure with which the Foreign Office were able to draw to George Brown's attention that his principal adviser on the Middle East, Geoffrey Arthur, had actually been at a state school in George Brown's own constituency."

MMcB: "Have you anything to say about John Major?"

Lord Wright: "Yes. I will now declare myself as somebody who actually regards him as a personal friend. I like him very much, I think he's an extremely decent person, possibly a little too decent and kind to have been an effective prime minister. I think he could have been an effective foreign secretary. He was overwhelmed by the job, he was very ill-prepared for it, he knew he was very ill-prepared for it. He had come from a job (I can never remember whether it was chief secretary or financial secretary) of running the public expenditure round and interviewing ministers from other departments for which he had to be, as chief secretary, formidably well briefed. What John Major found it very difficult to swallow was that a foreign secretary has an appointments' diary with perhaps fourteen calls a day, and that you cannot be briefed to the hilt for all fourteen calls. When he had the Cyprus High Commissioner coming to pay a courtesy call, we had great difficulty persuading him that he didn't need to read a history of the Cyprus problem, going back 30 years; what he needed was a clear statement of British policy on Cyprus as it now was. The man was coming to call on him to find out what sort of person he was (John Major needed no briefing on that), he also wanted to know whether there was likely to be any change of British policy. Clearly, for his first few weeks, his answer had to be, 'No, I expect British policy to remain unchanged, and it is this, that or the other.' He got very flustered, either by the fact that we weren't briefing him enough or that we were

giving him too much paper. I don't know what a chief secretary's diary is like, but I doubt whether he has fourteen appointments in the day."

MMcB: "Anyway it's all internal UK policy."

Lord Wright: "Yes, whereas for the foreign secretary fourteen appointments is normal, and he found that pretty overwhelming. He was a bit overpowered by 'The Foreign Office', not just a group of Etonian snobs, but also these grand buildings. As you probably know, he decided not to work in the foreign secretary's office. He moved into the more modest (but still rather grand) waiting room next door, and worked there. Again it was the boy from Brixton sort of feeling almost ashamed at sitting in Palmerston's chair. To some extent modesty, which is very charming, doesn't make life easier."

MMcB: "He was welcomed with open arms by the Europeans, because here at long last was somebody reasonable."

Lord Wright: "Yes, I know. But again, like Douglas Hurd, he hovered between stories that he'd been sent to the Foreign Office by Margaret Thatcher in order to correct our europhilia. On the other hand, he tried to correct, in the Foreign Office, the image that he was coming to the Foreign Office as Margaret Thatcher's poodle in order to give us a good scrubbing. So the atmosphere was quite difficult for him when he came. Just as Wilson and Margaret Thatcher didn't like being photographed with Germans or Japanese, in one respect John Major didn't like being photographed with his senior officials. I say that because there was quite a debate, about a month after he became Foreign Secretary, when he was due to go to New York and Washington and I asked him whether he wanted me to accompany him. I had accompanied Geoffrey Howe on my first opportunity to visit Washington and New York, and subsequently, Douglas Hurd took me with him on a similar visit. John Major took about a month to answer my question. I didn't press him. I merely said that I was available if he wanted me to go with him, but would quite understand if he preferred not. Stephen Wall told me, after about three weeks when I gently enquired whether I was going to be required, he said, 'Look, let me be absolutely

frank. I think John Major would quite like you to come, but I think what's fussing him, is the image that his mandarins are coming to New York and Washington to make sure he behaves himself.' So I think there was a sense of entrapment, and he didn't want to be trapped by the Foreign Office.

But, I must say, he was a delight to work for. I am absolutely certain that I owe my peerage to him, which I think (although he never actually said so) was a rather nice 'thank you' for having been his permanent under-secretary. I only say that because, as you know, both Michael Palliser and Antony Acland broke the mould of many years whereby the PUS always went to the House of Lords. I am afraid I attribute Michael Palliser's lack of a peerage to the very unfortunate coincidence that his sixtieth birthday fell on the day that Lord Carrington resigned when the Argentineans invaded the Falkland Islands, and Margaret Thatcher is reported to have said, 'How can I lose a foreign secretary, but ennoble his permanent under-secretary?' Antony Acland didn't get a peerage, I think, because of Margaret Thatcher's known view that permanent under-secretaries should no longer get peerages. There is an extraordinary story which the Clerk of Parliaments at the House of Lords told me, that when Margaret Thatcher came to pay her first call as a new peer, as they were talking the door opened and Denis Greenhill put his head round the door, apologised and walked out again, and Margaret Thatcher had said, 'Seeing Lord Greenhill reminds me that one achievement I have had in life is to have stopped peerages for permanent under-secretaries at the Foreign Office.' I find that an extraordinary statement."

MMcB: "What's your attitude towards Europe and the euro?"

Lord Wright: "I have a rather eccentric view as a non-economist that we should have joined the European single currency from the start. That's not a view shared by many people, though I'm going to hear Geoffrey Howe talking on the euro tonight at the English Speaking Union. I don't know whether even he holds what is actually regarded as an extreme view, and I don't know many economists who think we should have joined from the start. But I certainly think we should have joined long since."

MMcB: “Is it really an economic question?”

Lord Wright: “No, I don’t think it is, but insofar as it’s a political question, I think it’s something that we should have joined. The arguments against are normally very political, but you’re right, it isn’t only an economic question. I think the Opposition have got onto quite a good thing when they argue that the government are wrong to present it as an economic question.

I think I should say, rather pompously, that I am extremely proud to have been head of what I actually regard as the best diplomatic service in the world, and would remind you of that rather remarkable quotation by Cheysson when he described the British Diplomatic Service as the second best foreign service in the world, which is quite a compliment coming from a French foreign secretary. I also am sad that ministers nowadays seem to think it wrong to say so, and I wish that our successive governments could occasionally pay a few more compliments, both to the Diplomatic Service and to the Home Civil Service, and to what are now rather contemptuously known as bureaucrats.”

MMcB: “They certainly couldn’t function without them.”

Lord Wright: “In strong contrast, perhaps it’s only a coincidence that it was two aristocrats, Alec Douglas-Home and Peter Carrington, who were always ready to pay compliments to the Foreign Service, and I think it’s very sad that they don’t anymore, or very, very seldom do. It has to be wrung out of them. I’ve actually wrung it out of them once or twice in the House of Lords, but as nobody reads Hansard . . .

Just one word about intelligence and secrecy, because I actually think that Douglas Hurd did us all a service in pressing the Service, and his permanent under-secretary in particular, to downgrade classifications where possible. Far too much of the material you and I dealt with was graded ‘confidential’, quite unnecessarily. And I am delighted to see that on the occasions when the Foreign Office can be persuaded to send me telegrams or papers to help me with questions in the House of Lords, how often they are ‘restricted’;

indeed I suppose they couldn't send them to me if they weren't. I nevertheless, don't approve of ambassadors who classify their 'Last Impressions' despatch as 'restricted' in order to pass on copies to the press. Perhaps that's rather a pompous, old-fashioned view."

MMcB: "Do you think that happens?"

Lord Wright: "I know it has happened. I'm not making accusations, but David Gore-Booth's valedictory despatch got into the 'Daily Telegraph.' Don't tell me that that wasn't passed on, and deliberately classified 'restricted' to enable it to do so. Of course 'restricted' shouldn't actually be available to the press. People think it is. I know for a fact that David Owen was a material agent in passing on Nico Henderson's valedictory despatch."

MMcB: "Oh, so that's how it happened."

Lord Wright: "I think so. I say I know it's a fact. I'm sorry, I ought to correct that."

MMcB: "I asked Nico Henderson about that."

Lord Wright: "Did he deny it?"

MMcB: "He denied having any idea how it got into the press."

Lord Wright: "Did he. Then I should correct what I said as a fact. I had always assumed, and in fact I had been told, that it was David Owen who had done it, but I withdraw it if he has denied it."

MMcB: "No. I haven't spoken to Owen. I spoke to Nico Henderson."

Lord Wright: "Oh, I see. Well I think it was Owen."

MMcB: “Well, it seems he was doing a very valuable public service. It was an extremely good despatch, and it revealed all sorts of things that desperately needed to be available in the public interest. I thought it was absolutely first rate.”

Lord Wright: “Yes. I also think the late Ham White deliberately leaked his valedictory despatch from Singapore with its rather acerbic comments on the Service, but I don’t know. What I disapprove of, very strongly, is the leaking of confidential papers for political purposes, which has, unfortunately, become a daily habit.”

MMcB: “Yes, there can’t be any justification for that.”

Lord Wright: “The only occasion that I know that it happened in my time, was the distressing case of Sarah Tisdall, who was sent to jail for it. Probably the last person to go to jail for breaking the Official Secrets Act, probably the last person ever to go to jail for breaking the Official Secrets Act, which I’ve now probably broken in this interview about 23 times.”

MMcB: “But it’s all right, because this is private, and I send it to the Foreign Office for clearance. They go through it and give the O.K. They do that regularly.”

Lord Wright: “They go through it with what, I hope, they call a fine-tooth comb, and not a fine tooth-comb. Has that ever occurred to you? Again and again, you hear on the radio and television, people talking about ‘the finest of tooth-combs’. What the hell is a tooth-comb?”

MMcB: “Well, thank you very much. That’s very good.”

Lord Wright: “Not at all, not at all.”