

BDOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details
Sir Stephen Wright KCMG (2006), CMG (1997).

(Born 7 Dec 1946, son of J H Wright, CBE and Joan Wright; m 1st, 1970 (marr. diss 2000); one son, one daughter; 2nd, 2002, Elizabeth Abbott Rosemont

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RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR STEPHEN WRIGHT KCMG**RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY ABBEY WRIGHT**

AW: This is the 21st February 2015 and Stephen Wright is in conversation with Abbey Wright who is recording his recollections of his diplomatic career.

Stephen, you joined the Service in 1968 and I know your father was a retired Ambassador. Was it always a shoo-in that you were going to go into the Service?

SW: No it wasn't a shoo-in but it was the career I knew something about, having lived in it. I was always interested in it, partly, as you say, because my father was in it and also because I had lived some of the life that my parents lived and I liked the life. I liked the fact that they lived overseas but retained their very strong connections through their position with home, with the UK. I wanted to continue that. But I did look around when I was in my last year at university for other jobs too. I think the reason why I ended up in the Diplomatic Service was firstly for those reasons I've given and secondly because I thought it was very relevant to my history degree which I'd enjoyed at university and I always thought of history as a very good preparation for international affairs, because a lot of it is international affairs of the past.

For practical reasons, the selection process for the Civil Service started earlier than all the other selection processes did, so it seemed a no-brainer to apply and see how far you would get and, finally, that the selection process was more thorough and more professional than any of the others than I encountered. But I did look at other careers. I came to the conclusion before the end that if I was offered a job in the Diplomatic Service, that's the job that I would take. I looked at banking and I looked at Shell and so on but there were fewer opportunities to work overseas in those days.

AW: Did they still do the weekend away selection process, or interviews ...?

SW: It was a whole selection process but it wasn't a weekend, it wasn't the country house. The main part of it was a two-day selection board which took place in London and consisted of a whole mixture of exercises and I thought it was pretty well done. Then there was a final formal interview with a panel of interviewers which was quite frightening.

AW: Do you remember who they were?

SW: I don't I'm afraid, I wasn't told in advance, at least I don't think I was!

AW: Then you joined, what did that entail?

SW: I joined on the 3rd September 1968 along with about twenty other people and we started off being told to report to an office called Curtis Green which is now about to become the Headquarters of the Metropolitan Police after years of disuse. It's on the Embankment across Whitehall from the FCO and that's where, in those days, the training was done. We started on a two week induction course of which I don't really remember a great deal. I think the main value of the course was to get to know the other members of the intake of that year so we had a ready-made bunch of friends and colleagues with whom we could talk during the rest of the first year until we were all dispersed to posts. We were talked to by a Minister, we were talked to by senior officials of the FCO, we were told about various aspects of the work but it was a lot of being talked at. I think the main thing I remember about it and perhaps the most valuable bit of the whole course was the rather basic instruction on how to maintain a file and how to manage papers in the way that the FCO did it.

AW: Then were you all sent to departments?

SW: Yes, I was allocated to a department called Rhodesia Political Department. There were various interesting things about it. Firstly, this wasn't in the Foreign Office. This was in the Commonwealth Relations Office.

AW: The offices hadn't merged at that point?

SW: They merged in November of that year and it was late September when I started there and the merger took place into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. But of course it was a drawn out process and you were still very conscious of the fact, even after the merger, that the department I was working in and the departments around us were "from the Commonwealth Office" rather than from the Foreign Office. It had a function that no longer exists today. It was trying to respond to the consequences of UDI by Ian Smith's regime in Rhodesia, in which Britain was very much in the lead on the international response. And on the national response, it was a big political issue. And there was a UN Sanctions Regime for which support needed to be maintained. There was a great deal of political interest.

AW: Who was fronting that? Who was your boss?

SW: I was in a team of three people lead by a First Secretary, James Allen. He was a very good trainer and a very good coach. The Head of Department was a man called Richard Faber who was a bit more remote from me; he was an old school Commonwealth Relations person from the Faber publishing family. The Under Secretary was a very grand figure called Jim Bottomley who was the father of Peter Bottomley the current MP.

The work in that first year was principally about getting to know how to do things. How to manage parliamentary business, how to prepare Ministers, so the process you had to learn was important and the point of the first year's work. I found the subject matter very absorbing, quite challenging, a lot of public correspondence, a lot of parliamentary questions, and the challenge from the opposition party and from the public of the Government's policies. During my time, and this was only one year, there were two rounds of high level talks with the Smith regime which were prepared at top level and the Prime Minister was involved. I was part of the team who were preparing the briefing materials for both those rounds of talks, both named after the Royal Navy ships on which they took place, the Tiger and the Fearless talks. They were not conclusive but were an important part of the process.

There was public correspondence, responding to letters from the public both directly to the FCO or to MPs or to other Ministers, all of which came onto our desk. There was a lot of it and I learned how to get as close as possible to answering the question because I thought, and nobody sought to dissuade me, that the public were entitled to proper answers but in line with Government policy.

There were some particular exercises, the new entrant (and they had a new entrant every year in this role) was always given the task of organising the Governor's Christmas cards. The Governor of Rhodesia was not part of the illegal regime, he was still loyal to The Queen and the UK and was the only remaining part of the UK Government actually in Rhodesia. He needed support in all sorts of ways and every year he wanted to send Christmas cards which were best bought and supplied from the UK which was a normal process for any other post. But to supply Christmas cards to Rhodesia was technically, on the face of it, a violation of UN sanctions. So permission had to be obtained through the proper channels and this was very much a Civil Service classic exercise to ask the new entrant to get it through, to look at the file and see how it was done last year, do it again, deal with anything that had changed during the year and of course get the cards delivered in time for the Governor to send them out. Happily I navigated all of that.

I think my best memory from that year's work in the department was being asked to draft a speech for the Lord Chancellor to open a debate in the House of Lords, in those days the Lord Chancellor was the Speaker. The Lord Chancellor had to make a speech to set out Government policy on Rhodesia in a rounded comprehensive way for the debate in the House of Lords. I was given the job of drafting this and a bit to my surprise I was rather left to it and was told to produce a draft for the Head of Department to look at and he didn't make many changes so I felt quite pleased. It also contained the most nervous moment of my first year because in order to get this speech prepared, I took some of the papers home to work at home. This was the first time I had taken papers out of the Office, and you were always told you had to be very careful about it. So I got a lockable briefcase and took it on the bus with me which had a whole file labelled "secret" and, indeed some of the papers were secret. I left it on the bus! That's the first time I ever got into a cab and said "Follow that bus". The conductor, when we finally caught up with him, said "I think this is yours Sir!" and gave it me back, much to my relief. I thought my career was going to be much shortened.

AW: Towards the end of this year were you beginning to think of where you might like to be posted, or were people not encouraged to think about where they wanted to go in those days? Were you told?

SW: We'd got a bit beyond just being told. We were invited to express preferences. All the new entrants were expecting to be posted after their first year at work so we were all looking forward to being told in the summer of 1969 where we would be going in the autumn. Some were going off to do hard language training. I was not invited to do that. We all had to take language aptitude tests as part of the entrance process. This was a very arcane thing because you had to deal not with real languages but with sounds. You had to distinguish them and it was all done in a language lab. It was very scientific and at the end of that I got a neutral pass mark and they said "If you really want we can put you forward for some of the less difficult of the difficult languages but you don't need to". So I wasn't going to and I was happy with my French and Spanish. Partly for family reasons and partly for how I'd grown up I expressed a wish to be sent to Latin America.

The day came and I was summoned to the Head of Department's office and I was indeed going to Latin America, I was going to be sent to Cuba! I had about three minutes saying "But that's not what I meant at all", but they said "Well that's where you're going".

I then embarked on the whole process of preparing to be sent abroad for the first time which was very exciting. It was a big elaborate process, you go and form up and get paid allowances in advance to kit yourself out, there's an outfit allowance. You get money to buy a car, it was my first car. It was exciting but there was a lot to be done and going to Havana where the Post Report was very clear, there was nothing to be bought locally, I really did have to kit myself out. I was a young man without a household so I had nothing, no cutlery, no glass, no bed linen, all that had to be bought. It was purchased tax free through an export agent company who were quite used to doing all this. Everything I bought was sent to their warehouse in Kent and they collected my consignment of goods. I bought a record player, very high spec because I had money in my pocket and I ordered a car.

AW: What sort of car did you buy?

SW: I was able to just about stretch to a Triumph Spitfire. I wanted an MGB and some of my better heeled new entrant colleagues were buying MGBs to go off to the Middle East and I was a bit envious but it wasn't possible because, I remember, the loan was £600 and the car cost £660. I had to put in some money, but not much. I took delivery of it before I got to Havana so I had three weeks of real pleasure driving this brand new Spitfire around in London. I remember, this is how life has changed, driving it from Islington with a friend down through the West End around Trafalgar Square, down Whitehall, into King Charles Street, into the Foreign Office courtyard, out the other side into Downing Street, turned right, waved to the policeman on the door and drove down Downing Street and out into Whitehall.

AW: Long time since anybody's done that! Toot toot Mr Toad!

SW: That's right! I also had some language training.

AW: How was that done then? Was there an FCO language school?

SW: Yes, we had a language school and I had a teacher who was an FCO employee and it was all done quite well. I had some Spanish but it had to be improved. I didn't do as much as I did later to go to Madrid but I did enough and it was necessary because I spent the next two years working in Spanish.

Third Secretary, Havana, 1969-1971

AW: You are off to Cuba. How did you get there?

SW: Everything about Cuba was different including the travel arrangements. There were some international flights into Cuba, Aeroflot of course but also Iberia from Spain still flew into Cuba. Our approved route then was to go to New York where you picked up the British Embassy Havana Charter Flight which flew weekly from Havana to New York and back to Havana again. The official purpose of this charter flight was to transfer the Diplomatic Bags. The Queen's Messengers didn't go to Havana so members of the Embassy took it in turn on a rota to go up to New York with the bag and collect a new bag from the offices in New York and go back. But to go back the following week, so this was a piece of R and R from the post for staff to get up to New York, have a bit of a breather, do some shopping

AW: Presumably you would have to shop for everybody as there was nothing to be had in Cuba?

SW: Yes, we did have to shop for everybody. Later on in my time in Havana they gave up going to New York and went to Nassau, Bahamas which was closer and which had its own advantages and disadvantages. It was sunnier but there was less available. I went to both New York and to Nassau through this. The Embassy Charter Flight was the life line not only for the British Embassy but for the other Western Embassies, there weren't that many of them, and even a few of the East European Embassies who wanted things bought or people transported.

AW: So did we manage to make it self-financing?

SW: No, I'm afraid it wasn't self-financing but we certainly got contributions. The cost of this Charter Flight was under challenge all the time but it was the best of the alternatives to satisfy the requirement to move the bags and the welfare purpose of allowing people out to go and buy things.

It became very important to me. I had an incident during my first winter in Havana in 1969. I had a burglary in my house. I had a proper house and I was the only person living in it apart from Violeta the maid and it was burgled one night. The burglars, whoever they were, took the things that a Cuban needed to live, all my shirts, all my underclothes, all my

trousers, they left the jackets because they didn't need jackets, left the ties, and they took the shoes and a few other things. With none of the things to wear, I had to borrow shirts and underwear (other than the ones that happened to be in the laundry when the burglary happened) shoes – I went around for about three months wearing a pair of black leather shoes that were a couple of sizes too big for me, trousers, I borrowed a suit. The only suit of mine that I had left was the one they hadn't taken, happily, which was made in Savile Row and had been a present from my father. It was an English woollen suit which was too heavy so I was wearing that and sweating in it!

AW: How long before you could get new things?

SW: My memory is that I was in this suboptimal condition for two to three months while I argued with the insurance company. I'd never dealt with insurance before. They actually said they wanted to appoint a loss adjuster and I said "Fine, but you're going to have to get yourself here" and they thought better of that idea. But they argued about everything that I was claiming which was really pretty dispiriting. Eventually my turn came to get on the bag run to New York so I spent a week shopping to replace the basics for myself. But that was on top of all the other shopping list that the courier had to contend with. When the Charter Flight returned and the British Embassy Courier got off the plane he would often come festooned with neon strip lights, toilet seats, parts for cars, televisions, radios, boxes of toilet paper and all sorts of other things. We were excluded from the rationing system that governed the life of every Cuban and instead we were obliged to use a shop that was ostensibly for the Diplomatic Corps and had goods which were off the ration but it was still very limited. There would be mad rushes when the word went out that there were "onions in the Empresa". Everyone would leave the office and leap into their cars to go and buy onions, or potatoes, or whatever it was we were all short of, because the basic standard of living in Cuba under rationing was very, very poor. It was a tragedy because the island was capable of producing every tropical fruit, citrus, bananas, mangoes, papayas, as well as seafood, tobacco. My mother, who had served in Cuba in the 1940s, said they used to buy huge kilo bags of mangoes on the street for a very small amount of money. I never saw a mango.

AW: Had you previously visited Cuba?

SW: No I'd never been there, my parents were there in the 1940s and my brother was born there. In fact I went to find the house that they had lived in. It was there but it was dilapidated.

AW: So how did you actually find it when you arrived?

SW: I was pretty horrified and I was hoping for the strength to do the job. It was a big challenge. I was fresh out of university and knew not much. This was the big wide world and a very different world. It was all new. All I had to go on was perhaps a little bit of inherited knowledge from my parents but it really wasn't much use because what I had to do in Cuba was very different from when they had lived in other places.

The Embassy had certain important roles, especially in commercial promotion. The Americans had no relationship with Cuba so the role of the British Embassy was valued by the United States as well as by ourselves and we were one of the few Western Embassies there. Along with the Canadians, we were the two who were the most important to the United States for basic reporting and intelligence and commercial promotion. Before I arrived there had been a big commercial deal selling Leyland buses to the Cubans which got the headlines and there were other British companies trying to do business there and we needed to help. People wanted to know about the state of Cuba. But I have to say that the Embassy really spent a large part of its effort keeping itself in being, through this business of the Charter Flight and through all the other daily frustrations of being an Embassy and having houses allocated to us that needed a lot of maintenance, the difficulties of keeping motor cars on the road, and so on. We spent a lot of time maintaining ourselves.

In the middle of all of that I tried to understand as best I could what was happening in Cuba, to draft reports and to be the dogsbody in the Embassy to start off a lot of basic work. The Ambassador ...

AW: Who was your Ambassador?

SW: Initially a man called Dick Slater, who was a great Latin American specialist who was the only person I came across in the Diplomatic Service who had worked with my father. He retired quite soon after I arrived and was replaced by Richard Sykes, who really was a superb mentor, leader, wise man. He had served with distinction during the War and with his wife Anne, was very helpful to me in steering me through this difficult place and in giving me work that developed me.

The main thing that happened in Cuba in my time there was the tenth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. The Cuban Revolution had happened in the final days of 1959 so the tenth anniversary occurred right at the end of 1969 and went through into 1970. By then

Cuba was a thorough going Stalinist state with all the systems and accoutrements of Communist control of society, secret police, and alignment with the Soviet Union on whom the country was dependent for oil and its trade. So the first ten years after the revolution had been spent in establishing this system. It probably hadn't been Communist at the outset but it rapidly became so and by the time I got there it was fully fledged but operating at a much lower level of sophistication than the other Communist states in Europe. Fidel Castro, who was quite a leader and quite an orator but who was undoubtedly driving this system, had declared that in the tenth anniversary year of the revolution, that is to say 1970, Cuba would demonstrate its socialist achievements by producing a record harvest of ten million tons of sugar. 1970 was universally referred to as the "ano de los diez millones", the year of the ten million tons. The average was somewhere around six million tons. Everyone was mobilised to help produce this sugar. Harvesting sugar now is mechanised but then was very labour intensive, unpleasant work. It was originally done by slaves from Africa. Cutting cane was back breaking, a bit dangerous and certainly you needed to be fit, with a lot of energy and stamina. Parties of workers from every known field, the military and so on, were drafted to go off for weekends or whole weeks, in trucks to go off and cut cane. In the course of this year of the ten million tons and a lot of propaganda, the rest of the economy was pretty well neglected and a lot of people were taken away from their normal work. So all the other functions of the economy, such as they were, rather ground to a halt in the effort to produce ten million tons. They published graphs all the time and I kept a graph in my office of the weekly results and watched the line climb. Everyone talked about whether it was going to be achieved. In the end it wasn't achieved. They got eight and half million tons, which had never been done before, but they nearly bust the economy to do it. And to what end? To demonstrate the superiority of socialist organisation. During the year there was propaganda on the radio and in the one newspaper called "Granma". I remember the song that they played was a song by an American group called the Archies "Sugar Sugar" but they called it "Azuca, Azuca, por Los Archies".

AW: What was the morale of the Cuban people like? Were they happy with their lot? Or were they depressed?

SW: They varied a great deal. It was also very hard to penetrate behind the propaganda because there was a nation-wide network of organisations called "Committees for the Defence of the Revolution" who really snooped on the population. They were typically staffed by little old ladies who enjoyed snooping and gossiping so there was a huge amount

of social control. I used to have a CDR right opposite from where I lived and I watched them watching me. They were little old ladies and they all had a telephone and were reporting. So everybody was under surveillance and the secret police were present and everybody knew about them although nobody knew who the informers were. People were very controlled and did not speak frankly or easily, and foreigners like us were definitely excluded from Cuban life. We diplomats, especially junior ones like me, were absolutely ravenous for any titbits of what seemed like hard information that would get to give a picture of life in Cuba.

During my time there I got lucky. I met a man who I think was actually a counter revolutionary dissident but he had been the editor of a pre-Revolution newspaper. That newspaper had, by coincidence, celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1959. To celebrate this anniversary they had published a book on the state of Cuba in that year. I was very lucky in that he gave me a copy of this book. This was absolute gold dust because all the political discussion that you had with Cubans or with foreigners was about the comparison of before and after, “antes y despues”, about whether this was better or that was better or how bad that was before the Revolution, or how good that was before the Revolution. Here I was given a book that had statistics in it and it was very obvious to me the scale of the decline of the economy. Cuban income per head, the standard of living over the ten years since the Revolution had declined to a level of subsistence that was very difficult for the Cuban people. The ration was very basic, it was measured in so many grams of pork, grams of sugar, etc per week. Nothing like the rationing in Central Europe in the context of the Czech Revolt, which had just happened, where they measured the ration in terms of importing Italian shoes and things. This was very basic. There had been a dramatic decline in the performance of the economy, in Cuba’s ranking in Latin America, and in the standard of living. What there had also been was a great deal of equalisation, or redistribution, so that the misery or the welfare was much more evenly distributed than it had been before the Revolution when society had been very divided between the rich and the poor. There was an equality of misery. You can discuss whether that’s better than having an inequality of relative wealth. That was very much part of the discussion.

I tried to assemble material, some of which went into reports to London when there were other political developments going on, Castro making another speech and so on, that had to be reported. Later on in my time I drafted a despatch for the Ambassador because the Embassies in Moscow and Beijing, then called Peking, had written despatches on the life of the ordinary Russian and the ordinary Chinese and we thought that it would be good to try

and write one about the life of the ordinary Cuban. I wrote the best we knew on this subject on how the ordinary Cuban lived and what his standard of living was. I drew on these statistics and on what we knew, on anecdote and people's personal experiences, such as they were, but our social contact with the Cubans was extremely limited and you never quite knew who you were dealing with and whether what they were telling you was true or not.

I developed one relationship with a chap who was a bit older than me. We had a common interest in history, he said he loved history. He worked on a magazine called "Militante Comunista" which was an ideological journal. He talked relatively openly about Cuban ideology, Communist ideology, socialism in Cuba and the positive view of Cuba without being totally propaganda driven about it. He was interested about what life was like in the West and I talked to him about that. Where that was ending up I have no idea but it was worthwhile. But there were plenty of other people who you came across at parties who were there for inexplicable reasons and who nobody trusted.

But there was a social life. I was a young man and I had no attachments. There were other young people in other Western Embassies and we had a social round. We had endless parties with wonderful music. It got a bit silly because you would find that the only thing which changed were the houses we were in because the people were the same...

AW: And did this include Cubans?

SW: Very few and those were the ones you had to wonder how they were there. So these were mainly foreign diplomats, the young ones. So the people, the music, the food, the waiters were all the same, the waiters always knew what you were going to have to drink, you didn't have to ask for it. It kept us amused. It wasn't bad. I had some friends there. My Canadian opposite number was a French Canadian, a man called Jacques Bilodeau. He subsequently turned up as the Deputy High Commissioner in London. He was the first French Canadian I had ever met and he had had to learn English to go into the Canadian Foreign Service and his English wasn't that great. We conversed in French and English and at a certain moment we decided that we would go off on a tour outside Havana. The Cubans said that diplomats weren't restricted and that we could go anywhere. We were not formally restricted like in China and Moscow. "Diplomats can go anywhere" said Fidel. But actually you couldn't because you couldn't go more than a day's drive without organising somewhere to stay, and organising somewhere to stay took about three months. It was an expedition, you had to take everything with you like loo paper, butter, jam, bread. So we did

this and got the permission and went off in a westerly direction. Havana is in the middle of a rather long island. We went off westerly towards an area which was said to be quite pretty because the land around Havana was terribly flat and very dry and dusty with huge palm trees, which are really rather ugly, and cane fields. We didn't seek to do any official business but we took notes on what we saw and got a little bit out of it but all we'd really done was get out of Havana and see something of the country -which was quite an enterprise.

AW: How were the people you met in the countryside?

SW: They were more open but they were subject to the same privations and probably a little bit more than in the city. On the other hand they were closer to food production so they may have had more black market. But what everyone suffered from was very poor medical services and very poor education. It was an achievement of the Revolution, and of which they were very proud, that medical services and education was universal. And it was but it was of very low standard. They had quite good doctors, they trained good doctors and always have done but they had no resources at all and so medical services were pretty poor.

AW: What was their culture like? Nowadays we hear a lot about their ballet dancers?

SW: Yes, and they were famous then. There was a lady called Alicia Alonso who even then was quite old and who was the grande dame of ballet in Cuba and had more or less created the Cuban National Ballet. That was the only cultural experience you could get in Cuba that was up to international standards. Going to the ballet was a real treat and Alicia Alonso had produced a really good ballet company. Since then they have kept up those standards. The Cubans are creative people and artistically quite sophisticated. There were artists who were licensed to go out and about and who were quite significant as artists, but they were restricted to the country. There wasn't much in the way of art exhibitions and what there was was all by the state, so it all had its slant on it. I think that the artistic form that I appreciated the most, once you got over the initial shock, was the propaganda posters. There was no advertising for goods but there were a lot of propaganda posters and they were well designed and quite attractive. I brought home a collection of them, which I've since lost, thinking that they ought to be framed although there were too many of them to do that. I remember one which was an anti-smoking poster and the slogan was "fumar es quemar salud", smoking is burning your health. They had the basic design of a smoking cigarette and an overflowing

ashtray, but it was beautifully done. There were others for saving electricity and others for producing sugar with heroic workers and was a mixture of what people called Soviet Realism with Caribbean colour.

AW: Was the place teeming with Russians?

SW: Yes, pretty much. When you were walking out and about in the town you would immediately get followed by little boys who would come and tug your sleeve and wanted to know who you were. So the first thing they said was “Ruso? Ruso?” and you said “No, no, not Ruso”, so they said “Bulgaro? Checo?” and when you said no, they said “Que? Que?” And when you said “Ingles”, they said “que es Ingles?” This was completely baffling! So then they’d say “dame cigaro” or “dame chicle” (give me a cigarette, give me chewing gum). They always wanted something but they assumed you were Russian.

The Russians, being Russians, were not free and easy. They were not going about being tourists but there were a lot of them and their Embassy was huge. They received about two Russian tankers a day in the harbour. There is a long promenade along by the sea, which was the main through route in Havana, called the “Malecon”. I drove backwards and forwards on the Malecon to get to work and you saw these Russian tankers going in and out all the time. They were totally dependent on Russia. Castro had also developed a very large army which was dependent on Russia for its equipment. There was conscription. The army was there for national defence and they’d had the Bay of Pigs in the sixties, but it was also there for social and economic purposes. What the country lacked, in terms of its performance, was a middle level. There were senior people, government ministers, senior officials, heads of industries who were technically, professionally, educationally, very competent and sophisticated. And there were lots of workers. But there was no middle management because they had all left. Again, Castro had said in one of his early speeches that these people were worms “gusanos” and that if they didn’t want to stay in Cuba they weren’t wanted and should go. So, unlike other Communist countries, it was legal and not physically prevented, people could leave. In practical terms it was quite difficult to leave because you couldn’t just book a seat. But people left in boats and it was only 90 miles to Florida and there had been waves of emigration early on in the Revolution which had created the Florida émigrés. And that was all the middle management and it took everyone who had

any aspiration in life and this was a big element in preventing the country from functioning well.

AW: You mentioned in your notes Santiago – is there a story here?

SW: He was the Embassy handyman, he was the one who fixed everything that didn't work because there was no one else to come and do it. He helped me a lot with my car. Driving everyday it suffered a bit, but it lasted and came back to England with me. Driving on the Malecon when the sea was rough, the waves came over onto the road surface so the underparts of the car got rusted. We were always replacing exhaust systems and when I came back from my mid-term leave in 1970 I had to bring an entire exhaust system back with me! The petrol pump clogged up with rust because when it came out on the boat they had drained the petrol tank and the tank had rusted inside so the pump got full of rust and had to be cleaned out every two weeks. I got very proficient at doing this. Santiago helped with all these things, he had the tools and the bodging ability and he would come and help in the house. The electrical power supply in Cuba, when it was on, was 110 volts - American type - which is less powerful than 240. Nevertheless his method of testing whether the electricity was working was to take his shoes off and put the live wires on his tongue and if that was live he could tell! But he was crucial, the Embassy wouldn't have worked without him.

AW: And there was your maid, Violeta. You put in your notes that she had a trial? What did she do wrong?

SW: She was living in this house which was a four bedroomed house with six loos, I remember counting. Four bedrooms for me plus servants' quarters and garage. It was the biggest place I'd lived in my life, on my own. Violeta lived there and looked after me. She did the cooking, laundry and was a good woman. She was a Seventh Day Adventist which was not a tolerated religion. Religion wasn't encouraged and that kind of evangelical enthusiasm was definitely not tolerated which was why she worked for the Embassy where she was safe. Late in my time she didn't turn up for work one day and I got a message that she had been arrested. She'd been arrested by the authorities for taking part in a bible reading session in somebody's house which she said they did every week but the authorities, for whatever reason, decided to break it up. She was going to be put on trial and the likely outcome was that she would be sentenced to a labour camp. I thought it didn't seem right

and I didn't fancy losing my maid so I went and sat in the trial. My intention was just to go and be there. I discovered where it was. It was in a little room and there weren't many people. There was a judge, a prosecutor, not robed or anything, they were all in their shirt sleeves. I think it called itself a Revolutionary Tribunal. Clearly she'd fallen foul of the CDR. I was just sitting there. I think they wondered who I was. Violeta I suppose was glad to see me although she was completely frightened, she couldn't speak. This presiding person started off and asked if she had a defending lawyer. She said no. They said they would carry on without. I thought "this isn't right". So I stood up and said "Do you want a lawyer, Violeta? We will get you a lawyer". I said to the President that if she was entitled to a lawyer, she should have a lawyer and that the proceedings should be suspended until she had one and that I would get her one. This dumbfounded everyone. There was silence and then confusion "Who are you?" they asked. I told them and after a bit of consultation the session was suspended. Violeta was not in prison at this time so she came back and continued to work in the house, on bail somehow. In the short term, object achieved and I got her out and put a spoke in the wheels of this kangaroo court, got my maid back. I was called in to see the Ambassador two days later who said he'd had a complaint and asked me what was happening. So I told him what was happening and he said "Hmnm, well I understand why you did it, don't do it again". I didn't hear any more about it and looking back on it I think you couldn't have done that in Russia! By then I reckoned I had the measure of these people and the measure of how organised they were at the lower level and thought "where's the harm? I can actually make a difference".

AW: And what about the contacts you made officially? What were the Cuban officials you worked with like?

SW: Formal, they didn't give anything away. You didn't have a personal relationship with them. This was the Foreign Ministry where there was one person who was the UK and Western Europe Desk Officer. There was one individual who I used to go and deal with at the lower level on routine matters but it was all done very formally and with no attempt to solve any real problems. The other organisation with which I did have dealings and real discussions was the Central Bank of Cuba. One of my jobs was to look after claims, namely British subjects who had suffered financial loss as a result of the Revolution. And the British subjects for our purposes included Caribbean citizens, like Jamaicans, as well as UK people. So I had quite a long list of people who had registered claims with the Cuban authorities and

these claims were supposedly adjudicated by the Central Bank. It had been going on for years and my job was to try and move things forward. So I used to have sessions with one particular man in the Central Bank who was a genial old cove. We talked through the list and I asked if he could do this or do that. He said that he would take it under review and made notes. You knew that nothing was going to get settled but you had to keep pushing the thing along and after two years I left it effectively in the same state. But I had engaged with the authorities in a relatively professional way. I think the Ambassador had the same experience at higher level. Blockage at a more sophisticated level and couldn't really do much more than I could. The Commercial Department had rather more constructive relationships because where we were supplying goods, we were supplying them to somebody who actually wanted them, and so there was a more normal business type relationship. I was fortunate in having a period when I was asked to be the acting Commercial Officer when the Commercial First Secretary took leave. I rather enjoyed that. I'd never done any commercial work before. This was a period when a report had just come out by Sir Val Duncan, I think in 1968, and was one of those many reports which said the Diplomatic Service must concentrate on trade promotion. So it was very much the flavour of the year and I was quite glad to get a bit of commercial work. I was dealing with a different bunch of people in Whitehall, by correspondence of course, and I had a small team in the Embassy. They were Cubans who worked as commercial assistants and were very good people. There was a man called Narciso and a woman called Rosa and they were effective people and knew their business and who to talk to. So I learned from them and enjoyed a first experience of having somebody to manage. And there was more constructive work to be done than there was in my political section desk.

AW: Did you get any commercial visitors? Any political visitors from the UK?

SW: No political visitors. We got some commercial visitors but I don't remember anyone of a senior level. You got commercial salesmen, marketing managers and so on and who had a pretty tough time when they came. They didn't have access to even the goods that we had. They stayed in the hotels where the service was pretty minimal. There was one hotel that served good daiquiris, it had the bar that Hemingway used to go to in the Deauville Hotel. There was also a restaurant in the Hotel Nacional where I went once for a supposedly slap up dinner. I was given a leather bound menu, a volume about half an inch thick and it had everything in it, all the dishes beautifully laid out on thick paper, with a tassel. As I was

given it and was flipping through, I thought “this looks to be too good to be true” and so asked “Que hay?” (what is there?) The waiter very brightly said “Hay faisán”. “Que más?” I said (what more?). “Faisán” he said! So I had the faisán. It came and it looked like, tasted like and had the consistency of hen, but it was faisán!

The Cubans themselves had a language that was widely used and reached even us. It was a language of their own, phrases like “¿Quiéren es el último?” (who is the last one) for when you were joining a queue. Whenever you came up to any group anywhere you said this, because everybody was queuing all the time. Then they had fine distinctions for things being unavailable. The typical Cuban would get to the front of the queue and would say “¿Hay carne?” (is there meat?) They would be told “No hay carne” which means there is no meat. Much better they would be told “Sí, hay carne pero se acaba” which means yes there is meat but it’s finished, it’s gone. That was a much better reply than “no hay”. Just occasionally they got “Sí, hay” and they got given some.

I had a Spanish teacher and used to visit her flat in Havana. She was quite a good teacher and a nice woman. I don’t know why she was licenced to take diplomats, but she was. We did lots of things about life in Cuba, speeches in Cuba, Castro’s speeches and so on. One time she showed me her child’s arithmetic exercise book and I remember the exercise that related to how you calculated averages. The exercise was expressed in terms “On the first day of the week heroic Cuban airspace was violated by Yankee Imperialist aircraft on two occasions. On the second day of the week heroic Cuban airspace was violated by Yankee Imperialist aircraft on four occasions” ... and on through the week. “What is the average number of violations of heroic Cuban airspace by Imperialist Yankee aircraft during the week?” Propaganda was everywhere.

I used to annoy people at home when I came back and lapsed into Cuban propaganda-speak because I could get into it quite easily as to why things were the way they were or what was the problem, “Yes but you have to understand the heroic masses struggling with Yankee oppression in this area”.

AW: So you had three years there?

SW: Two years.

AW: Was it considered hardship?

SW: Yes it was a hardship post and that was the reason the posting was only two years with leave in the middle. I had a long leave in 1970 and returned with the exhaust system.

AW: Were you talking about where you were going next or did it just come to an end and you came back and ...

SW: I certainly wasn't expecting to go back to the UK because that was relatively uncommon in the routine for the early years. The early years were normally one year in London and then to a post and most people went on to a second post. I don't remember having strong preferences as to where that should be although I had always been interested in the European Community and we were now approaching the period when the UK was about to join the EC and I was a bit envious of one of my colleagues who was posted to Brussels to the Delegation who were negotiating to join the EC. I think I probably expressed an interest in that. However, I was told to come back a little bit early, so I think I only did a little bit more than a year and a half, I started in September 1969 and left in June or July of 71 because they wanted me to go on an Economics Course and it started in September of 71.

I was glad to leave. I knew I didn't like it. I couldn't stand the regime and what it had done to a productive, creative, alive sort of place. It was really quite cultured even though it had been socially divided and I couldn't really abide the way it had been brought down to a minimal level and where everything was under this politically repressive system so I was very glad to leave. But it had been a real political education for me. I had never experienced anything like it and of course you have no basis for imagining any of that just going from school to university and into the Service. It was a crash course in developmental politics and I was glad of it but I was glad to be out of it. I haven't been back. I spent quite a lot of time afterwards berating people who took vacations in Cuba. I've given up doing it now because everybody seems to go there, but I still think the same. We shouldn't be giving them dollars.

AW: Before we leave Cuba, you were going to tell me about the Embassy Beach House? Was it open for everybody to use?

SW: This was really the Embassy's main recreation because there wasn't tennis or golf although there was a golf course and I did once try to play. But there was a beach house that the Embassy had been given at some stage in the past which was within relatively easy driving distance of Havana at a place called Jibacoa. It was by the beach on a hill overlooking the bay. It was nice and quiet because nobody else went to the beach in Cuba because nobody had petrol. We were not bothered. We occasionally got Canadian tourists who were perfectly OK, nice people to see. Offshore there was a coral reef and you could do snorkelling. There were occasional barracudas to give us all excitement. The house was not for sleeping in but was good enough to accommodate a lot of Embassy members and a lot of people used to go out there at the weekends and talk to each other. The Ambassador and his family used to use it quite a lot, no doubt they thought it was good for morale to make an appearance but I think they needed it as much as everybody else did. We used to eat lunch altogether round one big table and it was hilarious that without anybody ever saying anything, the whole lot organised themselves into a protocol seating plan with the Ambassador on one end and his wife at the other end, the Counsellor next to them sort of, and the First Secretary Commercial sort of next to them and then the junior diplomatic staff, me and the Second Secretary somewhere in the middle with the registry clerks, who were all excellent people. We all got on very well together but it was funny to see how people arranged themselves and it suited everybody. It just goes to show how the important thing is how protocol helps everybody to be comfortable. The beach house was one of the lifelines, along with the charter flight, that kept us all sane.

Further along the coast, if you wanted to go further but still within a day's drive, there was an absolutely wonderful beach which I went to occasionally with other people. As no one had the petrol to make the drive the beach was often deserted. There was a little peninsula sticking out of the north coast of Cuba called Varadero, pointing towards Florida. The beaches were white fine sand and the water was never rough because the beach had a long run out of very shallow water which would get warm in the sun with little waves. Because of the heat the water took on a velvety quality, it was just the most delicious place to be. I believe it is now fully developed with tourist hotels and no doubt they have ruined it but in those days we would be the only people on the beach. If I ever did go back to Cuba, that's the only place I would want to go to for nostalgia.

Civil Service College, six month's economics course, 1971-72

AW: So back you come for this economics course. Where was that held?

SW: It was held in London in a building in Belgrave Road, round the back of Victoria Station which I have been to since, it's now commercial offices but it was the Civil Service College. I was put on a six months economics course which I was quite positive about and glad to be nominated. I don't think I had hugely strong feelings but I was quite glad to be back in the UK. I rented a flat which I found through the lists the Foreign Office used to have in those days of people who wanted to let their properties. This was a British Council person who was letting out a flat in Harley Street, so I lived in Harley Street.

I was the only FCO person among the students on the course, they were all civil servants and this was my first exposure to civil servants of my age. It was a good experience and gave me a network across Whitehall which was useful and it enabled me to compare and contrast what I knew and was interested in with what they knew. I should mention that when I had passed into the Foreign Office at the Civil Service Selection process I had squeaked into the Foreign Office by a few marks and narrowly missed the Civil Service. I put it down to the way I was, and perhaps my ideas were a bit more adapted to the Foreign Office than the Civil Service. But I knew I wouldn't have been a civil servant and I was interested to get a sense of what they had that I didn't have. So I enjoyed that process.

AW: And the course itself?

SW: A lot of it I found quite unduly theoretical and not very applicable and also there were elements of sociology in it which I thought was just mumbo jumbo. But it was valuable, it familiarised me with the jargon and the concepts which stood me in good stead for the rest of my career. For example, I now know what is meant by an indifference curve, I know the Phillips curve about employment and inflation, all the very basics and realities of economics which help you to understand everything you read in the newspapers. There was tacked on at the end of the course an optional 6-8 weeks of international economics which I found, obviously, much more relevant and that gave me the basics not only of the theory of trade and how it benefits different countries and what's bad and so on, but also the international

organisations that did trade and economics, like the IMF and GATT and what the European Community's role was. The application in the real world of international economics was genuinely valuable and has remained so through the things I've done since.

The third thing that was good about it was learning about regional policy. We went on regional visits, we went to South Wales and we went to Scotland, Edinburgh, to talk to the Welsh Office and the Scottish Office to see the issues that they were up against. We had learned about regional policy but this was seeing it in practice. It was very instructive and useful and good to get out of London and see some of the realities of industrial life in South Wales where the coal industry was winding down and you could buy a pub in the Rhondda Valley for £5 because nobody wanted the properties, and how the government was coping with industrial change and what the social problems were and gave rise to. They showed us the new towns that were being built to move things forward. The same in Scotland. I was quite interested in it as a government process because I thought that these people who were working in the Welsh and Scottish Offices must have had much more satisfaction because they were much closer to the issues they were dealing with and could see the effects of what they were doing much more directly than anyone could in Whitehall. I thought this was attractive. I did regional visits later on in my career and I was always glad to be able to do it.

AW: Did you have good people looking after you on the course?

SW: That was a bit of a downside. The only other FCO person in the course was the Course Director, who shall remain nameless, who was a bit of a disaster. He was a fussy person who couldn't really establish authority over these bright young people and was an object of derision quite quickly and remained so. I felt it incumbent on myself to try and stick up for him a bit. I hadn't met him before, I worked with him afterwards, but they were right - he was a bit of a wanker really - I don't know if that is language for your record, but that is what he was. It didn't make that much difference but he wasn't an inspiring leader. But we did get good people to come and talk to us. A mixture of economists, academic economists, government people, and so on. I remember one lecturer on the international bit of the course who restored my faith in the Foreign Office. There was an FCO First Secretary who was head of a team on financial policy and came and gave us a lecture on the significance of gold in the international economy. He was brilliant. He was just a little bit older than me and in fact a few weeks ago I told him how impressive that lecture had been...

AW: Who was that?

SW: A man called Tom Richardson who ended up as Ambassador in Italy. He was quite gratified to be told that all those years later! So that was the course.

Second Secretary, Trade Policy Department, (TPD), FCO, 1972-3

AW: And you are still not going overseas, they are keeping you in London?

SW: Yes, having brought me back they wouldn't send me off again so soon, so the intention was to put me into the FCO afterwards and having done this economics course, they put me into the Trade Policy Department. I was on the policy side of it. The department had two functions. Although the trade promotion function was actually managed by the Department of Trade and Industry and they were actually in charge of all the commercial officers overseas, nevertheless there had to be a unit in the FCO who supported and gave perspective on all of that and that was one of the functions of the department. But it wasn't the part I was in.

I was in the policy side which dealt with a few international organisations like the GATT in Geneva and the OECD in Paris. My particular responsibility that I was given as Second Secretary, under a First Secretary Head of Section, a man called Mark Pellew, was to manage COCOM. COCOM was an abbreviation on The Committee on Control of Strategic Exports, I think. It came under the umbrella of the OECD in Paris but it was an inter-governmental committee and consisted of all the members of the OECD. They drew up and maintained a list of items that the OECD countries collectively agreed not to sell to Communist countries. It was obviously all military hardware but also a lot of what is called dual-use items, things that could have military applications. There was a periodic review of the list. By the time I came into it, it was a well-established system. It had quite a lot of authority but in-between the reviews there were always applications for exceptional treatment by different governments who wanted, notwithstanding what the list said, to export this or that.

AW: The "Ah-buts"?

SW: Yes, exactly. The exceptions had to be negotiated so there was a little bit of “You look after me, I’ll look after you”. We had a man in Paris who was doing this and I was the London end of it. In Paris it was Robert Alston. It was my first experience of spending sustained periods of time on the telephone to people on the other side of the Channel. My job was to act as a channel for the whole of Whitehall. Of the departments that were strongly interested in this were the Ministry of Defence as well as the DTI, sometimes from opposing points of view, especially in the cases where we wanted an exception. So that had to be mediated and come to a common Whitehall position. There was a committee in the Cabinet Office on which I represented the FCO. This was my first experience of inter-governmental policy making and then passing on to Robert Alston what his instructions were and what his position had to be both on our exceptions and everybody else’s exceptions and try to achieve it and see it through. It was strangely quite fun! It was techy, quite detailed and obviously was important and led you into some fascinating areas. I remember we did a lot of jet engines for Rolls Royce, I think we were wanting to export BAE 111s and Tridents to different clients round the world which were full of bits and pieces that were dual use or sensitive equipment. And then Concorde. This was 1972, so Concorde by then was in flight and coming in to service. There were still considerable hopes of selling Concorde to other countries like Quantas. That was no problem for the COCOM system but selling it to China was. One of the most sensitive bits of kit on the Concorde was the inertial navigation system that was made by the Americans I think

AW: Yes, Litton Industries

SW: If you say so! The INS caused months of work and to-ing and fro-ing and of course it never came to anything because it was never sold to anyone, but it was certainly a big deal. You can imagine the pressure behind it on the UK and French side and the difficulty of persuading anybody that selling the INS to the Chinese was a good idea!

I did that job for a year, it felt a bit longer, perhaps because it was a bit limited and I was aware of physically not being in the main FCO building. I was on the other side of King Charles Street in what is now the Treasury. It was called Great George Street Offices in those days where a lot of economic departments were and I felt a bit “out of it”. I think I must have put in a request for a transfer into something that was a bit more mainstream because I was transferred in 1973 into Eastern European and Soviet Department.

Second Secretary, Eastern European and Soviet Department, (EESD), FCO, 1973-5

It was a fantastically interesting job, not just because it was in the mainstream of the FCO being up on the second floor with Near East and North Africa Department just over the corridor and Southern European Department dealing with the Mediterranean countries next door in another direction. EESD, as it was known, had two teams dealing with Eastern Europe, that is to say the northern half and the southern half, so some guys did Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and others did Romania and Bulgaria and so on. There were two teams doing the Soviet Union, one dealing with Soviet internal affairs and bilateral Soviet Union - UK affairs, which in my time was led by George Walden who resigned and became an MP, and subsequently Christopher Meyer who was a bright young man at the time. The unit I was in was the team dealing with Soviet external policy, Soviet worldwide, multilateral policy and which was led by Brian Fall who later became Ambassador in Moscow and included other luminaries like Andrew Burns who went on to be our first Consul-General in Hong Kong.

This was a period when Kissinger and Nixon had come in in Washington and Brezhnev was in charge in Moscow. In retrospect it was the height of the Cold War but it was also a period when both sides were attempting to find a better way which came under the general heading of "Détente". It sort of means relaxation, but we knew at the time that there were a lot of different objectives on the two sides. But it meant that there was a lot of contact and a lot of negotiation between the East and the West. During that time the CSCE Helsinki Agreement was launched which was a great Western success. The Russians wanted to ratify, codify and fix the post-World War Two status quo in Europe. What the West wanted was to limit the competition, circumscribe it with rules and also, in the famous Basket Three, to find ways of getting the Soviet Union to commit to human rights and the exchange of ideas which at the time was very wishy washy but which actually we now know sustained a lot of the dissidents in the East. If you were to ask President Havel of the Czech Republic how important it was ... it was crucial. The Russians knew how dangerous it was so it was a very difficult negotiation. We ended up with a balance. There was also negotiation on force levels in Europe which went under the label of Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions – MBFR - which was about conventional forces in Europe and negotiating to reduce the levels and set limits, which had some effect. Meanwhile between the US and the Soviet Union they were

getting into strategic arms limitation, SALT, which was about nuclear weapons and in which the UK had an interest but not a voice. Our line was that the UK nuclear holdings were so small that they were not really affected by whatever the Americans and the Russians were talking about. Out in the world, the Soviet Union concluded a selection of friendship treaties with Vietnam, India and Egypt and those two, India and Egypt, were strategic successes for the Soviet Union essentially freezing out Western influence and locking in Soviet influence in those two countries. In the case of India, I went there later, and the effects of it were fundamental. The degree of Russian and Indian links in trade, especially in the military field, survive to this day. In the case of Egypt, President Sadat did a reversal at some point, I think after the '73 War, when he threw out the Russians and brought in the Americans who have been there ever since. At the time it was very significant and of course the Arab Israel issue was every bit as alive then as it is today. There was the war in 1967, another war in 1973 when I think, this is a little remembered fact, Kissinger declared a nuclear alert. It only went to the first level but it really put the cat amongst the pigeons, and it was meant to intimidate the Russians. It was only tactical, but who knew that at the time? It was really quite hairy.

In Europe things were happening. West Germany under Willy Brandt was negotiating with East Germany, so there was an inner German treaty. Willy Brandt was also negotiating with Russia on his famous Ostpolitik to try and improve German relations with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. There were negotiations going on between the war time allies on Berlin, called the Quadripartite Agreements obviously affecting the Germans to control and reduce the tension in Berlin. So there was a lot of negotiation going on but a lot of distrust and hostility because the stakes were very high and the Soviet Union was sensitive and dangerous. One of my roles, apart from routine briefing and correspondence and so on, was to edit a monthly publication which came out of our department called "Communist Policy and Tactics" and which contained some very high-grade articles written by people in the policy departments, not the researchers, a lot of them our people in EESD and also in other departments who were writing articles about Soviet or Chinese policy and behaviour and activity in all the regions of the world - the Middle East, the Persian Gulf Region, Vietnam and South East Asia, Eastern Europe. I had to edit all of these, firstly working out in consultation what the subject should be for each month's edition and then getting people to write the articles, which was always a challenge, writing some myself, editing them myself and submitting it all for approval. It was good because it got me round the Office. I went trailing the corridors to get people to do things I wanted them to do which what I'd been

missing in the previous job, and really introduced me to all the major departments of the Office where I met people I continued to know for the rest of my career. The whole thing worked because the Head of Department believed in it and stood up for it. For other people it was too long, too wordy, too academic, too “why do we need this?” There were a lot of critics but I maintained it was quite good stuff. The head of the department believed in it and he was one of the greats of the Foreign Service, a man called Julian Bullard. His father, Sir Reader Bullard had been famous in his day. Julian had grown up on German affairs and I always imagined him being there when John Le Carré wrote “Small Town in Germany” as a model for Smiley, because Smiley was a person who understood Germany. Julian Bullard understood Germany, its culture, its politics and post War German issues and he had served in Moscow and understood and knew the Russians, and was a great intellect. He was a Fellow of All Souls College and became the Political Director. When he retired he went to All Souls. He applied his intellect to our business with a very clear and acute understanding. His morning meetings never lasted more than half an hour. Nobody was allowed to sit down. We all stood up and said what we had to say about the day’s work or what was coming up, just to make sure that everyone knew. It was conducted with machine gun rapidity and he took it all in. He believed in the importance of analysis and the importance of the FCO having good analysis for policy.

I thought the publication was good because it was mind expanding, it was global and it was about an enigma as Churchill said. So understanding Soviet thinking from what little you had to go on from reporting from the Embassy, which was from very high grade people like Rod Lyne and Francis Richards, or what the Russians were saying overtly, what the Russians were saying to others. I used to use the BBC monitoring services from Caversham a great deal, a much under-used resource I’m afraid in the Foreign Office. BBC Monitoring was fantastic in covering what Soviet broadcasters were saying and about what other countries were saying about the Soviet Union too. Towards the latter stages there were things happening amongst the Communist parties in Western Europe that were actually quite new. They were breaking loose from the Soviets. The Italian Communist Party was saying interesting things and my contribution was to read what the Spanish Communist Party was doing. Santiago Carrillo was the Head of the Spanish Communist Party during the Spanish Civil War and he died during our time in Spain. He was at the height of his powers in the 1970s. He was forging out with new lines on how to be a Communist party inside Western democracy and how to participate in the democratic process which was entirely different from what the Soviet Union

thought. This all began to come together under the label of Euro Communism and it began in the seventies, part of the Détente process. I was instrumental in drawing attention to it.

Meanwhile in the room next door, the one doing bilateral relations with the Soviet Union, there was the dramatic moment when Alec Douglas-Home as Foreign Secretary, expelled 104 members of the Soviet Embassy in London. I was aware of it happening, I wasn't involved but I was aware of it being prepared, it was called Operation Foot. My colleague next door, I think it was George Walden, was preparing the ground, working out with the Foreign Secretary how it was going to be done and then doing it and dealing with the consequences. The government thought it was great, it was the Conservative Government, it had enough dealings with the Soviet Union, it wasn't war mongering or anything like that, and it had a very strong case because the activities of the Soviet Embassy were demonstrably excessive, their numbers excessive and they had to be brought under control. I think our reputation gained a lot with that. I was sort of there.

First Secretary, British Information Service (BIS), New York, 1975-80

AW: It is 3rd August and this is Abbey Wright recommencing the conversation with Stephen Wright about the recollections of his diplomatic career. Stephen, in 1975 you were posted to New York as First Secretary with the British Information Service, was that something you applied for, or were you sent?

SW: In those days in the FCO I think you were invited to express preferences but you were in the end sent. I did ask quite strongly, amongst everyone who I thought might have an influence on the decision, to be posted to the United States because I thought that was a step that I really wanted to take and needed to take to develop. In those days, in the seventies, the States were still a place where young British people wanted to go in order to get a wider view of life, of opportunity. This tradition had built up in the Sixties and it was still very much alive. I think that at that time it was an ambition that was justified because I found my overall experience of working in New York for almost five years to be thoroughly rewarding and mind broadening in a way that developed my attitudes for the rest of my life.

AW: British Information Services, for nearly five years, was it a different sort of post from the mainstream?

SW: Yes, it was a bit unconventional. British Information Services was a unit within the British Government offices in New York and had a quite distinguished history, but it doesn't exist anymore as a distinct unit. British Information Services, BIS, was first established during World War II before the United States entered the war in order to give energy to the presentation and explanation of what was happening in Britain and what Britain was trying to do in the War and to influence United States opinion to be supportive which, of course, was quite a challenge in those days. It had had, during the War, some very distinguished people working in it. By the time I was there in the 1970s it was obviously a much less prominent and less high level an operation but nevertheless we still had quite considerable ambitions for acting as a place that influenced American opinion and American thinking in favour and in support of what Britain was doing and what was happening in Britain.

AW: Who was in charge of it when you got there?

SW: When I got there it was a man called Ham Whyte who had had an interesting career. He had previously been in one of the security services. He was a very gifted presenter and he went on from New York to be Head of News Department in the Foreign Office and eventually High Commissioner in Nigeria. He was a very imaginative and creative person and he was very well known in New York and had a good understanding of New York life. He was a very good boss to introduce me to the role.

AW: How large was the unit?

SW: I can't remember exactly but it had a number of different functions. It had a unit that worked on promoting British products for commercial purposes, in support of commercial operations in the United States, that was about product innovation, new products and new technologies that were coming out of the UK. It had a unit that dealt exclusively with radio and TV material for US broadcasters. And it had a unit, which was my unit and which I was in charge of, called Policy and Reference Division. It was policy because it dealt with British Government policy and the reference part of it was that I was also in charge of the reference library that BIS had built up. It was actually quite an important part of the machine. US media culture in those days, and for all I know still is, was very heavily committed to fact checking, much more than the British media are. There were a number of

US publications that were in regular contact with our reference library which was operated by four telephone staff who were dealing with enquiries throughout the day. They were dealing with some very abstruse and arcane enquiries from the US media about not just British policy but all aspects of life in Britain. The New Yorker, for example, was particularly devoted to fact checking and also used to write quite a lot about Britain. So our reference team were very intimate with the editorial staff of the New Yorker on fact checking. The New Yorker writes about all sorts of interesting aspects of life and is not mainstream in terms of its headlines. We were up to the task and had a very strong reputation.

My main role was in disseminating mainly printed material about British Government policy and doing it orally and in person with senior editors in New York under the guidance of my boss Ham Whyte and his deputy who were also doing similar types of work.

AW: So you were a bit of an early PR man?

SW: Yes, that's exactly what it was although it may not have been described as such. Although we were not professional PR people we had a lot of local staff who had come out of that life, and out of the media, and from whom I learned the business. I don't claim to be a PR professional nevertheless I learned some of the rudiments of public relations and the dos and don'ts about how to convey messages to the media and, most importantly, the importance of doing homework about the message that you wanted to convey.

We were often afflicted by spokesmen or people coming out from Britain who would say "I want to do a press conference" as part of their programme. But we would have to say "What do you want to say in your press conference, what is the message that you are conveying? Because only then can we convene the right people to hear what you have to say." It was quite remarkable how many such visitors hadn't actually thought about what they wanted to say! Including Government Ministers, because, of course, Government Ministers tend to a certain sense of self-importance and that their own presence is a news story. Well, actually, not in fact! It was another important part of learning in New York that such was the scale and importance of the US media market that what was important in Britain was not necessarily important to the US audience.

But we did have a nation-wide role and we were in touch on paper with a wide range of publications across the United States. The office was situated in New York because in those days New York was still the US media capital although there were already signs of that beginning to break up. The Washington Post had always been very important and CNN started up in my time and that was based in Atlanta and the Chicago publications were taking on a life of their own. But New York was still a valid place to be doing that kind of work, and in consequence I felt very privileged to be in that office because I think we were in touch with all the most interesting constituencies of people in New York, namely the media people, the editorial staff and the writers, the inevitable spin off from that, the cultural world in New York and also business people through our work in support of commercial promotion and even more important inward investment promotion.

AW: So you made some very good contacts in all of those areas?

SW: Yes, we had good contacts, I think between us we knew all the people we needed to talk to in our broad subject area and such was the vibrancy of these communities and the energy that went into that kind of work in the United States that we picked up that vibrancy and energy of the American media and we turned into very good friends, and still are. That was really valuable and you can imagine how valuable this was for a young professional diplomat coming out of the UK to have everything we were doing subjected to some quite hard media scrutiny in our daily conversations with US contacts. That was very mind-broadening.

AW: At that time there was quite a lot going on, Northern Ireland was a big issue in UK/New York relations?

SW: It certainly was. This was the mid-seventies and the Northern Ireland issue was at its worst – actually it got a lot worse after I left because the hunger strikers hadn't really started while I was there – but it was very difficult and the climate of US opinion was frankly not very sympathetic. American lobbies were very powerful and were not really sympathetic to the UK policy.

AW: Especially in New York?

SW: Yes, especially in New York and also in Boston and in the North East generally, all of which were areas that we needed to cover. And another factor was that the Irish Government and the Irish representation in New York and Washington were also very active. They were not exactly hostile but on a separate track with a different agenda. Frankly they were all extremely skilful and I acquired a great admiration for the capacity of Irish representatives to exert and develop influence because they really were very good at it, including politically. One of the developments on Ireland, that did start in my time, was the emergence of what became known as the “Four Horsemen”, Senators Moynihan and Kennedy, Congressman O’Neill and Governor Carey, four very influential American politicians who gradually came to dominate the political opinion on Northern Ireland. We were in touch with them but so were the Irish and also the British Embassy in Washington. We worked very much in cooperation with the Embassy.

AW: How close were your relations with the Embassy in Washington?

SW: It was actually quite a difficult relationship because we were a sizeable independent unit doing work in a way which we thought was the professional way to do it having learned the lessons which I have talked about. We were, of course, responsible and answerable to the British Embassy in Washington but they equally and naturally tended to be a little more parochial about Washington-based work and a Washington-based view of the United States. They didn’t necessarily share our views about how the job should be done and it was sometimes quite difficult to get their attention. Also it was quite difficult to get Washington-based colleagues to spend time to come and meet our contacts and to understand the environment. That had an effect on my role when it came to 1976 and 77 on economic matters, which we can talk a bit more about. On issues like Northern Ireland and British foreign policy in the Middle East, the European Community, as it then was, all of those things we had to work on in very close coordination with the Embassy in Washington where there was an Information Counsellor and some very bright First Secretaries including, for example, Stephen Wall, who I worked with closely and in constant telephone contact.

We did need to maintain the confidence of the hierarchy, the Head of Chancery and the Ambassador in Washington and that wasn’t always straight forward. It became quite a crisis later on when Peter Jay was appointed as Ambassador. He wanted to do away with the BIS operation and to do all the work in Washington, a lot of it, he said, himself. That became

quite fraught and some of the local staff, not us of course, we were obediently following instructions, but some of the local staff whose jobs were at stake started to lobby quite actively within the British Government system to the point where it came to the attention of Ministers in the Cabinet. I think the Prime Minister, then Jim Callaghan, had things to say about this issue! He was certainly quoted as commenting on it rather sceptically. BIS survived Peter Jay. So that was alright I suppose, although I can't say he was wrong in substance and of course now what he wanted has come to pass in that Information is now managed out of Washington. But of course the United States and the world are a lot more integrated than they were then and it was important to be in New York and on site for the media people. It's much less important now. All that said, when I later worked in the Embassy in Washington I was very conscious that I didn't spend enough time in New York and that my colleagues didn't either.

AW: You have mentioned inward investment as well as economic matters, would you like to talk about these?

SW: Yes, two separate issues really but they overlapped. Inward investment promotion was the main responsibility of the British Trade Office in New York which was a separate unit but again within the British Government Offices. It was their responsibility, however. Promoting inward investment was very much a campaigning thing and it raises issues from very specific matters of where you site a factory and where you get workers from and the availability of labour if you are trying to persuade some United States company to move to the UK or to set up in the UK. There are some very specific questions. But there are also some very general questions about direction of UK economic policy, the business environment and the level of support that is available for inward investors, all of which is Government responsibility, or very close to it. So we worked very closely with the Trade Office in developing materials in support of it and developing media operations to create the best possible climate. It also had a very specific subset of targets relating to promoting inward investment into Northern Ireland which was part of the peace process. Frankly that was very successful because it was very targeted and US opinion was very interested in it whereas promoting the UK as a whole was a rather more disparate thing. US business was disposed to be there and in some ways it was more complex, especially as we had a Labour Government at the time and the direction of policy could be quite controversial.

So that was inwards investment. You may remember that in 1976 the UK had to have recourse to an IMF programme because of the balance of payments and the Government deficit was getting out of hand. It became so bad that the UK went to the IMF and undertook a programme to restructure the economy and public spending. It was quite a crisis. This of course meant that the whole question of maintaining confidence in the management of the British economy became rather crucial in the United States, as well as elsewhere. The Treasury team whose responsibility this principally was, was based in Washington. They were few in number and most of their work was dealing directly with the IMF and the World Bank as well as with the US Treasury. The then head of the Treasury team, a man called Bill Ryrie, who came up to New York as often as he could, quite quickly realised that they couldn't satisfy the requirement by occasional visits from Washington, and that they needed a much more steady contact with the institutions on Wall Street who were taking investment decisions which were affecting the UK economy and which were very much driven by perceptions of the UK economy. And so I was picked upon, with not strong but some economic background, to take on an assignment of reaching out in particular to the analytical units of the major Wall Street banks. The analytical units were the people who advised internally on how to think about a whole range of questions including the UK economy. They were economic analysts and I gradually developed good relations with them and talked regularly about the UK economy and supplied them with material, took them through it and influenced them as much as I could. Of course you can never measure your effectiveness but it was certainly a job that needed to be done. For me it was a whole new dimension to my work because it put me in contact with yet another interesting constituency in New York, namely the Wall Street community which I hadn't previously had much need to contact. I was doing it on my own in direct relationship with the Treasury team, so it was all pretty satisfying and it certainly developed my capacity to defend a position on economic arguments. These days none of that would be needed because all the major US banks have their people in London and they can see the situation for themselves. Information is universal so they can make their own analyses in contact with their own people in London. That really wasn't the case in the 1970s, so it was important to seek to influence their perceptions.

AW: Whilst you were in New York, amongst your notes you have mentioned Concorde? It's the seventies of course and Concorde is taking off?

SW: Yes! Concorde was indeed taking off! We obviously had a major policy objective of facilitating US acceptance of Concorde operations into the US. There was no question by then of Concorde flying supersonically over the United States but even so the whole urban myth of everyone and his grandson got involved in whether or not Concorde should be allowed to operate to the UK and in particular to Kennedy Airport in New York. All the local media started putting up all sorts of scare stories about how cows would give birth prematurely, the noise would shake the houses, that families and education would be disturbed and all kinds of bad things would follow by permitting Concorde to take off and land from Kennedy Airport. It was our job to combat this stuff as best as we could. Even then, much more now, when a public panic gets a hold of people's minds and a perception of danger gets into their minds, it is very very hard to shift it. We must have worked on this for getting on for a year in advance of Concorde's arrival in the US. Throughout this period the US authorities were fairly relaxed.

AW: It wasn't an official problem?

SW: No, it wasn't an official problem and that was all dealt with by the professionals. No, this was a problem about public relations, public perceptions and politics. Well we worked very hard at it. The airlines got, the Government got, permission for Concorde to operate into and out of New York so the day was approaching and the public discussion and alarm never really abated. We never won the argument really before the arrival of Concorde. The day did come when Concorde arrived and I was there when it made its first landing. After a year of telling people not to worry, that it was just an aeroplane and not that much louder than other things, it was the loudest bloody aircraft that I've ever heard! Gosh, I was amazed, you could see what people were talking about. Of course after that, in London, we all got used to Concorde passing over and hearing it much louder than other aircraft. It didn't make cows abort prematurely but it was loud and we all got used to that later on but at the time having spent a year reassuring people that it wasn't that loud really, trying to argue about decibels, which is a very hard thing to try to do, I was there and it was very loud. But flights continued without interruption until Concorde came to an end, so that was an exercise in trying to manage hostile public opinion on something that was important but not completely out of hand.

In 1976 there was the Bicentennial of the US Declaration of Independence and it was a big thing in the US, as you can imagine. Our part of it, in New York, was quite large. The Queen came on a Bicentennial visit and her itinerary included Washington, Philadelphia and New York. We had to manage a lot of the media preparation, provide the information that was needed to support good PR for all of this. This, of course, was while Concorde and Northern Ireland were going on but this was a positive story and the Royal Visit was very welcome. The programme was very well organised to commemorate the Declaration of Independence, for example, in Philadelphia she presented a replacement of the Liberty Bell that had been cracked for centuries. The original Liberty Bell was made by the Whitechapel Foundry and she presented a new bell from that Foundry. That kind of symbolism was really very good. She was in New York for two days and the programme included her arrival on the Royal Yacht sailing up the Hudson River, berthed, The Queen going on an intensive programme of activity and calls. We had to be there both before and after her arrival, so all hands on deck, lots of media management and briefing and the actual visit is all a bit of a blur because it had been hard work in advance and then we had to rush about on the days making sure it all worked well. It did work well, it was a great success and she went down to the Wall Street area, down to Battery Park, overlooking New York Harbour. She went uptown, she called on the Mayor, the Governor, she delivered a speech, had a big banquet, did all the things that big Royal Visits included in those days and then went off to Philadelphia and Washington. It was a big deal and my bosses duly got awarded with the decorations as was traditional. Unfortunately I hadn't reached the dizzy heights to be part of that but nevertheless it was a great feel-good operation for Britain in New York and I think if we hadn't been there someone else would have had to do it. But it took us all our staff and no one else had enough people competent with dealing with the media, so it was a good thing we were there.

AW: And you mentioned Operation Drake?

SW: Yes, that was a funny one and nothing to do with the British Government at all. It has now been succeeded by an ongoing operation called Operation Raleigh. Operation Drake was an expedition to follow Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe in a tall ship crewed by young people, taking time over it and stopping off in lots of places to carry out programmes of social work, construction, to engage the young people who were participants in the lives of poorer countries and to do some good. Quite a simple concept but it hadn't

been done before. The driving force behind it was someone who was something of a household name in those days, Major Blashford-Snell, who was an explorer. Blashford-Snell was the champion, spokesman and front runner for gaining support for all this. He wanted American support and American involvement. He wanted American young people involved. We got involved in it through the British Consulate and the Consul-General engaged with Blashford-Snell and he engaged a few of us in support. We were providing supporting material, a lot of it originally from the UK but you had to massage it and re-present it for US audiences. We were helping with a lot of appointments in New York, and fortunately the Hanson Group which was then a very powerful industrial group, led by Sir James Hanson and Gordon White, decided to back the US arm of Operation Drake. So we had a lot of engagement with high level business and high level fundraising. I think it actually happened long after I left but it was a success and there was good US participation and media coverage, all of which was very important to the organisers. Operation Raleigh, which replaced it, continues and does some of the same work.

AW: You mentioned the Consulate, what were relations like with them?

SW: The Consul-General had a particular role in that he was not only British Consul General in New York dealing with consular matters; he was also Director General in charge of the whole of the US wide trade promotion operation. He was not head of BIS, however. We were the floor below him and he was a big wheel and he used to call upon us to provide support for specific things either because we were involved on the trade development side, or because he as Consul-General in New York was out in New York doing New York things where again he needed some capability because his consular staff were not numerous and exclusively dedicated to consular work which was frankly not very onerous in those days. Leaping ahead long after my time to 2001 when the 9/11 disaster happened, I could just imagine how a huge consular emergency suddenly occurred and the whole of the establishment had to reorient itself to deal with that and the Consul-General at that time who was really a trade promoter, Tom Harris, had to redirect his entire attention and build a consular emergency response on a large scale pretty much from scratch, which he did, because the staff were there, but not consular dedicated trained staff. The Consul-General in my time was Gordon Booth, he was quite a feisty character and sometimes quite demanding. Although I worked closely with him on this Operation Drake thing and also to some extent on

the Concorde campaign, he was actually very professional but he was also quite self regarding.

AW: So are there any more big issues whilst you were there, nearly five years? What was living in the United States like for you?

SW: I think we've dealt with most of the professional big issues, but my original motivation had been to go and live in the United States and live in New York. I must say that was the experience that I hoped it would be. I think when I started in New York, during my first year I felt quite uncomfortable, although I'm not sure I realised it at the time because I was working hard.

I arrived in New York, one of the last people in the Diplomatic Service to cross the Atlantic by sea, in November on the QE2. The crossing was OK, I didn't go out on deck that much but nevertheless travelling on the QE2 was a complete experience in its own right. I don't suppose I hadn't thought a lot about living and working in New York in advance because, well, what's to prepare? I think it was easy to think that there was not going to be anything complicated, we all speak English ...

AW: And you'd done your shopping in New York from Havana? ...

SW: Yes, I had been there before. I knew about the geography and how the city worked a bit. I arrived at the Docks from this majestic entry into the harbour under Verazzano Bridge, and then up the Hudson and berthed on the West Side of New York. You immediately spill out into the hurly burly of New York and I think I quickly grasped that I didn't know where I was and that I didn't know anything about it. Of course the Office looked after us and put us into an apartment; the machinery of life was not difficult but functioning, especially out on the streets was quite different. I was in a hotel to start with before the apartment was ready and I do remember walking to work along Lexington Avenue and buying a newspaper in the morning. Everyone was buying newspapers from the vendors and they were all rushing in the rush hour. I would say "Would you mind, could I possibly please have..." by which time three other New Yorkers would have pushed past me saying "Times" so I learned to say "Times" and got my Times and the vendor didn't seem to mind. It was a lesson in the urgency and brevity of language in New York.

There was the whole business of doing the work and introducing myself. I learned how to do cold calling – well, I did cold calling because I had to call people up cold and tell them who I was and what I wanted. That was quite challenging.

I had the sense of being quite foreign and quite alien and it rapidly became clear to me that the culture of New York was not at all British, that the make-up of the city had a very powerful Jewish influence as well as other nationalities, Polish, Italian, and Irish. The Jewish thing struck me first because I arrived in late November, Christmas was approaching and there were Christmas things in the shops. But there were also lots of messages up that I'd never seen before "Chanooka". I didn't know what Chanooka was but I learned that it was the big Jewish festival at about the same time as Christmas and I also learned that the polite thing to wish people in New York and the United States was not "Happy Christmas" but "Happy Holidays" because holidays took different shapes for different people. All of that was quite an education as was dealing with the subway, shopping and all of that stuff. I think it took me about a year by which time I was living on the Upper Eastside on Upper 86th Street which is a bit less central and a less busy area of Manhattan. I do remember doing my morning walk from the apartment to the subway along 86th Street, this must have been about a year in, and I suddenly realised that I belonged, this was my town now and I enjoyed being there and knew how to make it work, I could explain to other visitors what to do and what not to. I suddenly felt at home and from there on I was happy, made good friends, and so on.

The other thing you begin to realise, although New York is a very self-sufficient place, is the enormity of the United States, and something of the variety of the United States. In my first summer holiday I drove down, because I like driving, to New Orleans and back. This was the summer of 1976, before The Queen came so I was doing an early vacation. I told people I was going to New Orleans. They said "What do you want to go down there for?" This was the summer before the November when Jimmy Carter was elected President, being from Georgia and who later on brought Southern ways into Washington and the North East. But it hadn't happened in 1976 and people were very suspicious. They were dismissive and thought I was a bit cracked to want to go down to the South. Whereas I think the whole inbuilt legacy of British sympathy with the Confederacy, which had been very powerful in Britain in the 1860s, triggered something in my British mind as well as *Gone with the Wind* and all that! And it was very much where I wanted to go. So I drove down the coast

through lovely places like Savannah and Charleston and across the top of Florida which enabled a visit to the wonderful Okefenokee Swamp. There were little flat bottom boats with hand drawn maps and outboard engines going down narrow waterways, water completely still, full of wildlife, alligators six feet away on the shore. The swamp was full of birds, full of snakes, it was fascinating, at least until the outboard conked out miles away from anyone. Of course there were no mobile phones so I had to get it going again. In due course I did and found my way round the hand drawn map. I ended up in New Orleans and went to a few jazz bars, in those days the Preservation Hall Jazz Band was still operating in Preservation Hall which was not a performance venue at all. It was just a wooden hall, with wooden seats and a place for the band at the end. There was a little old lady called Emma who played the piano with her one good hand. She must have been over eighty. This was New Orleans jazz as it had traditionally been. Visiting this city which was part US, part French, part Spanish and rather prided itself on its French and Spanish origins, was an interesting experience and you got a sense of the people being different down there.

When you visited places in the South, big homes that were open to the public in Charleston or Savannah Georgia, the guides would show you around with their lovely Southern drawl and they would talk about the "War". The "War" that they were referring to was not World War II or World War I, it was the earlier war between the States, in which of course their sympathies were still quite mixed. Pride in the Confederacy was really quite obvious and their treatment by the North immediately after the war clearly still rankled. So that was quite an education and I loved it and was very struck by the lack of interest, and even scorn, that the New Yorkers still had for all of that because they were missing out on the colour and the Southernness. I learned to eat grits as well!

Later on in 1978 I finally manufactured an opportunity to drive all the way across the States and all the way back. I picked up the car in Denver Colorado and did all the US national parks around there which were magnificent. You are looking at rock and wilderness and wildness all the time. You become very interested in strata, volcanic debris and things. After about five days of wandering around these rocky national parks and seeing the Grand Canyon and Death Valley, where I think the temperature was 106 degrees, the American Ford just about functioned. Immediately after Death Valley you go through a few passes and come to Las Vegas which is a completely weird experience as arriving in the evening it was already lit up. After a week of rocks and desert and wilderness, there was this great electric thing in

the middle of the desert. I had a couple of days in Las Vegas and learned about the culture. I didn't make or lose any money but people did. They tell you stories. The interesting thing about all the casinos in the hotels was that there was no natural light and there were no clocks anywhere.

AW: It's something to do with the psychology to keep people gambling?

SW: Yes and I didn't notice it for a while, it's an extraordinary experience. I went on to San Francisco where the weather got bad. I didn't know the weather got bad there. The visit was somewhat disrupted by a Gay Rights demo. This was the first time I'd encountered gay rights in my life. It wasn't general in the United States, it was very much a West Coast thing and before anyone had discovered AIDS. Gay rights was a matter of celebration and being Californian and proclaiming your difference. Then down from San Francisco towards Los Angeles, but not as far, turned left into the desert and back through Santa Fe, up a bit of Route 66 and came back through Memphis and a bit of Texas, all in all five weeks over it.

The last great place I went before my departure was Aspen Colorado. I was invited to a seminar at the Aspen Institute which went on for the best part of a week. It was just delightful being in the Rockies, meeting some extremely interesting people, one couple of whom are still friends. The seminar was about ethics for business people. The course material under discussion was the world's great philosophers and what they had to say about ethics and the people discussing it were heavily engaged in business. The Aspen Institute was a luxury. These friends gave me another first time experience. As the seminar was coming to an end we were talking about getting back to New York and I said I would have to change flights somewhere else so they said "Why don't you come with us? I've got a plane here" he said. So that was the first time I travelled in a private jet and I immediately concluded that it's the only way to travel!

AW: So five years in New York, that's a long time to be ...

SW: Yes I suppose it was a four year post and it ran over.

AW: Were you working out where you wanted to go next?

SW: Nobody expected me to go back to the UK, I wasn't going to be posted back to London having worked in London after my first post. I had always wanted, right from the beginning, to get involved in the European Community. I remember being envious of one of my fellow new entrant colleagues who, when I was posted to Havana Cuba, she was posted to the delegation in Brussels. It was about the only area of work that I specifically wanted to get into. So I had been talking to my bosses and occasionally to people in London about this ambition. It so happened that the then head of BIS, a man called Peter Hall, had been part of UKREP in Brussels and had worked there relatively recently and he still had good contacts with the Permanent Representative and the Deputy Permanent Representative in Brussels. I'm pretty sure he worked his magic with them for me and perhaps with London. Anyway I was posted to Brussels and I was very pleased about it.

I think I left New York in about May 1980 and I arrived in Brussels in time for the resumption of business at the end of August or early September 1980. In between I had some leave. By then I had acquired a small cottage in the Cotswolds and that was lovely as it was the first long leave I'd had there. I was sent by the office to France for six weeks to improve my French. It was mandatory that I went unaccompanied and I was sent to Tours, which was generally thought to be the centre for French language tuition for foreigners, on a course with other non-French students, most of whom were a lot younger than I was and several of whom were very nubile German girls! I had previous experience of learning in a French Institute for foreign language teaching which hadn't been successful. In my gap year I'd gone to Lyon with the aim of learning French but it really hadn't worked because the course wasn't very good and the other people were all non French and we all talked a lot of English and the university put me into lodgings with another English boy who I became very friendly with but it just wasn't doing the business. So I was a bit sceptical about going to Tours. But it turned out that it was a good course and the tuition in French was excellent, very classical class room stuff, but it was well done and my French was good enough to improve considerably. I had a room in university lodgings but it was a real pleasure because I had time on my hands as well and I went and discovered Tours, and did wonderful excursions by bicycle to some of the chateaux around Tours on the river. It being summer there were 'son et lumières' and exhibitions, festivals, it was quite good fun and did my French the world of good. So I was then ready to go off to go Brussels, bought myself a new car and arrived late August or early September 1980.

First Secretary, External Relations Section, UKRep Brussels, 1980-4

AW: UKRep must have been quite a culture shock after BIS? Bigger?

SW: Yes, a bigger organisation and a more diverse one because its staffed by people from all over Whitehall, pursuing their various areas of policy interest and also it was much closer to Whitehall and much more like working in Whitehall in that respect. It's all about policy and negotiation and the business of UKRep was and is to negotiate for the British interest in the European Community. The principal forum, since we were a national delegation, is in the Council of Ministers because that is where the member states meet and negotiate in their own name. But there was an enormous amount to do with the European Commission because it generates new policy proposals and it was really important to know and understand what policy proposals were being gestated in the European Commission, to influence them even before they are formally adopted by the Commissioners. Also the Commission are part of the Council, they sit there participating in discussion so for that reason too you need to understand them.

In those days I had less to do with the European Parliament, partly because the Parliament's powers hadn't really developed very much and partly because they certainly hadn't developed in the field of external relations, they were more developed in terms of internal EU affairs.

External Relations means external to the European Union where you are helping to frame the European Community's posture to the outside world. The section in which I found myself was the External Relations Section which was responsible for representing the UK interest in all aspects of European Community external business. At the outset of my time in 1980 the section did not handle EC overseas development aid programmes because that was handled by a separate section, but during my time the two sections were combined under the leadership of Charles Powell. I worked for Charles Powell for a good two years in my time in Brussels.

AW: And who was the Permanent Representative?

SW: The Permanent Representative was Michael Butler, commonly known by the name he had been given by the British press community in Brussels, “Chalky”. He had a passing resemblance to the Giles cartoon character of that name.

AW: Did you see very much of him?

SW: Actually I did see him, especially in my second two years in Brussels. At the beginning I saw him in the weekly UKRep wide meeting and I saw him from time to time when he had to receive somebody or do business that concerned my affairs. But at the beginning my main responsibility was towards the Deputy Permanent Representative who was a wonderful Scotsman called Bill Nicoll. He was the one who had really listened to my former boss Peter Hall about me, so it was the relationship that really mattered to me. Bill Nicoll was not a Foreign Office person, a Department of Trade person and he had spent his time in Brussels and he knew his way round the corridors of Brussels.

A lot of what we all did in UKRep, the business, was channelled at one stage or other through the Committee of Permanent Representatives, commonly known as COREPER. COREPER met in two formations, one set was of the Ambassadors or Permanent Representatives as they were known, and they handled one whole set of business and then there was their Deputies who handled a whole other set of business. The business was divided between the two COREPERs. The purpose of COREPER was to minimise the sets of issues that had to be submitted to Ministers and when they were submitted to ensure that they were submitted in a proper way to facilitate decision making by the Ministers. So above the two COREPERs was the whole panoply of meetings of the Council of Ministers at ministerial level of which the one that concerned me was the Council of Foreign Ministers and/or Trade ministers because they handled trade policy in the Foreign Affairs Council. In those days, it was the beginning of Mrs Thatcher’s Conservative Government, the main minister was Lord Carrington, to start with, and he had a number of deputies over time. And I also dealt with Trade Ministers.

The particular subjects that I had been allocated in the External Relations Section were, especially at the beginning, trade matters. The two main blocks of business that I did were, firstly, the European Community’s Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). This was sanctified by the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) which governed world trade in those days. GSP was an international agreement to give tariff preferences to

developing countries over and above the tariffs that were charged to developed countries. It being the European Community the system was very complex, most of the concessions to developing countries were limited, they had a certain amount of advantage but there was a cap. There was a certain amount of business to do with which countries should benefit most and which countries were to be penalised or have less. Then there was a whole range of sensitive products and they all had to be discussed and agreed upon by all the Member States. At that point there were nine Member States. So you were negotiating about the structure of each year's GSP.

The other main block of business that I had to deal with was international textiles policy. In these days world trade on textiles and clothing comes and goes, it moves freely, there are no limits on it. In those days there was an international regime, again under GATT auspices, called MFA, the Multi Fibre Arrangement. This governed the imports into all developed countries of textiles, cloth, fabric and clothing. Some forms of cloth were more sensitive than others because of the competitive disadvantage in which European textile manufacturers found themselves, and in particular some forms of clothing were very sensitive. It is really typified by the T-Shirt. I was participating in the European Community's management of its textile import regime which was partly helping the Commission to manage the system that was up and running, and partly to define the future regime because these multi fibre arrangements were time limited and they needed to be renegotiated in the GATT. The European Community negotiated on behalf of all the Member States with all the other developed countries to update the MFA. That was enormously complex, nobody other than the experts understood it, and the experts were me, Bill Nicoll and some people in the Department of Trade and, in those days, the separate Department of Industry. That was my little world on textile trade. It was very rewarding because what we were all doing was really negotiating at the European level and then helping the Commission at the international level. It was the intra-Community negotiation that was really detailed, purposeful, tough and I learned a lot from the process of being involved in that about how to secure the UK's objective, where to make a concession, where not to, how to set about getting consensus both of our own team and then in the Council working group in which I was participating. You know me, I like this techy stuff, very detailed and nitty gritty! I used to get very excited about Category 4 T-Shirts!

Those were my initial blocks of work when I arrived in 1980, learned the trade in the last months of 1980 and the early months of 1981. At the end of 1981 the UK had the Presidency of the Council. This, I think, was its second Presidency, the first one had been in 1977, and it was a big deal for the UK in the European Community, it always is, but it was a very big deal then. As you know, when a country has the Presidency, that Member State chairs all the formations of the Council, from the ministerial level down to the humble working groups. So I found myself as Chairman of the Textile Working Group, also of the GSP Group which was a new experience and that was pretty good fun. On the one hand you're in charge of the agenda and you have the support of the Council Secretariat who are professionals and there to advise you, and everyone treats the Presidency with a certain amount of deference, the other Member States whose business it is to help the Presidency deliver its objectives, but of course life's not that simple. You have quite a standing amongst the other Member States and the Commission also needs you to get their stuff through the Council and in return takes you much more into their confidence than they do for the other Member States. So I found myself the Chairman of the 113 Textiles, from Article 113 of the Treaty (Textiles). At the end of our Presidency the third Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA3) was due to be negotiated in Geneva and give way to MFA4. So there was a whole lot of policy debate about how much liberalisation the UK industry and the European industry could stand, which was real economics, and there was a whole debate about negotiating and a whole debate about new and old mechanisms and how they needed to be changed and what had to be negotiated with the third world, because, whichever way you cut it this was the developed countries imposing itself on developing countries and something which you had to do with restraint.

So then we had this important negotiation at the end of the year. There was a lot of preparation at my level, a certain amount at COREPER level and then at Ministerial level. The Community's negotiating mandate had to be approved by Ministers. So it started to appear on the Foreign Affairs Council agenda in October of 1981, I remember it was in Luxembourg and the Council meets in Luxembourg in October, as well as April and June, and Lord Carrington was there. The business was done without too much difficulty but after that Carrington said "I do not want textiles on my agenda again". A certain amount of consternation about that, "But Secretary of State..." but it was "No, no, no you must find a different way, we are not getting into that stuff". So an ad hoc formation of the Council, called the Foreign Affairs Council (Textiles) was formed and the Chair was filled by the

luckless Mr Humphrey Atkins, Minister of State in the Foreign Office and he had to learn all about textiles, quite fast! He actually made quite a good fist of it but for me it meant that not only was I in charge of my stuff at working group level and asking Bill Nicoll to facilitate it all through COREPER and advising him on how to do that, but then I had to hold the hand of Humphrey Atkins because Bill was busy doing other things all the time, and guide Atkins through these meetings of the Council on really quite difficult national interest things. Amongst the bunch of Trade Ministers, and once you specialised those who did textiles from capitals were usually Trade Ministers, you got the German Trade Minister who was the redoubtable Count Lamsdorf and equally French and Belgian and Italian ministers who were out to run rings around the system in order to achieve their objectives. You had to see them coming. You had to help Humphrey Atkins find his way through as to the right conclusions. There was quite a lot of briefing in support of the Ministers to be done but the best bit was that in December of 1981 the whole of the textile world decamped to Geneva for negotiations that were conducted by the Commission but there were daily meetings of the 113 Textile Committee to hear how we were getting on and to give their views on how the Council should be consulted and in between there were negotiations with the other international parties. For ease of business the GATT organised an inner group of parties to fix the deal. The European Commission was one of those, along with the United States, India and other major textile importing countries. The Commission invited me, as the Chairman of the 113 Textiles to be part of that team, not to speak but to be there and observe. It gave me a great insight into how they work and how they apply their mandates and deal with their partners and how they had their international partners like the Bangladeshis coming to them to complain about us, the Member States. So it is quite a test of coordination and loyalty.

We had to report back from the 113 Textiles Group, which I was chairing, to the Member States in Brussels. For at least three weeks, away from Brussels with an occasional phone call to Bill Nicoll, I was on my own doing this. "How you getting on laddie?" he would say. The COREPER didn't really touch it during that time because the game was going on elsewhere. Inevitably, in the way of these international negotiations, Christmas was approaching and we were all beginning to worry about it running on, going on through Christmas, having to resume in the New Year, and it couldn't because the thing expired at the end of 1981. I got home on Christmas Eve, so that was a really really good experience and frankly I loved it all. I loved being on the inside, by then I understood how to run the committee, so getting the Member States on side, getting the Commission to say the right

thing. The major thing I learned running these committees was however brief you wanted people to be, and they always promised to be brief, and however much time pressure there was, every person who spoke would not take less than five minutes. So if you had a one or two hour meeting you could time the number of people who would be able to speak. I got to learn about managing meetings and how to cut people off and who to give the floor to and who not to. As it was all a great success for the European Community being in the Presidency was good. We did the job and got a certain amount of credit for doing it quite well. Being in the Presidency and having exercised the Presidency gave us all much better standing and relations with the partners afterwards, and that lasted quite some time.

At the end of the Presidency everybody does a rethink, you've had reinforcement staff for the Presidency and they all go and everything needs to be readjusted. I was asked to change subjects. I dropped textiles and the GSP and took on the accession negotiations for Spain to join the European Community. The accession negotiations with Spain were running in parallel with Portugal and had started somewhere around 1978. They'd been going on for quite a while and a lot of the undergrowth had been cleared away and they were getting into the serious stuff for both countries. I only did Spain. Most people who were doing this were doing Spain and Portugal, but I only did Spain and had another colleague who did the Portuguese Working Group.

This, in structural terms, worked to the COREPER Ambassadors, so I found myself working regularly with, briefing and sitting next to Michael Butler which I found a very satisfying experience. People used to tell horror stories about Michael Butler rejecting briefs as unusable because every item in COREPER had to have a brief and we often had to do it at the last minute, late at night. Each brief had to have the documents attached to it, telling him what the goal was, how to set about and so on and it had to be done briefly. He had a mountain of these things every week and there were these horror stories about briefs being flung back. It didn't happen to me, thank God.

I found myself in the Spanish Accession Working Group where, although an accession negotiation is formally a negotiation between a candidate country and the Member States, the Commission, nevertheless, has an advisory role and they were the masters of the economic facts. They were pretty dominant in forming the priorities of when you took what subject and so on. We were grinding our way through a number of quite sensitive issues for the

European Community and the Spanish which was really all about bringing Spanish economic policy and the Spanish management of their industry and so on into line with the European so-called “Acquis”, the European way of doing things, European regulation, most of which was about liberalising markets. The Spanish market had been very tightly controlled and it needed to be liberalised, but in some areas the Spanish were very competitive and some of the Member States were very concerned about the competitive threat they were bringing in, notably the French about Spanish fruit and vegetables because Spain then, as now, is a very competitive supplier of fruit and vegetables. They had not only the growing but the distribution of it very well organised and the French could see all their producers being destroyed.

There were similar issues on other agricultural subjects but most of what I had to do were industrial subjects where, for example, the Spanish motor car industry was very heavily protected by Spanish legislation and that all had to be dismantled. We had British Leyland shouting for this as well as Land Rover. This was a big pressure from London and we had to organise and negotiate transitional arrangements so that the market was opened completely over the shortest possible timetable.

There were other extremely complex issues such as Spain adapting its system of patent regulation to European standards and to open up the Spanish markets for pharmaceuticals and other important products that were governed by patents. I didn't know anything about patent law to start with but I learned quite a lot quite quickly, and there we were yakking away discussing the finer points of patent law and regulation within quite a short space of time.

My moment of glory in these negotiations, apart from achieving quite a good outcome on the motor cars, which Mrs Thatcher was much exercised about we were assured, was on British Sherry.

AW: Horrible stuff!

SW: Well, I've never actually tasted British Sherry but it was a product on the shelves of supermarkets in the UK and lo and behold we were told by MPs and the Department of Industry what a very important industry it was for us, how many people it employed, what the consumption was in the UK and how important it was in the British culture. But the fact was

that it had to go because the Community had a well-established system of appellation controls, like British Cheddar which is protected, it can't be made by anyone else, it has to be made in the UK, in its place. Obviously Spain was going to have appellation protection for sherry. It's the world's main sherry producer. Apart from British Sherry. We had a highly tense, very difficult negotiation where I had to argue for a transitional arrangement to phase British Sherry out, rather than to make it illegal on day one, with no support from anyone and the Commission definitely on the Spanish side on this one. They said "You've got to give way, you've got to let it happen". And I said "I know we have to let it happen but it has to happen gradually because we employ so many people, and it's important to the British social structure, it's a less expensive drink, less expensive than Spanish sherry, and it will leave a hole in the market and people will suffer by its disappearance". Various arguments were put forward including one that said it wasn't sherry at all because it was made from molasses not from grape juice. The Commission proposed a very short transitional period and I managed to extend it by a couple of years to about five years. So the game was played and no doubt came out in exactly the place where the Commission thought it would come out all along, but we had to go through the motions. All my colleagues were either on the Spanish side or just sitting there on their hands enjoying the spectacle!

AW: Glad it wasn't them!

SW: Yes, glad it wasn't them! They all had their own issues on different things at different times. You have a certain amount of sympathy as professional to professional having to play a poor hand.

Another thing that was an issue in the Spanish negotiation which was of course directly relevant to the UK, was Gibraltar. Gibraltar has its own status in the European Community but it's part of the free trade area and it was clear that Spanish controls on the movement of goods at the Spanish/Gibraltar frontier had to go. On this the Commission and the rest of the Community were actually on our side because they saw the point and the Commission had no difficulty in understanding the political sensitivity. But again it was a British issue and I had to deal with it, it being very important to the Ambassador who got very involved in it. It all came down to the drafting of one provision that was about four lines long for the final treaty which stated that Spanish controls would have to go on Day One. I was a party to the drafting of the four lines and the outcome was successful, as it had to be, but nevertheless you

have to go through the process and the Spanish were not being easy about it and we needed all the firepower on our side from the Commission and the other Member States to show solidarity.

AW: So the Spaniards you were negotiating with were people we found later in Spain?

SW: One or two of them, for example the Deputy Permanent Representative on the Spanish side was a man called Carlos Bastarreche who, when I went to Madrid later as Ambassador, he was the Spanish Permanent Representative, almost twenty years later. There was another Spaniard called Javier Elorza who was very much in circulation when I went back as Ambassador, he was then Spanish Ambassador in Paris. There were one or two of my working level contacts who I never actually met again but were known to other people I knew in the Spanish Foreign Ministry. This was basic training for going back to Spain as Ambassador later. Firstly in the negotiations with the Spanish delegation there was a lot of Spanish spoken. There was interpretation but I tried to listen as much as I could to the Spanish rather than the English, especially when it wasn't vitally important to me. I learned a lot about the structure of Spain and its economy and about how Spain worked and had some exposure to the issues that they thought were crucial. It was a good little card to have when I was in Madrid as Ambassador to say that I had participated in these negotiations. I also met more of the Spanish in Brussels when I went back later by when they were a Member State and around the Council table, along with the rest of us.

AW: With all these intense issues, the four years must have gone very quickly?

SW: It did and I certainly enjoyed it all. I was working with wonderful people. There was Michael Butler and Bill Nicoll who were great and one of my colleagues in the External Relations Section was Brian Bender who went on to be Head of DTI and DEFRA and who has stayed a friend. I worked with Charles Powell for two years and had great admiration for him and a certain sort of personal relationship which stood me, to some extent, in good stead later on and certainly socially. It was always good to be with other Whitehall people who pass through Brussels and share professional respect.

AW: And so it was time to come back to the UK again?

SW: Yes, it really was time to come back to the UK, having had two postings away, so that didn't cause much of a discussion with Personnel Department. I was at the level where I had been a First Secretary since 1975, getting on for ten years. The next stage was to be an Assistant in a Department, "Assistant" being Foreign Office jargon for a Deputy Head. It was that process of learning what it was to begin to manage people, manage flows of work, to be able to deputise for a Head of Department and to deal upwards at slightly higher levels that being an Assistant was all about.

Assistant, Energy, Science, and Space Department (ESSD), FCO, 1984-85

They put me into a Department that I can't say I knew existed and certainly hadn't had anything to do with before, called Energy, Science and Space Department. I was continuing my techy career - with the encouragement of Michael Butler who said that all these functional departments were much more rewarding than the geographical bilateral ones, but that was his prejudice. ESSD for short was divided into two sections and each section had an Assistant Head of it. One section dealt with energy policy and that was not mine. I dealt with Science and Space policy.

What has the Foreign Office to do with Science and Space? Answer – nearly all big science was done on an international collaborative basis. You think of CERN in Switzerland or the European Space Agency. There were also projects in hand for the future – one was called the ESRF about particle physics and the Joint European Torus about fusion research, based in the UK, Harwell. All these international collaborations meant international coordination and negotiation between the partners. The policy areas of science and space and technology belonged to the Department of Trade and Industry and also importantly to the Research Councils of which the main one for these areas was the Science and Energy Research Council, which I think has since been abolished. The Research Councils existed with funds provided by the Government and the Government exercised supervision over it all. There was also a Government Chief Scientific Adviser overlooking it all, his name was Robin Nicholson. So that was my new little world.

The Foreign Office's contribution to all of this was really to help these departments negotiate. They all knew what they wanted, they all knew their European or international opposite numbers pretty well and they all knew their subjects. But they weren't necessarily very good

at negotiating. Nobody told me this but I found the role was really advising DTI, advising the Research Councils and the very embryonic British Space Agency, which was created in my time, to understand what they wanted to achieve and then advising them on how to set about doing it, and going along with them to a lot of the meetings and trying to smooth the path with the other partners. Little by little I found a useful role participating in this. There wasn't really much interest from the rest of the FCO though Geoffrey Howe, who was then the Foreign Secretary, had sporadic moments of great interest, not least because a lot of Government money was being spent on these projects. There was quite a debate then about the value of particle physics as opposed to other areas of science because particle physics was done through either very expensive machinery like CERN or through space exploration which was also very expensive. There was quite a debate about continuing particle physics research and there was talk about the UK leaving CERN because we couldn't afford the subscriptions any more. The Foreign Secretary got interested in that.

The UK was always a junior partner in the European Space Agency because we had no interest in manned space exploration whereas the French, I think, would have liked to have done it. We had no space launcher, which the French had. The UK interest was then, and I think still largely remains, in the design and construction of satellites and also with land communications, in other words the geo synchronous orbits of communication satellites. This was a UK speciality and during my time the UK won the contract to supply and run the entire satellite network for INMARSAT which was the international maritime communications system. We were also engaged in other forms of communication like International Telecoms Union and so on.

AW: You did this job for just over a year?

SW: Yes, it felt quite full as a year. I became quite interested in one particular subject and wrote the first ever Foreign Office paper on the Foreign Policy Implications of Satellite Broadcasting. This was before Sky had started and when people were first talking about satellite broadcasting and it had been experimentally demonstrated and proved. We all thought this was going to be revolutionary both culturally and economically so I decided to write a paper on the subject! I submitted it upwards and worked hard to get people interested with limited success but I was quite proud of it.

AW: So what made you move after just over a year?

SW: It wasn't my decision but what I was thinking about in early 1985 was whether I wanted to carry on in the Foreign Service. I loved the work and felt I was quite good at it but I did worry about not earning enough and in the early eighties we were in a phase in the UK where the economy wasn't that good and pay restraint on the public service was pretty strong and mortgage rates were fairly high and life was a bit of a struggle financially. I knew of people who had got out and were working in the City, doing all sorts of things, and I did think seriously about it and went to see a former Permanent Secretary, Michael Palliser, who I knew moderately well who was then working for one of the merchant banks, Samuel Montagu, and consulted him. He was broadly, but not very specifically, encouraging. With hindsight, I think he was probably looking for a clearer sense of commitment as well as thinking no doubt that it was a pity to see people leaving the Foreign Service for financial reasons.

I was agonising about all of this when one of my contemporaries and friends, Simon Fuller, was Deputy Head of Personnel Department, in charge of the next rank up, Counsellor. He salvaged me. I don't know what he did or how much he knew about me, but he had me in and said he thought he could get me a promotion to Counsellor which was important in itself and would mean moving out of my job which I hadn't been doing very long, to the Cabinet Office and to the Assessment Staff. He said that was good experience and if I could make it there it would be another string to my bow, and promotion can't be bad! So that's what I did.

Counsellor, Deputy Chief of the Assessments Staff, Cabinet Office, 1985-7

The promotion to Counsellor, first of all. I had a very strong sense as it happened that, a bit like moving up to public school, it was like moving from being top of the bottom half to being bottom of the top half, and that sense of transition was quite important. Moving into the big boys' league, even though it was at a very humble level. That sense rather stayed with me through my other Counsellor posts.

I moved into the Assessments Staff which was an area I'd had something to do with when working on Soviet matters but I didn't know how it worked. The Assessments Staff existed

to service the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). The JIC, having been created before World War II but had continued since, and brought together the heads of the Intelligence Agencies and the main consumer departments who were mainly the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. This was my first introduction into the intelligence world. The role of the Assessments Staff was to be an intelligent user of intelligence, rather than to produce it and to draw on it. So we were drawing on all the information available, partly secret material and to a very great extent to very open material like diplomatic reporting as well as media reporting. There was a weekly meeting of the JIC where it had particular papers on subjects that had been defined in advance and the papers were written by the Assessments Staff but with the advice of all the experts involved. A lot of the business at my level of being a Deputy Chief was to chair a constant flow of Whitehall meetings which brought together representatives of the Intelligence Agencies, Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence, occasionally Treasury and sometimes the policy parts of the Cabinet Office to thrash through and make sense of the information that was coming in from all sources and present a coherent picture of it in as short amount of time as you could do. So drafting was important and, in the process, drawing people out and listening to them.

I worked for some very high level and demanding people.

AW: Who was your Chief?

SW: The Chief was a man called Martin Morland who had a lifelong interest in Burma and had worked in a number of other posts. He was intelligent in a Foreign Office sort of way and he was succeeded later on by my previous boss Peter Hall from New York, so that was quite congenial. But the boss of bosses was the Chairman of the JIC who took very close interest in the work that was being developed by the Assessment Staff for the JIC. We had pre JIC meetings and he would go through the drafts and get them approved.

AW: And that was?

SW: Sir Percy Cradock, a distinguished Chinese expert who, at that point, was not only Chairman of the JIC but was also Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister. The purists said that you couldn't combine in one person an intelligence function and a policy function but he didn't pay much attention to that and he actually did the job superbly well. One of his

mantras was “the assessment must lead you where the assessment leads you”. You must write down and describe what the assessment tells you. The policy consequences are for others. He, of course, knew all about the policy consequences, but he kept the two sides very rigorously separate - except on one subject: he would not allow papers to be written for the JIC on China’s intentions towards Hong Kong even though the Hong Kong negotiation was going on all of that time. I don’t know what his thought process was. As we now know he was carrying out his own war, because he had a very strong position on Hong Kong and China and, in the end, lost that argument. I think he probably thought that assessments from the Assessments Staff on what the Chinese thought about Hong Kong just wouldn’t help because he knew everything there was to know and he would tell the Prime Minister rather than let the Committee do it.

With that one exception Percy Cradock was very rigorous, a good task master and by sustaining a very high quality of debate and conclusion in the JIC, he ensured that the content of the stuff coming from the Assessment Staff for the JIC was of very high quality. So we felt challenged all the time by him, and that was good. I enjoyed working for him and I quite enjoyed the process of chairing the meetings though they always went on too long. Busy people from Departments don’t like that so I always tried, like in Brussels, to try and keep them short, but it was an uphill task. I quite enjoyed the process of drafting the papers and getting mine through and submitted to the JIC and then when it met we were there in attendance to introduce the paper, if it was one of our subjects, and to answer questions, speak when spoken to, but participate in the discussion. It was a good exposure to some very senior people in Whitehall from which I hope I learned.

There were three other Deputies, one for economic affairs and he was a Treasury analyst, one was a Soviet expert of many years standing who supervised all the work on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and then the rest of the world was divided up between me and another Foreign Office Deputy. What I got out of that was geographically the middle swathe of the world from west to east. I didn’t do the Americas. I did the East, South Asia and East Asia, so I went through all the Middle East, all through the Persian Gulf, South Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South East Asia and China, which is why we got into these issues about China. There were lots of other papers about China, just not on Hong Kong. I was also in charge of our work on international terrorism and to the extent we did any work, we tried to pioneer it during my time, on international drugs trafficking. The terrorism stuff

was important and very high priority and during my time there were a number of serious terrorist incidents. The main terror group of the time was called Abu Nidhal. There were lots of Palestinian terrorists and sub divisions as John Cleese illustrated in *The Life of Brian*, but there was the Abu Nidhal group which was more effective, frightening, ambitious and brutal than the others. In my time they hijacked an Italian cruise ship called the *Achille Lauro* in which they murdered an American tourist who was in a wheel chair, a man called Klinghoffer about whom there is now an opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*. That was a terrible outrage and it ended up with them being spirited out. I think there was an international dirty deal which the Italians masterminded and the Abu Nidhal people didn't actually get captured and punished, which the Americans were unhappy with. There was also a bombing of a disco in Berlin, called the *LaBelle* disco, the authorship of which was always in much doubt. But it took its importance because there were some indications that the Libyans were behind it, or that they had facilitated it. There were a lot of American victims in the *LaBelle* disco and because of that President Reagan bombed Tripoli and he did it with US Air Force bombers based in Britain and so British political consent was required, which Margaret Thatcher gave. The whole intelligence base for that was obviously of very great importance and we had to do a lot of work trying to validate these indications that there was Libyan involvement. It was a constant thing and we were trying to understand the dynamics of terrorism, the groups and what was happening, so it gave rise to a lot of work.

Other major themes were the Middle East Peace Process, occasionally things that were happening in North Africa such as in Moroccan Western Sahara, but most important the war going on between Iraq and Iran which had, inevitably, Western involvement despite arms embargoes - you remember *Matrix Churchill* and things. Gas was being used so there was a lot of outrage about that but on the whole the starting position had been a good deal of Western sympathy for Saddam Hussein in Iraq but that evaporated over time. So it was about the Iran/Iraq war and the rest of the Gulf area. Then there was continuous tension between India and Pakistan which gave to moments of crisis. There was civil war in Sri Lanka. There was not much happening in South East Asia but there was, of course, China. This was really the beginning of Deng Hsiao Peng and the beginnings of discussions about economic liberalisation and political control and the old China hands like Sir Percy Cradock really say "they can't survive, they can't liberalise the economy and retain political control". They are still doing it! And they still have the same problems but they are a lot richer than they were. In a way he was not wrong but like Zhou Enlai said "it's too soon to tell".

At the end of my time, and this was outside my field of analysis, Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had made early visits to London in his previous role as Minister for Agriculture. Mrs Thatcher rather liked him and thought she could do business with him, and I think that was the advice she was getting from the Embassy in Moscow. The UK role was quite significant at the beginning of Gorbachev. Inevitably the old Soviet hands said "it can't be true, you can't trust him, he's no different" but other people said that it was different and that he was changing the way the Soviet system worked and that it was worth working with him. Once he took the top job obviously his major attention moved to the United States, strategic arms and things, but Margaret Thatcher was in her element because she was able to advise Ronald Reagan on Gorbachev and what she thought of him. There were nervous moments when Gorbachev and Reagan were negotiating over our heads, there was a meeting in Iceland where they were declaring they would do away with all the nuclear weapons and Margaret Thatcher threw a wobbly and said they couldn't do that! That was very worrying for a brief period.

AW: And there was the Westland Helicopter issue?

SW: Yes, Westland Helicopters happened! There was this great Cabinet battle between Margaret Thatcher, Michael Heseltine (Defence) and Leon Brittan (DTI) about the future of Westland Helicopters and whether they should go to Agusta, the Italians, or whether they should go to Sikorsky, the Americans. They couldn't continue on their own. The main involvement of the Assessment Staff was to stay out of it! But I think at least one of the protagonists, I think it was Michael Heseltine, tried to draw the intelligence system into this discussion by saying there were national security concerns about the option he didn't favour. He demanded that the JIC look into this. I think my involvement was that I had a phone call from Charles Powell at Number 10 demanding, not a JIC paper, but an Assessment Staff view, more or less instantly, on why he was wrong! So I duly obliged within the limits of what we knew, which wasn't much, and within the limits of honesty which we had to try to protect. Since it was such a drama and it was going on in Number 10, and we were right next door to Number 10, Percy Cradock was directly involved. We all felt a moment of risk.

It was an interesting period to be there because this was some years after the Falklands War but not long after. The Falklands War was a failure of intelligence assessment because with

hindsight you could see that signs of the Argentine wish to do something were there and the Government and British system didn't recognise them. There was an absolutely masterly report written by Lord Franks on the intelligence failures leading up to the Falklands War which went through all the indications including the facts that were out there in the Argentine media which nobody had picked up. The unwisdom of withdrawing the iceship Endurance, the wrong signal that it gave to the Argentines and how that was misinterpreted. He made some recommendations about how the intelligence system, and especially the intelligence assessment system should not only upgrade itself but should also take account of the various principles of intelligence that the Falklands had thrown up such as mirror imaging, which is jargon for assuming that the opponent thinks like you do, and other intellectual failings. This was very much part of the language in the Assessment Staff and in the JIC in the time that I was there because the Franks Report was relatively recent and it was such a good document and analysis that it was actually applicable to everything we did.

It was demanding work in another way, it was demanding to produce drafts that were succinct and said everything important and said it effectively. We never achieved perfection in that but I think we did quite a good job.

Counsellor, Head of Chancery, New Delhi, 1988-91

AW: This is Thursday, 16 August and we are resuming Stephen Wright's recollections of his diplomatic career. Next move Stephen and you are India bound? How did that come about?

SW: I had hoped and I had made it known in the FCO that I wanted to be posted to Turkey. Turkey because I thought it was an important place on the borders of the USSR, Iraq, and Iran and closely linked to Europe and I thought it was an important country for UK interests and for the region in the Eastern Mediterranean, and a bit of a mystery. However, I think that plan did have quite a lot of approval and standing but I remember meeting the Head of the Personnel Department at the Foreign Office and he asked me where I was thinking of going next and I told him Turkey, and I could see a sort of cloud pass over his face. Two days later they were in touch with me and told me I was going to India. They sold it to me, which was not difficult. The people in Personnel Department really built up the value and

importance of serving in India and they did describe it as the Washington of the Third World and also a place where I needed to go to get Third World experience.

I think that India had been the Washington of the Third World when Nehru and perhaps even Mrs Gandhi were alive but I thought then that it was a bit of an exaggeration and during my time in India I thought it was. I thought India was little by little backing itself into a position of global, not quite irrelevance, but not of the first order and regionally a country with a lot of problems. I think that nothing I've seen since really contradicts that. I think that India, since I was there, has been a large experience of frustration of progress and failure to do the things that were expected of India and which it has the potential to do. That was the situation at the end of the eighties and I think it is still the situation now only everything is much more complex and bigger now.

I prepared to go to India and in due course arrived in Delhi where I was to take up the position of Counsellor and Head of Chancery. The FCO was at that time moving away from the title "Head of Chancery" and moving away from the role because they thought the title was a bit vague and all embracing. They wanted more clarity about roles. Most heads of chancery were rebadged as political counsellors which is certainly what I did in Delhi. My High Commissioner, David Goodall, was attached to both the title and his idea of the role of Head of Chancery, so Head of Chancery I remained.

It was a position of great responsibility because it was a very large High Commission with a lot of different roles including and particularly, the visa operation which employed a lot of people and which I was in indirect charge of, as well as an important political relationship and it is a country with a vibrant media, so information work was important as well commercial and development work. Those two areas were in other people's hands, Francis Richards was the Counsellor in charge of trade and development but I was in charge of everything else, the political work, the information work and the visa work and the overall good functioning of the High Commission.

Being in the High Commission was quite a new experience because the majority of High Commission staff lived on the British High Commission compound and I had one of five so-called bungalows, that's what they were labelled. They weren't quite bungalows because they did have two storeys but they were five houses on the compound as opposed to the flats

in which everyone else lived. They were for the Counsellors and the senior staff and a bigger bungalow for the Minister, the Deputy Head of Mission. They were very nice houses and they came with readymade staff. There was a bearer, a cook, a gardener, a dhobi who did the laundry, and a sweeper. That was pretty much a normal complement of staff. Those who came from Europe and rather balked at employing so many personal servants often didn't realise that actually the people depended on us for employment and would have hated to be told that their officers could manage on their own without staff. Equally, they would have hated it if they were asked to combine their traditional role with somebody else's because Indian workers expect to have a distinct role and to work alongside other people with distinct roles. They don't want to disturb traditional arrangements.

AW: Was the caste system in evidence in all of that?

SW: I don't think I ever understood the caste system and how it worked. I think it's a subtle thing which Indian people are born with and grow up with and understand instinctively but I think it was very difficult for foreigners to perceive it. Obviously there were some people who were better class, more educated, wealthier, brought up in good families who'd had all the advantages and other people who didn't and who were poor and lived in difficult circumstances, but that was understandable. But I don't think that is caste, its class and background. The two may intersect but I never saw anything that I could recognise as the caste system in operation. Perhaps if you lived outside the big city it might have been more visible.

SW: So there I was in the compound, and I had a walk to work of all of 50 yards and a walk to the communal swimming pool and the communal tennis courts of about 200 yards and most of our colleagues worked around on the compound. It was a style of life that you needed to get used to. It had plenty of advantages but it had some disadvantages. People who were culturally ambitious such as the younger political staff and the young staff member who had been designated as the Hindi speaker, who spent time in country learning the language, liked to live off the compound and generally did so. But the majority of staff lived on the compound and it was quite a tight circle of acquaintance. We certainly [had to] be careful about our behaviour to our colleagues. The High Commissioner and his family were not on the compound. They lived in a very handsome Lutyens-type house in what had always been the government sector. It had, in colonial times, been called King George

Avenue and it became known as Rajaji Marg after independence, but it was still the same house and was still known to most people as 2KG.

AW: You've arrived and moved into your compound. How did you find the whole business of relations with the Indian officials?

SW: Relations with the Indian Government at that time were really quite difficult. My boss David Goodall really put up with quite a lot of stress and pressure and I did so too at a lower level. The problem, I think, was that there was a permanent sense that the ex-colonial power, the Raj, Britain, needed to understand and needed to be told all the time that the relationship had changed and that India was important and independent and had its own views and didn't agree with the UK's views on many things. There was deliberately a barrier and a distance between us and that had been true, probably, ever since Independence. And it was still true. The memory of the Raj was much fresher in Indian minds at the end of the 1980's than it was in most British minds. For most of the younger staff in the High Commission it wasn't a significant factor for them. But it was for the Indians. So that was a permanent factor and then on top of that the Prime Minister of India at that time was Rajiv Gandhi who had become Prime Minister because his elder brother Sanjay had been killed in an accident. He had not grown up with the intention of being a politician, but there he was, drawn into it by the dynastic politics of the Gandhi family and the needs of the Congress Party. He had grown up in a very westernised way. He had spent a lot of his youth in England and he had married an Italian woman, rather than an Indian. He was seen, by most Indians, as more westernised. I think that when he became Prime Minister he felt he really had to counteract that impression and one of the ways he counteracted it and tried to establish his authenticity as the leader of India, was to increase the distance and be a bit clearer and more ferocious about maintaining distance from Britain. The consequence of all of that was that the Indian Government - I'm not talking about the Indian people - chose to find quite a lot of fault and difficulty with a number of issues that lay between India and the UK, especially in the bilateral field.

This was the time at which there was almost a revolt with violence in the Sikh community. The Sikhs had assassinated Indira Gandhi, his mother, and the situation with the Sikhs when I arrived at the end of the eighties was less bad than it had been after the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the storming of the Golden Temple at Amritsar but it was still very bad and there was a terrorist problem. And furthermore there were a lot of Sikhs in Britain who

sympathised with the Sikh movement and their attempt at separation, or revolt. This was a real bone between us and the Indian Government. In principle the UK supported the Indian Government in its efforts against Sikh terrorism and offered every assistance that the British Government could to control the UK end of it. But the Sikh extremists were usually quite careful not to offend against British law and a lot of the manoeuvrings went on inside the Sikh community which was not easily penetrable and in the Sikh Gurdwaras, temples, and so it was a constant problem between us over Sikh violence. In addition the Indian Government controlled, with great care, the amount of contact that foreign diplomats in general, but certainly British diplomats in particular, had with branches of official India. For example, the Armed Forces were almost out of contact with us because they were under orders not to have their own relationships with officials, even military officials. The Indian Armed Forces are firmly under political control, which is a good thing, but they had to follow that instruction. There were many other branches of the Indian Government which it was really quite difficult for us to get access to and you had to go through a long and elaborate process with the Indian Ministry of External Affairs on everything. And they were professionally difficult. So we had a lot of business, a relative lack of common ground, a good deal of official Indian comment, for example in the media, which was critical of Britain and a lot of stress that was quite difficult to live with and, as I say, particularly difficult for the High Commissioner, less so for his Deputy, because he tended to concern himself above all with commercial and development issues, but also for me. It's quite a different picture from the relationship with India that exists now.

We also needed to understand and report on Indian relations with the outside world, with its neighbours and the other major countries. It had a rather more constructive relationship with the United States because they didn't feel the need to be particularly hostile to the United States. There were lots of things on which they wanted US cooperation. There was still a very strong relationship, which had existed since the 1970s, with the Soviet Union, so there was a lot of Soviet presence in India. Even though the Indians denied they were in the Russians' pockets, nevertheless it was a very close relationship and there was a very extensive commercial and defence relationship with Russia. There was a very suspicious, fearful and minimal relationship with China. China hadn't yet emerged into the power that it is now and the Indians could not forget that the one war they had lost since Independence was the one with China in the sixties. So all the common ground that might have been built for the future between India and China was not being built.

The focus of regional attention was on Pakistan and on Sri Lanka. With Pakistan the relationship was systematically bad and dangerous. It went up and down in its badness and its gravity but it was always hostile. There were outbursts of violence or armed tension, and up in the Himalayas at a place called Siachen Glacier there was a confrontation between Indian and Pakistani forces. When the Kashmir violence started during my time there in about 1989/90 there was another bone of contention between India and Pakistan which had a strong military component because there were substantial forces on both sides of the line of control, which is the line that divides Kashmir. That led to outbursts of actual fighting from time to time. That was a permanent state of risk and in addition we knew very well that both India and Pakistan had fought two wars between them and could fight another, and with the passing of time the likelihood that nuclear weapons might come into it was getting ever stronger. My memory is that at that time they hadn't yet established a nuclear capability but they were definitely heading in that direction.

AW: And with Sri Lanka?

SW: India had forces in Sri Lanka combatting the LTTE, the Tamil rebels. Frankly I never quite understood the Indian motivation for getting engaged in Sri Lanka other than an obvious effort to contribute to regional stability and a concern that Tamil violence in Sri Lanka might blow back into Tamil violence in the south of India where the Tamil population is much larger than it is in Sri Lanka. I don't think that was ever quite enough justification and it always put a question mark in my mind as to why the Indians were engaging in that particular civil war and why they weren't a bit more backward in giving support. But that's the way they were and there were forces there. The UK was supportive of their presence in Sri Lanka because they were combatting the LTTE who nobody wanted to recognise. We accepted that they were terrorists and needed to be stopped but, on the other hand, we didn't have a great deal to say about it. So it was just an important factor in Indian foreign policy up to the day, which was in the month before I finally left, when the LTTE assassinated Rajiv Gandhi. This is a really significant story in its own right and probably the low point of India's relationship with Sri Lanka although, for quite other reasons, I think it was the beginning of a recovery because things changed.

So working life was quite hard and quite adversarial. There was a constant dialogue with the Indians and so a lot of my life was going backward and forward to the Foreign Ministry over various issues. None of them were unmanageable but they were all difficult and we had to be careful about monitoring the media because we felt ourselves to be under pressure, and there was the constant irritant in our relationship of the Sikh issue and pressure on the High Commission to do everything it could to combat the UK end of Sikh terrorism, and the wish to promote a better understanding with the Indians which was pretty much an exercise in frustration.

Official life was therefore pretty adversarial and sensitive and my role in that, apart from operating at the Counsellor level on issues of substance, was as a member of the triumvirate that led the High Commission. Every morning I had a meeting with the High Commissioner and the Deputy High Commissioner Peter Fowler which I found quite a trial because I was expected to outline the issues and the agenda of the day. David Goodall was always extremely patient with me doing that, but I knew all the time that his own view on the issues and the agenda was already clear in his mind because he is a very clever man and it was sharper than it was in my mind. But he was always very gentle, because he is a gentle man, in steering me to a more precise and accurate view of what needed to be done. Nevertheless it was always me that had to start. So I started every morning with a brief presentation knowing that he could do it better. During those sessions, because they were difficult, I used to stare into the middle distance while collecting my thoughts and concentrating on what I was saying. One of the things I used to stare at was a point on the wall above and behind David Goodall's head with his back to the wall, sitting at his desk. The focus of that attention, conveniently above and behind David Goodall's head, was one of his watercolours, (because he is a great watercolourist) of the Samode Palace, which is a rather nice small palace outside Jaipur which was functioning as a hotel. It was a place a number of us visited, a delightful place. David had done a watercolour of the Samode Palace, which I thought was a lovely painting, and in my final week he took it off the wall and he gave it to me. I thought it was a gesture of his generosity and a certain humour because he knew what it signified to me from watching my behaviour over three years. It's lovely, I have it in my drawing room and it's a joy.

AW: If the Indians were difficult to work with, how were the Indians you met socially? Did you make Indian friends?

SW: Oh yes, how could you not? The official Indian line was, as I say, reserved and hostile, but the Indians I met who I suppose were upper middle class educated Indians, many of whom had been educated in England, political people, business people, were all generally delightful, very stimulating, very clever and with lots to say not necessarily along the lines that British people thought but very intimate and appreciative and keen to have contact with the British High Commission and with British people. So we had excellent relations that ranged between the working and the social with a lot of people and it was always creative, constructive, enjoyable and stimulating and good. Delhi is a Punjabi town and the Punjabis are quite tough, aggressive people. They are tough business people, tough soldiers and they are very self-confident. I had endless conversations, in social circumstances, over dinner, over lunch, with Punjabi men about the faults of the Raj, what Britain had done, what Britain was doing now, what India was doing and what a mixed experience the Raj had been, how partition had destroyed India. All these issues were very live in people's mind and very live in discussion with official Brits like us. I had to work for my supper most nights because you had to think and to argue. That was what was expected and that was what we did. It was always done with personal friendliness but there were deep feelings there. So I had to work quite hard, socially, on the record of Britain in India. But the wives were always uniformly delightful and gentle and motherly or grand-motherly, depending on their age. We had some very good Sikh friends who, on the whole, were round ladies, very well educated, so kind, such good friends. And Indian women give as good as they get, they participate, they are not like Pakistani women or women in the Muslim world who have to be more reserved. Social life was constantly stimulating even if I felt I was being metaphorically jabbed in the chest over what we were and what we stood for.

We got out of town as much as we could. India being a huge country and air travel, though not exactly in its infancy was not terribly well organised So I preferred to go wherever I could by road, generally speaking driving myself, which was hazardous. The world of Rajasthan, the golden circle of Jaipur, Agra and Delhi, occasional visits north to the hills and further on to Kashmir were delights of my time in India. I got down to central India, got down to the tiger reserves that were accessible from Delhi. I got down once to Kerala in the south and had one excursion outside India to the Maldives. I did get to Kashmir in the summer of 1989 when I hired one of the High Commission drivers, because it is a long and fairly hazardous drive, to spend a week at the capital Srinagar on one of the lakes in a

traditional houseboat, which you could rent in those days. The lake was absolutely beautiful as were the gardens and there were all the beautiful products that Kashmir makes, the silks, painted woodwork, carpets and then on further into the mountains up to Ladakh and Leh which is very near the line of control at a very high altitude and much more Tibetan in its culture than the rest of India. That was quite an adventure, the road and the altitude were challenging and I had severe headaches and felt almost incapacitated from time to time with altitude sickness. The food was challenging too because the people up there really like their fermented milk with lumps floating in it. However it was a historic experience as not many people could go up there, it was very tightly controlled by the Indian military. One of the roads, for example, was one-way over a stretch of road of about 50 or 60 km. You had to wait and then go off in convoy. I like to say that the first bomb in the Kashmiri violence blew up the day after I got back to Delhi, so with hindsight I was very privileged because very quickly it became out of bounds and impossible to go to Kashmir, and the whole infrastructure of tourism in Kashmir pretty much collapsed, the houseboats rotted on the lake and so on. I had a sense that I had been somewhere that was no longer going to be possible to visit.

In fact, that was a sense that I had in a lot of places in India, but for other reasons. There were a lot of palaces that had been built not that strongly and the pressures of the environment, of pollution, of the population were such that everything was being encroached upon and the protection of monuments was not that good, it was all a bit primitive and you had a sense that when you went to temples, castles, palaces outside Delhi that they might not be there in another few years. I felt very privileged and out in the countryside the British were welcomed warmly and people were interested in us because, of course, the Indian middle class tend to know our British culture even better than we do! The Minister who delighted in giving us trouble in the Foreign Ministry, a man called Natwar Singh, his chief occupation was reading the works of P G Wodehouse! There were many performances of Shakespeare to be heard around India and it was a common occurrence that the audience would recite along with the performance because everyone knew their Shakespeare. The sense of cultural linkage was very strong. But it had an element of frustration in it because you would get to a certain point in the discussion, based on shared cultural experience, but when it started to get difficult they would say “But you wouldn’t understand, you’re not Indian”.

AW: And then Rajiv was assassinated?

SW: Yes and that was in my last month and I was actually in my farewell round. It was a memorable experience the night that it happened. He was assassinated down in the south of India, miles away from Delhi. I was at a farewell party which was pretty much for me but it was with the British and international press corps. It's an important thing to say about life in India, the number of expatriates was very, very small. The number of expatriate business people were numbered on the fingers of two hands and the numbers of other expatriate Brits was very limited. But there were some British correspondents there who were, of course, an important part of our life there because we interacted with them and exchanged with them a great deal. So, we were all at this party and having a perfectly nice evening, and then somebody got a telephone message about Rajiv, somebody had been called up by an editor somewhere, and very quickly everyone started being called up - no mobile phones of course - and the word went round that party that something very bad had happened to Rajiv. I have never seen a room empty so fast. The journalists went from social drinkers to energetic professionals in about thirty seconds and they got their kit and their communications and the party just drained.

It quickly became public knowledge that Rajiv had been killed. Indian tradition, and it obviously has strong practical roots to it, is that funerals take place very quickly, so Rajiv's funeral was scheduled for about three days later. It was obviously a big international event and the whole of the international community was expected to descend upon Delhi to attend the funeral, and the Indian authorities expected that to happen. We didn't have time to coordinate with the Foreign Ministry but there was a set time for the funeral and it was made clear that participants were invited, encouraged, expected and an outline of what would happen was known. We were all scurrying around wanting to get this fixed up and get the appropriate British response set up.

The day came for the funeral. The very first thing that happened in the day was a phone call from none other than Keith Vaz MP who was a fairly assiduous worker of the UK-Indian network and he had got himself to Delhi ahead of everybody else and was in town wanting to be included. He had no official standing but he wanted to be included and so I duly took note and told him broadly speaking what was happening, looked forward to seeing him later in the day and so on.

The next thing was the arrival of a VC10 at the airport containing the entire British party, led by HRH The Prince of Wales, including the Foreign Secretary, then Douglas Hurd, including David Steele representing the Liberal Party, Neil Kinnock, representing the Labour Party and Ted Heath, former Prime Minister. So out of this plane stepped the top level of British political society and we had to look after them during the day. Our dignitaries were farmed out to the senior staff in the High Commission and each of us had been allocated one or two to look after in our houses. They'd had a long flight, they needed rest, they needed feeding, a bath perhaps, so the bungalows were pressed into service. I can't remember who I had to deal with but I do remember that one of my colleagues, Jeffrey James, had been detailed to look after Ted Heath, and that got a bit memorable later in the day. The Foreign Secretary, the Prince of Wales and, I think, Neil Kinnock were being looked after in the High Commissioner's Residence, 2KG.

They all set off for the funeral event, I was not invited, none of us were apart from the High Commissioner, and jolly good thing too because the grandstand for the foreign dignitaries had been set up in full sun, it had no shade, they were there for about three hours while they waited and then the ceremony took place. It must have been quite a gruelling experience for them other than the fact that they had a lot of people to talk to. The whole international community was there. The Prince of Wales carried himself off very well and went to lay a wreath at Gandhi's house and to give condolences to the widow, Sonia Gandhi. The Private Secretary, then Peter Westmacott, had to do some rapid improvisation because our wreath suddenly and unexpectedly went missing, but he solved that with creativity.

The funeral event lasted a long time and in full sun, it was exhausting for them and then finally they all came back to their designated watering holes. My colleague Jeffrey James recounts that Ted Heath looked pretty shattered and they set him down on the sofa and offered him tea, because this was mid-afternoon by then. "Tea", he said "Tea, what nonsense, give me a whisky". So he was given a stiff tumbler full of whisky and he sat on the sofa with his hand firmly gripped around the glass which was perched on the arm of the sofa, and fell asleep, as anyone might in that situation. But all the time he was asleep, his hand and his grip on the glass did not waver at all! So Jeffrey James, or perhaps his wife Mary, was sitting there looking at him wondering whether he was going to drop the glass! Eventually he woke up and drank the whisky but it was quite a moment for them.

Later in the evening the High Commissioner organised an impromptu buffet supper for all the party and for a few other foreign visitors. It was for an indeterminate number, just a happening. There was a moment when the Prince of Wales, Ted Heath and I think Douglas Hurd and David Goodall were seen to be having a very animated discussion at their table and we wondered what weighty matter of international affairs was being settled. It turned out afterwards, when we managed to ask David Goodall, that no, they had been talking about the Cathedral Close in Salisbury and what was to happen to it! Because of course Ted Heath lived there and everybody else cared about it.

In the quieter moments of the day the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, had some bilateral meetings with a number of opposite numbers. I remember one Foreign Minister, I can't remember which country, but she was a lady and she turned up in a short skirt and that was a bit of a distraction for all of us! At another moment the door of 2KG opened and a large man burst into the room with hand outstretched saying "Hi, I'm Don McKinnon, Deputy Prime Minister of New Zealand". And Don McKinnon was there for the rest of the day, a lovely man full of life. He came to see the Foreign Secretary and stayed on to dinner as did, of course, Keith Vaz. Neil Kinnock went off to present his own condolences to the Congress Party as a sister party of the Labour Party. There was a lot of activity around the funeral and it was a very big day in India and a very big day for the British High Commission.

That was pretty much the last thing I did because after that I was winding down. I like to say that India started to improve on the day I left because on that day the new Government took office led by Narasimha Rao who as about as different from Rajiv Gandhi as it was possible to imagine. He was a south Indian philosopher and poet and a man of great gentleness and subtlety. He was quiet. He wore traditional Indian clothing and sandals. He was, as it were, an authentic Indian Prime Minister, slightly more in the mode of Mahatma Gandhi, although not physically because he was quite large and round. Narashimha Rao pulled Mammohan Singh back from the World Bank, who was a noted Indian economist, to be Finance Minister. He was the one that started the reform process in India that really began to open India up and who then went on to be Prime Minister until quite recently, a pretty gruelling life for him. The whole economic scene in India started to liberalise and become rejuvenated and that really contrasts darkly with the situation that had come to light in February of that year, 1991, when India's foreign exchange reserves, which had been falling, were down to the equivalent

of three months imports and which in the world of foreign exchange reserves is a critically low level and indicates a real economic crisis. So it had gone from that situation of economic weakness in February, through the killing of Rajiv Gandhi, to the formation of a new Government and action to remedy the situation in the right direction.

Counsellor, Head of External Relations Section, UKRep, Brussels 1991-4

AW: It's 1991 and you are returning to Brussels. Were you very excited about that posting?

SW: Yes I was, and I considered myself to be very fortunate because I had made clear to the powers that be that having had a very good experience in Brussels in the eighties and having seen Charles Powell at work as Counsellor for External Relations, in other words, head of the external team in Brussels, having seen the quality of the work and what he made of that job, I always thought it was a job I would really, really like to do and to build on my earlier EU experience. I had made known, through the end of my time in India, that that was something I would like to do, but it was explained to me that there was an incumbent in that job, Michael Pakenham, who was not due to move and it was unlikely to be possible. However, in the nick of time and through the hand of some good fairy, I don't know how it happened, Michael Pakenham was appointed as Ambassador to Luxembourg and suddenly his post became vacant at just the right moment. I was very excited and very pleased to be appointed to fill it. I think that David Goodall thought I was making a mistake because he thought one shouldn't go back to places you'd been before. But the reputation of UKRep at that time, its standing in the FCO and Whitehall, the fact that the Permanent Representative was John Kerr, who I'd known slightly in earlier years and who I'd always rather liked because he is an enjoyable character and colleague, and the fact that all kinds of really able and distinguished colleagues had passed through there, all of that made me want to do it again and to go into that particular job. It was a senior FCO job and it was the one for which I was qualified so I was very pleased to go back and to do that. The timing worked out because I was due to finish in Delhi in late May/June and I was due in Brussels for late August, early September so there was time to leave and do the needful at home as well. All of that worked out well.

AW: So there you are, back in Brussels. Had the department changed much since your first time there?

SW: The people had changed but the structure of the department had not. The department was responsible for the UK's interests and activity in all aspects of the EU's relationships and dealings with the outside world. As before it was development work but it was also trade work and increasingly it was political relationships.

In the autumn of 1991 there were two major things happening. Inside the EU the negotiations were at an advanced for the new treaty which turned out to be the Maastricht Treaty in which many steps forward for the European Union were being discussed and among them the creation of the Single Currency. That was one part of the negotiation, not handled by my team, but pretty much by the Treasury people, led by Nigel Wicks in London. But also there was the effort to develop what had been known as European Political Cooperation on Foreign Policy, and turn it into something more systematised which came to be known as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) which really was given its start in the Maastricht Treaty. And that was our business in External Relations at UKRep even though hitherto it had not really handled collaboration on foreign policy because that had been handled directly by the Political Director in the FCO. This senior figure had traditionally handled political cooperation on a bilateral basis with his opposite numbers without much involvement from Brussels. The point of bringing it into the EU institutions and to giving it a treaty base was to bring it into the Brussels process, and our role was to advise and to negotiate on the way in which this subject was going to be institutionalised.

The third thing that was happening that was important outside the European Union was that since 1989 the former Soviet satellites in Central and Eastern Europe had been starting to free themselves and to start the transition of turning into democratic states, which was of great interest to both the UK and to the EU. Also the Soviet state in Russia was coming to an end in quite dramatic ways. So all that drama was going on outside but was immensely relevant to the European Union as a whole and to us in the UK. The Member States, the UK and UKRep collectively had to devise the right response to all of that, which was a new relationship with Russia and new relationships with the parts of the Soviet Union that split away, namely Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and the other Stans which were second order but designed to be harmonious with Russia, and the development of a rather more active process designed, one way or another, to lead the Central Europeans towards eventual EU membership.

In 1992 the UK had the Presidency of the Council and we set it as a major goal for ourselves to get the Council to agree that they, the Council, shared the objective of EU membership for the Central Europeans. We did not succeed. The other Member States would not allow the EU to go that far but we got quite a long way down the road toward it with the result that that commitment was actually made the following year under the Danish Presidency. So we felt that we had moved forward on enlargement and that we were devising the right policy responses towards Russia, developing Common Foreign and Security Policy to handle the cooperation between the EU governments on foreign policy and as if that was not enough, there was the civil war going on in Yugoslavia and reaching very high levels of international stress and tension. Most of the focus of that in my time and for me was the delivery of aid and the arrangements of giving aid that had to be coordinated with the EU and the European Commission. It was a dramatic time for that too.

More peacefully, in the outside world, the GATT, the international trade body that had been so much part of my life in my previous incarnation in Brussels, was finally coming to the conclusion of a very long trade negotiation under the name of the Uruguay Round, which was for major liberalisation in terms of international trade and dismantling of barriers and also the conversion of the GATT organisation into something more modern, under the different name of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). All of that was going on at the same time and I think the UK set out to, and succeeded in, making a big difference to the Uruguay Round negotiation. John Major who was then the Prime Minister and Sarah Hogg his adviser took major international roles in pushing the Uruguay Round, especially, but not only, during the UK Presidency. And we were central to that because it was the EU that had to negotiate all of that.

So we had the Maastricht Treaty, the CFSP, Russia and the Central Europeans and the Uruguay Round, really quite a big agenda. Obviously we had an excellent team in the External Relations section, we had enough people to handle all that, but it was pretty active and I found myself in very close contact with John Kerr as the Permanent Representative on all these things. I found myself working very closely with the key people in the institutions and notably in the Commission and in particular I made a relationship for my future in Spain because the Yugoslav issue was the responsibility of the then Spanish Commissioner, Abel Matutes, and his Chef de Cabinet was a man called Ramon de Miguel who I worked with very closely in Brussels on Yugoslav problems and a few other issues to do with

development and overseas aid. He was a key contact in Brussels and then became a key contact for me when I went to Spain ten years later as Ambassador when he was the Europe Minister. So you build up relationships that last longer than you expect in places like Brussels.

The UK Presidency of 1992 which I mentioned was a great activity and that's when John Major made his great push on the Uruguay Round and was when the Foreign Office made a big push to get the Central Europeans closer to Enlargement. It was when John Kerr was Chairman of COREPER and needed the support to enable him to do that and UK Ministers were on the Council and we had to advise on all of that. It was all very thrilling and I was so glad that I got that posting and was able to be part of that.

Director, European Union, FCO, 1994-7

AW: You stayed with Europe? You returned in 1994 back to London to be Director European Union?

SW: Yes. I think it was probably arranged and organised by John Kerr, and in any case it was John Kerr who told me that this was the intention by calling me up one night at home and asking me if I was willing to do this and saying that this position was on offer, which was, of course, promotion into the FCO Senior Grade after a number of years at the Counsellor level, and it was promotion in the sense of going back to the FCO as a Director (Under Secretary in old speak) with responsibility for all the EU.

I was in charge of three departments in London, called European Union Internal, which dealt with institutional matters, the Maastricht Treaty, its creation and the parliamentary process for that, internal EU matters such as justice and home affairs, which was a growth area, and other internal issues which was budgets and the financial stuff. Then there was European Department External which dealt with everything outside the EU which was familiar territory for me and there was a small team dealing with the growing Common Foreign and Security Policy. Those were my three departments and I was supervising them and was responsible for them. This was the first time I'd done anything at this level of responsibility.

The range of contacts and people I had to do business with was transformed from what it had been in my previous times in the FCO. I was now one of the Permanent Under Secretary's key Under Secretaries, I dealt on continuous and senior terms with the EU Secretariat in the Cabinet Office which coordinated all Whitehall positions and business on the EU. Between the FCO and the Cabinet Office we ensured that everything was done right so it was a joint endeavour. I came across, for the first time, the very different world of the Special Advisers who were brought into Departments to provide political and party advice to Ministers without having to taint the civil servants with such matters, and I made some good friends among them. For the first time also I had to deal with some Parliamentary committees and support our Ministers, especially our Minister for Europe, at the EU Scrutiny Committee. There were also Lords' Committees who were interested in the European Union in a broader framework. Sometimes ministers were giving them evidence and other times I acted on my own and was invited to speak, more in a way of briefing than accounting for policy to their Lordships. That was a very stimulating experience because the Lords contains some very experienced and wily people some of whom had been my bosses.

When I returned in 1994 John Kerr was still in Brussels but eventually he was transferred to Washington as Ambassador and Stephen Wall took his place. So during my time in London in this EU Director role I had to help Stephen Wall prepare and take over in Brussels from John Kerr and had to deal otherwise with a succession of Permanent Under Secretaries. I think it was John Coles to start with and then David Gilmour. John Coles had EU experience but he was less sympathetic and interested in EU business. David Gilmour did not have EU experience but was a warmer and more encouraging chief. My Ministers for Europe rotated quite a lot during my time. I had David Heathcoat-Amory and David Davis, and Tristan Garel-Jones previously in Brussels. There may have been one other. On the whole I think the Prime Minister reserved this slot for Ministers with a Eurosceptic frame of mind. This on the whole made my job quite enlivening because they were not necessarily part of the consensus about the EU, but their responsibility was to get the Maastricht Treaty through the House of Commons and defend the Government's position and business on EU matters. They were both fundamental to delivering on policy and quite sceptical of it and argumentative with us.

I think the other major factor affecting the shape of my job and its range of responsibilities was that the previous incumbent in that position as Director EU was Michael Jay, who not

only understood the subject in full, but then was promoted out of the job into a senior job in charge of international economic affairs - and the EU. So my predecessor was there on top and he had quite a large share of senior level EU work including the last stages of the Maastricht negotiations and a lot of the higher level work relating to Parliamentary ratification which meant that I needed to focus my attention on the areas that were of less interest to him. I think I managed to do that. One of the highlights for me during that time was touring Central Europe with my opposite number, the number two in the EU Secretariat in the Cabinet Office, Andrew Cahn. Andrew and I toured all the Central European candidates for membership and promoted the idea that the UK was firmly in support of their ambitions and firmly in support, in practical terms, of their preparations. By then, through the Know How Fund, which was a UK fund, there were a lot of British experts being put at the disposal of the Central Europeans to help them modernise their systems. I made a lot of good relationships with people from Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and also later on with Bulgaria and Romania, though slightly less so because they were further back down the road in their efforts to EU membership. I think we made a difference there in strengthening the British reputation and British standing with those countries as firm supporters, which was genuinely the case, of their accession to the EU.

There were other issues that were more difficult in my time. There were regular media flurries and storms about silly EU stories about weights and measures, and bananas. Weights and measures was important in a cultural way. There was a lot of pressure in the EU to standardise weights and measures to the metric system across the EU and to a great extent the UK acquiesced and participated in that. We now have a situation where most official measurements are metric but references to the old Imperial System with its miles, its pounds and ounces and stones and all those things that foreigners don't understand are preserved in common culture. But there was a time when there was a serious effort from the European Commission to make it illegal for any of the traditional measures to be used in selling things. We got over it with a lot of media flurry.

Bananas were difficult. One of those complex EU regimes that only a few people understood - and at that time one of them was me - namely, the trade regime that the EU imposed on the importation of bananas. Because one of the little known facts in life is that there are no fewer than five Member States of the European Union who are producers of bananas. So competition from the Caribbean and the American companies in Ecuador and Central

America was competition for EU producers. So there were quotas and there were limits and the whole international development community was against us because they wanted the Caribbean and the Latin Americans to develop through this, especially the Caribbean where there was British influence and British interest. So the revision and future of the banana regime was one of my subjects and it became quite controversial. It also became controversial in the media way by having controversies about bending and curved bananas as opposed to straight bananas! I think it was always an exaggeration but I wouldn't have put it past the European Union to try and adjust the packing of bananas so that they were straighter than they might naturally be! Certainly the Daily Express accused them of that, and we had to deal with it.

More serious and more damaging was the experience with BSE which was during my time. There were serious outbreaks in Britain and there were legitimate and necessary controls on the export of British beef to a lot of countries. But, at the same time, it was pretty clear that the veterinary committees in Brussels were not listening to science but listening rather more to political prejudice and instruction. It was extremely frustrating for the whole of British officialdom and industry that was concerned with this genuine medical crisis. We were managing the health aspects of it well enough but the commercial side of it became really very difficult, and the standing of the EU, as a result of their veterinary committees' control over British exports into the rest of the EU at limits beyond what we thought the science justified, did a lot of damage. It got to the point where the Prime Minister, John Major, essentially couldn't stand it anymore and over the course of a weekend, certainly a very short period of time, he decided that Britain had to make a stand. He demanded and declared that Britain would gum up EU business by withholding agreement across the entire range of EU affairs in a policy that became known as Non-Cooperation. It fell to me to justify this policy and to try to enforce it across Whitehall through the Cabinet Office where frankly most of the Departments were incredulous, not really willing to go along with it because a lot of their interests were wrapped up in having achievements in the EU and having good decisions taken, and were pretty non-cooperative with the policy of Non-cooperation! It became very difficult for a short period until an EU-wide fix was stitched up and Ministers' feathers were smoothed over with better decisions in the EU and the prospect of better trade, and a greater acceptance that the UK was doing what needed to be done to control the disease and the beef trade. It was at a time where you remember in the UK that whole cuts of beef disappeared from the shops and trade in offal virtually disappeared - no more kidneys, no more liver, no

more prime ribs. In the process a lot of the industry in the UK had to change very fast with abattoirs becoming more professional with higher scientific standards and a lot of the old ones closing. So it was, in many ways, the death of the butchery business in Britain but all of that was quite necessary and justified by scientific requirements. We eventually managed to get the EU onto a position that we considered respectable and scientifically acceptable. But it took this period of Non-Cooperation, which the EU hadn't seen since the early days in the sixties when De Gaulle had imposed the policy of the empty chair on the EU and France had absented itself from discussions.

The crisis blew over quite quickly and there was probably a rather grudging recognition by some European governments that the UK had been badly treated and that John Major had not been wrong to get cross about it. But while it was happening it was definitely pencil snapping stuff.

Minister and Deputy Head of Mission, Washington, 1997-9

AW: We have reached the end of your period as Director European Union at the FCO in 1997 and your next move was to be Minister and Deputy Head of Mission in Washington. How did that come about?

SW: It came about because I knew the previous Minister in Washington was due to leave and it was also the case that John Kerr was Ambassador in Washington. I think that both he and I were keen on the idea of me taking that role and working together again. It's a major role and the first thing I had to consider about it was whether I wanted to go to be number two in our largest Embassy in the world with our most important ally or whether I wanted instead to be number one, namely Head of Mission, somewhere else. At that time my desire to be Head of Mission was not that strong, and I thought that Washington as number two with John Kerr, in a period when American relations were pretty strong, was a more stimulating and challenging option than going to a second or even third rank country as Head of Mission. I was asked whether I wanted to apply for it and I said yes. In due course my appointment was approved, I don't know who the other candidates were and in those days you didn't have an explicit bidding process - it was rather more veiled than that. An expression of interest to go was enough to make a candidacy on which the administration then took a decision.

AW: How did you find Washington when you arrived? It was a Clinton White House, yes?

SW: Yes, I arrived in the autumn of '97 which was the beginning of the second half of Clinton's term. He had been re-elected in '96 and his second Administration therefore started at the beginning of '97. One of the first things that struck me as something of a surprise was how ill established the Administration was several months into the second Administration. There were so many posts still vacant which the Presidency and the White House would, in due course, fill with their appointees. As you know, Presidential appointees go quite a long way down the system in the Administration in the United States, much further down than in the UK. So there were many posts still vacant in September '97.

I think I knew pretty much what to expect. The Embassy is a mini Whitehall because most Departments of government are represented in the British Embassy in Washington because they all have important business to transact. The role of Minister and DHM was to support the Ambassador and to take as much of the load of managing the Embassy and the US network off the Ambassador as was possible and to pursue diplomatic contacts and exchanges at a second level, below the level of the Ambassador but above the level of everyone else in the Embassy. So I did deal with senior people at Assistant Secretary level and above in the State Department and the other Departments and that's quite senior.

AW: So you were dealing with these senior people as well as managing the network, was John Kerr, as your Ambassador, very hands-on?

SW: He was extremely hands-on as an Ambassador on the things that were of direct interest to him. He was not overly hands-on in terms of managing the Embassy or managing the network. I think he wanted me to take the lead on that. But he was interested in the contacts at the highest level, with the President, or the President's Chief of Staff and with the Secretary of State, that was Madeline Albright at the time, and her Chief of Staff. And the pursuit of major high level diplomatic objectives, and that meant for him the major issues of foreign policy but also, and perhaps above all, the major political relationship between the White House and Number 10, and some quite important contracts which were being pursued especially in the defence field, leaving me with a pretty wide area of activity across the whole network. It really was very large because the Embassy itself was large and we also had a

number of other posts, Consulates General, in all the major cities, at least seven, spread across the American continent and they needed to be coordinated and managed and visited.

AW: So you travelled in the United States?

SW: Yes, I did. I tried to fill in the gaps that the Ambassador wasn't doing himself and I made a point of visiting all the consulates during my first months there.

AW: And what was going on in the world to affect the work? There was Kosovo? Arab Israel ...?

SW: Yes there were all the major foreign policy activities and challenges. The Arab Israel issue was a constant, the growth of international terrorism by Al Qaeda was an increasingly important theme. The Kosovo War was extremely important while it lasted but it did thankfully come to an end fairly early in my time. On bilateral matters there was the Northern Ireland Peace Process in which the Americans and the White House were intimately involved, culminating in the Good Friday Agreement which was a really important piece of UK/US diplomacy as well as obviously crucial for Northern Ireland. In addition there was a whole range of economic affairs that needed to be promoted and pursued and which, on the whole the Ambassador didn't get much involved in. For example the Climate Change Agenda for which the UK Government in the form of Prescott was very active. The Americans were in the difficult position internationally of not having approved the Kyoto Protocol, because the Senate would not approve it and unanimously rejected it. This was a big blow to the international effort that the UK was playing a leading role in, so there was a lot of activity on that. And on international trade policy, what was going on in the World Trade Organisation was a constant area of business which I tended to do myself. But I had teams, they were not over large, but they were led at quite senior level on all these subjects. For example the Political Counsellor on the bilateral side was Anthony Cary who went on to become British High Commissioner in Canada and on the international side was John Sawyers who went on to become the Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Advisor and other jobs. So I had really talented people at the working level and I had to find my layer in which I could add value but not get in the way of other people either the Ambassador above me or the teams below me, but add value to what they were doing. The key criteria I had most of the

time when deciding what I should be pursuing and with whom was to reinforce the efforts that were going on at working level when we felt those needed to be reinforced.

AW: Did you have large numbers of people coming from the UK? For example were Number 10 all over you or did they let you get on with it?

SW: Physically and in person they were no more present than the agenda required. For example, during my time there was a G8 Summit in Denver, Colorado and the Prime Minister came out for that and I'm sure there were other briefer, lesser visits. It wasn't overwhelming. There was a constant flow of visitors at all levels and part of my job was to take my share of senior London visitors and arrange their programmes and lead them around Washington. It's an important part of the dialogue but it wasn't excessively so.

AW: And during your time, you had an Ambassador change? John Kerr returned to London?

SW: Yes that was quite early on because the decision on that came quite soon after my arrival; it must have been early 1998. I hadn't expected this. He might have been expecting it, I don't know, but he was appointed as PUS at the Foreign Office and returned having done two or three years I suppose. So I had to be the support for the incoming Ambassador, Christopher Meyer, who was plucked out of Germany, Bonn in those days, at very short notice, having just started that post and he had to turn himself round to come to the United States. He had previous US experience because he'd served there before in the role which I had, but it's different being the Ambassador and he needed a good deal of support in his early weeks as he pursued his very active agenda of making his own network.

AW: So that was quite a change?

SW: Yes it was a change of style. I had got used to John Kerr over the years. I had never previously worked for Christopher Meyer. I knew of his talents and reputation as a senior press officer and adviser because he'd been Head of Communications in Number 10 as well as in the Foreign Office and his talent for interesting, stimulating, frank presentation was put to full effect in Washington.

AW: And dealing with the Americans. I think you have some quite fond memories of the people you dealt directly with?

SW: It was an interesting experience. Obviously, senior people at the State Department and in other Departments were extremely able and busy people, and the British only had a certain level of importance for them in their scheme of priorities. But we were not unimportant and it was my job to keep our points of view present in their minds and to be influential in pressing the arguments. It was stimulating and rewarding. I had to adapt to the rather different ways in which the US Administration works by comparison with Whitehall. Whitehall is quite a collaborative place where different Departments and different teams in Departments reckon to collaborate with each other for the greater good. The US Administration works much more by internal competition, and so the so-called inter agency process of forming an Administration position was much more fraught and much more active than in London. We had to play our part in that. If we had an important objective it was often necessary to make our points to exercise influence not only in the State Department but also in all the other Departments that were relevant including the White House, the central national security staff in the White House and the Pentagon and other Departments like the US Treasury. Their style was more competitive with each other.

In addition, I found that senior people in the US were heavily concentrated on the one or two or perhaps three major issues of the day. Their capacity and interest in looking broadly across the horizon was much less than I was used to in Europe. In Europe and in London, senior people in the FCO and in Whitehall regarded it as their job to keep an overview of a wide range of policy areas and to make sure there was coherence between them. It was also part of the US process but it was much less evident. What was much more evident was really intense focus and absolute determined commitment on the part of senior levels of the Administration to pursue whatever the top priorities of the day were, whether it was the Kosovo War or some particular initiative in the Middle East or responding to a particular act of terrorism. Their priorities moved with the agenda but they were heavily concentrated on the number one or number two issues and it was quite difficult to get them to shift off that. And this really represented the good and the bad of the American foreign policy process. Washington really is the international capital of foreign policy and so the role which we had in the Embassy was absolutely essential to that and to our own emphasis. I often had the impression that in Britain and in Europe the question that we grappled with in response to any

challenge or any problem was “What shall we say about this?” In Washington the question was very clearly “What shall we do about this?”, because the US clearly had so many more instruments of action than the Europeans did and they were determined to use them. It helps to explain their strength of commitment to quite detailed management of policy initiatives at a very high level. If it was in their agenda, you could expect everyone from the US Secretary of State and the President’s National Security Adviser downwards to be interested in a very high level of detail, and conversely not to be very interested in looking ahead, in looking across and in looking more widely, which I think is more part of our tradition. I had to learn to adapt.

AW: Did you like living in DC, did you have to adapt to that? They go to bed very early!

SW: Yes, that wasn’t difficult because you started early. Typically an evening dinner would start at seven and be over by ten, and that’s not an unhealthy way to live. I got up at a reasonably early hour, I was going to the gym in those days but it wasn’t an unreasonably early start by comparison with many American officials who were routinely getting up at 4am to go running and take exercise. You had to adapt to that, and it often took the form of having to manage the programme of some incoming London visitor and getting them over their jet lag and then getting them into the habit of quick lunches and early dinners.

Living in Washington was easy. The Minister in the British Embassy had an absolutely delightful house and I inherited that. It was quite well run by a team of devoted Filipino ladies. It had a nice garden, was in walking distance of the Embassy and was a place that Washingtonians were keen to visit and it had good entertaining facilities. I could put on dinners and receptions in the house without undue difficulty, and did so.

Over time I think I become somewhat disillusioned with Washington. Washington DC and I mean DC, District of Columbia, is quite small. The people like us, namely white, well paid people, only occupied one-quarter of the small DC area. The whole of greater Washington outside it was a rambling, shambling conurbation but it was not where we functioned. DC was very much a creature of the Federal Government and I think that, after visiting many other major American cities, Washington suffered and was a bit disappointing in the lack of diversity of initiative. There was a monopoly of buildings and institutions on behalf of the federal government and there was none of the large corporate activity and sponsorship that

you get in other cities which helps to make cultural activity and diversity so enjoyable. I'm thinking of Chicago or Houston or San Francisco where you see a lot of sponsorship by the corporate sector of the arts or discussion activity and debate and that really wasn't there in Washington. So it was a Federal city, its galleries were controlled by the Government, its theatre and the Kennedy Centre were controlled by the Government and I think it all lacked a bit of flair. Washington is elegant and it has its beauties, but is it dynamic and full of change? Well not really. I think that I tired of that in the end.

There is one other characteristic of the policy work I should mention. I say that the US always asked what they could do, in addition to what they could say. In my time, and I think it was becoming a permanent feature of US policy, the answers to "What should we do?" were increasingly military, and so we were involved in influencing US policy in full knowledge that they were either going to use, or were using, military force as part of the responses to policy challenges. In fact I think I said, after I had been there a while, that in my time in Washington, there was no time when the United States was not preparing to use force, using force or recovering from the use of force. This was an eye-opener because there is no other country in the world that can behave in this way. The UK seeks to be an important partner for all of that, so American military activity was very important to the UK because there was always a question about UK participation or support when it came to US responses to terrorist outrages. When the USS Cole was bombed in Aden, or the attacks took place against the US Embassies in Dar Es Salam and Nairobi, there wasn't any question of UK response but there was a question about the appropriateness and effectiveness of US responses. That was a matter of active interest to the UK Government, in Parliament and in debate, so we had to get very involved with US use of force which is quite a characteristic of their diplomacy. And this was under Clinton, before Iraq, before 9/11. With hindsight one can see the major Al Qaeda attacks on those US Embassies as precursors to 9/11 but of course we didn't know that at the time.

Also another major issue that was continuous was the UN-authorized effort against Iraq, which was a left-over from the first Iraq War, against Saddam's policies of developing weapons of mass destruction in which there was constant military involvement. And there was a lot of discussion about that.

AW: You short-toured and you came back to London in 1999?

SW: It was not an easy decision. I came back after two years in Washington, having completed half my normal posting. John Kerr had said to me right at the beginning that he thought that my job as number two was a job of great interest and great professional development but not one to do for too long. So I had that ringing in my ears as I considered what I was going to do. I felt quite strongly that in my second two years in Washington I would have made a much greater effort to get out of Washington and devote more attention to the management and development of the UK network in the US, in full knowledge that might prove quite difficult to do because of day-to-day pressures. You get tied down to DC stuff. In awareness that the Ambassador, Christopher Meyer, didn't necessarily share that objective, I thought that I had done a lot of the job in two years. I had learned it, executed it and, looking ahead from that, there was either more of the same or a shift of emphasis towards the wider US network that was not necessarily going to be feasible. For all those reasons and also the emergence of quite an attractive opportunity in London, which I applied for and then moved to, I thought I would go back after two years. It was a good period to have done this job which had included periods (and I didn't say this earlier, but should have) of being in charge of the Embassy when the Ambassador was away. Being in charge of the British Embassy in Washington, even for a period, was pretty high level activity and achievement. It wasn't easy dipping in and out of the top level but I think I executed that alright. So I thought it was not inappropriate to go back to London into a job which I really wanted to do.

Director, Wider Europe, FCO, 1999-2000

AW: You returned to be Director of Wider Europe at quite an exciting time for that region? "Wider Europe" is quite a funny description?

SW: Yes, it's one that the FCO invented for the lack of a better one! What it actually meant was being Director in charge of UK relations with all the countries of Europe, broadly defined, that were not in the EU. That meant Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia. It did not mean the Balkans, that is to say the former Yugoslavia, because that was still a special set of problems being dealt with separately. But it meant all the former Soviet Union, all of central Europe and a few other parts of Europe that were not in the EU such as Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and the candidates in the Mediterranean like Malta and Cyprus.

The job was also being in charge of bilateral relations with these countries and therefore of managing the UK network of posts and missions which was not something I'd done before, and being a proper geographical director which meant having a significant budget under my responsibility, a significant number of posts and senior people for all of whom I was the line management officer having to write their annual appraisals, and to be responsible for quite a diverse set of policies. The themes that emerged were one, Russia, and two, helping the countries that we were in charge of deal with and come to terms with the European Union either as candidates for membership, as was the case for Central Europe, Malta and Cyprus, or as countries that had, or wanted to have, quite intense relationships with the EU, such as Norway, Iceland and Switzerland and also countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Georgia.

AW: And Turkey?

SW: Yes, Turkey as well and Ukraine and the Baltic States. So the job had a diversity of issues and priorities with a big chunk of helping these countries in our own interests to develop healthy and productive relationships with the EU.

AW: So you did a lot of travelling?

SW: Yes I did a lot of travelling. Firstly because I was responsible for the Embassies and needed to show my presence and get to know the Heads of Mission and see them on their own turf and also because we had agendas to promote. A part of this job, and I only did it for a year and a bit but it felt longer than that because it was very intense, one of the things that I did in conjunction with my opposite number in the European Secretariat of the Cabinet Office, Andrew Cahn. We used to tour all the candidate members for the EU, the Central Europeans above all, and talk to them about their issues and how they were preparing for membership. We talked about the problem areas in their negotiations, how they should be resolved and representing to all of them what the British view of that was and also trying to place the UK in a position of benevolent influence. And this was appreciated by all of these countries who were going to become members of the EU. I think we did a pretty good job actually. And it was more effective for doing it in a pair, partly because you represent your arguments better that way but also because it was a demonstration of commitment at senior official level, and because we really did grapple with the issues and help the candidates get

themselves straight, advise them on how to approach things in Brussels, help promote solutions in line with our own interests which we could identify. I can say that when I left the job I left the UK's standing in the candidate countries quite high.

The Cyprus thing was rather a case apart because it had only one problem as far as membership, namely the division of the island, and there was a separate initiative led by David Hannay and the UN to try to negotiate a settlement of that. It was going well until right at the end when it flipped. The diplomatic effort was based on the belief and the assumption that it was the Turkish Cypriots who would be difficult and the Greek Cypriots who were supportive of the terms. When it came to it, it was the other way round and that actually was a real problem, I don't know whether the EU did the right thing in admitting Cyprus even though the division of the country was not resolved and we are still living with that.

It was my first introduction to Turkey. I'd always been interested in Turkey because, as you will remember, I wanted to go and work there, but this was the first time I actually went there. I can't say I got very involved because you fly into Ankara and fly out of Istanbul in the course of two days and you meet a few people. Nevertheless I went there and in those days Turkey's inflation was high, they had lots of zeroes on their prices and the economy was not yet being well managed, so the idea of Turkey as a serious candidate for development, let alone EU membership, was quite hard to make. But it was an important country and it mattered to UK interests in lots of ways, not just because of Cyprus but also because of Iraq and Iran and Russia.

And I went to Russia. That was also a first. I'd never been there before although I had worked on the Soviet Union. I was surprised at what I found in the sense that of the various places I visited in the Slav and Central and Eastern European world, I found the senior Russians, the kind of people the Embassy introduced us to, quite the most creative, interesting and stimulating people anywhere. This was a time when the development of Russia was quite positive. This was the end of Yeltsin and the beginning of Putin. It was still looking good in Russia and there were a lot of very fine and innovative policy makers who were trying to build a more democratic and free market Russia as well as a lot of commentators, observers and thinkers whom the Embassy in Moscow knew very well and I

was introduced to. I thought it was just great but the problems were horrendous and perhaps that's a permanent reality of dealing with the Russians.

I was there for the beginning of Putin and at the time it seemed to us to be for the good. Yeltsin was clearly past it when he went and had allowed bad things to happen. He had this much younger designated successor who seemed to talk about the rule of law and who wanted to get better order restored and run the government crisply. All of that seemed to be positive and I had a lot of discussion with my French and German opposite numbers about how to respond to the change in Russia for the best and how to build relationships. There was a lot of discussion in Whitehall about that as well. I had a very good Russia Department led by Anne Pringle who later became British Ambassador in Russia and they were extremely active and influential on their own in Whitehall. Again, like in Washington, my job was to add value as well as to know the Embassy and to know the Ambassador who was Roderick Lyne, nobody better.

AW: And at that time your Foreign Secretary was Robin Cook? Did you travel much with him?

SW: Yes a bit. I didn't have long visits with him but I took him around the region occasionally. I remember taking him on a quick visit to Estonia.

AW: And how was he as Foreign Secretary?

SW: Robin Cook had had a very difficult start in the Foreign Office back in 1997 when the Labour Government came in. He had been extremely difficult for the Office to deal with and he had not formed a very good opinion of the Office at that time. It was when I was away in Washington. It was all very difficult and I think that John Kerr, as the PUS, had a very difficult time at the outset.

By the time I got to London, Robin Cook had had, as they say, "a very good war" because he had gone through the Kosovo War which had been a significant military effort. But at the diplomatic level it was a process of almost continuous coordination both with the EU Foreign Ministers and with NATO, and Robin Cook had emerged from that process with really quite a good reputation, a lot of influence for the UK and a good deal of effectiveness which all

reflected his own personal talents. He was on top of the subject and the relationships and it was a very positive experience for him. Consequently, I found Robin Cook a model Foreign Secretary because by that time he had obviously come to terms with the organisation and it had with him and there was much less evidence of the sharp sensitivity and mutual disrespect that had occurred at the beginning. For example, apart from travelling, one of the main face-to-face encounters with the Foreign Secretary was in his office meetings. He would often convene a meeting to discuss a particular subject or problem. These meetings were scheduled for half an hour and they didn't last longer. He conducted them brilliantly, in the sense that he set out at the beginning of the meeting what his own views were, he set out one, two or three questions that he wanted advice on and he then asked everyone at the table for their advice and he then reached a conclusion about what the FCO policy line would be and he did all that in half an hour. It was all extremely clear and very conclusive. You couldn't say that about a lot of Ministers! It's how the job should be done. So there we had a Foreign Secretary who was influential across Europe, because of the Kosovo war and his role in it and who was also influential in Whitehall, as any Foreign Secretary should be, and confident in his relationship with the Prime Minister and who was running the office really pretty well. That's how it seemed to me. There were scars; John Kerr bore scars that I don't think ever really healed. There were perhaps other people who didn't get on with Robin Cook as well as I did but I found him good to deal with, didn't have any trouble with him and felt confident and relaxed in his presence and so could say what needed to be said.

Director General, Defence and Intelligence, FCO, 2000-2002

AW: From this intense year and a bit of being Wider Europe Director, you were promoted into becoming the Director General for Defence and Intelligence?

SW: This reflected John Kerr's talents in the area of administration. I think John Kerr's view was that provided you get the right people into the jobs that mattered, everything else would follow OK. So he paid great attention to getting the people appointed to the places where he thought they should be appointed to. As it happened in this particular case, my appointment as Director General (DG) was the outcome of a rather more complicated process which had to do with the replacement of the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee in the Cabinet Office for which I was a candidate. I think that the first plan was that I should go

to the JIC as Chairman and that Peter Ricketts would become the Director General for Defence and Intelligence in the FCO. The outcome was the reverse of that and I think it was for the best, certainly the best in my case, and Peter Ricketts didn't suffer by it. But it was all a slight scramble at the time to ensure it came out alright for the FCO. I became DG in the FCO and, as I say, it was good for me and never bad for Peter Ricketts and we had a good relationship throughout it.

It was a fascinating role. I hadn't really appreciated in advance the sense of difference in standing both inside the FCO and in Whitehall of the transition from Director to Director General but it was very palpable that I was a really senior person in Whitehall with an ability to be listened to across a wide range of issues which I believe I grew into. In addition to that you were one of a group of half a dozen who were the top people in the FCO. There was the seat on the FCO Board under the PUS's Chairmanship being involved in all the senior ambassadorial appointments, dealing with a much higher level across Whitehall and being able to pick and choose to some extent the issues that you grappled with in the FCO. I found it very rewarding. Because my responsibilities were for defence and intelligence that straddled the whole of the FCO agenda, so I had to pick the issues and to convene people to move them forward as necessary. There was a much closer relationship with Ministers and with the PUS.

The external role was fascinating. Essentially, on the intelligence side, the role was to help the Foreign Secretary exercise the responsibilities that he had as the Minister in charge of at least two of the intelligence agencies. It was all set down by statute so there was a legal responsibility there and the Foreign Secretary needed senior level advice in order to execute these responsibilities. That was the basis of the job.

The content of the job was obviously much more detailed than that and it meant being given an insight and access to agencies of the UK Government that are not normally open to outsiders other than Ministers and an involvement in their affairs which was unique at a high level of sensitivity, obviously. I think that I developed good relationships as needed to do that but at bottom it was a matter of advising the Foreign Secretary on how to respond to things that were put to him in his position as Minister responsible for two of the intelligence agencies.

The other side of the job, which was the defence side, was really based upon engagement with the uniformed parts of the British defence establishment. There was a seat for an FCO representative on the Committee of the Chiefs of Defence Staff, which was presided over by the Chief of the Defence Staff and consisted of the three single service Chiefs and their advisers in the Ministry of Defence which took place weekly. I occupied the FCO seat to represent the FCO's contributions to their deliberations. That was a thoroughly stimulating and rewarding process because it was different from anything I'd done before and the thought processes and ways of thinking of the military that they grew up with in their own careers were on display at this table at the top level. It was different from the ways in which the FCO thought. Senior military are much more engaged in 'the plan' and much less disposed to be blown off course by short-term political issues, for example parliamentary issues and so on. Their plan is entirely focussed on the outcome, 'the effect' as they term it and if they were being asked to do something where there wasn't a clear outcome and the effect was not clear to them, then they tended to balk. They didn't want a bad plan. And this was how everything was done in their thought processes. It made me realise how short term and how responsive to short term problems the FCO and diplomats were. Through diplomacy you deal with the unexpected and respond to it, the military are also dealing with the unexpected but they are really committed to keeping the plan in place and adapting what needs to be adapted in short term changes but with the main eye on pursuing the final objective if it had been clearly stated. And if it hadn't been clearly stated, they didn't want to do it. That was really educational for me and there was no one else in the FCO with that kind of insight and so I brought back to the FCO what I had heard and learned about outcomes and so on. The job was much more focussed on the uniformed parts of the Ministry of Defence because there were lots of other teams in the FCO who were routinely engaged with the defence policy areas which was a civilian staffed operation, so that was much more familiar ground for the FCO. We knew those people. I was fully engaged with them but my unique contribution was dealing with the Chiefs and their military staffs.

AW: And then the horror happens?

SW: Yes, the 11th September. I remember clearly on that morning I thought "I've got a fairly clear day today I'd better sit at my desk and clear some of my papers". I was busily getting on with that when, you, in fact, called me on the telephone to say "I think you need to turn your television on" and I saw the second impact on the towers that day for myself. It

was immediately clear that things would not be the same again and that this would dominate for the foreseeable future.

There was, of course, immediate coordination in Whitehall, very fast, and the FCO had to assemble information and make sure the key people knew what had happened and produce an initial Government response which was quickly done. The Prime Minister was, I thought, masterly, in his own immediate response to the events of 9/11 which happened when he was just preparing to address the TUC Conference. He improvised brilliantly and appropriately in the way that he could, and very much set a tone.

The steps after that, for the first day or two, were a blur of activity for me, now in retrospect. I do remember participating in meetings of senior Ministers and all of the senior Ministers were around the table. I was standing at the back, along with many other officials as advisers, but listening to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary for Defence, the Home Secretary and other senior Ministers talking about this in their own terms as it were. The thing I remember most clearly about the meeting that took place on the evening of 12 September was a clear conclusion by the Prime Minister that the Home Office needed to develop very quickly their understanding and their links into the British Muslim communities because it was already clear that the responses that were coming out from some of the younger members of the Muslim community was not what one would want to hear and that there was a problem there which needed to be addressed very quickly. I think we are still living with that because I'm not actually sure that the Home Office responded as quickly as they needed to.

There were some very high level exchanges as you could imagine between the UK and the US, partly expressions of solidarity but also early coordination of responses which I was not directly engaged in. There was a great deal of consultation at the senior military level and between the intelligence agencies. There were very few face-to-face encounters because, if you remember, American airspace was closed for some days. In fact I think that David Manning, the Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Adviser and who was probably the most important single official in Whitehall on this at that time, was stuck in Washington because he flew over lower Manhattan on a flight from Washington to New York to get a flight home and he flew over New York Harbour with a clear view of lower Manhattan from his aircraft window and saw the Twin Towers on fire. He landed at Kennedy and his onward flight was

just cancelled. If my memory serves he engaged with the US authorities with Whitehall at a distance from an improvised desk for him in our Government offices in New York where, of course, there was a major consular emergency response in a Consulate General which had been developed over the years to give higher priority to almost everything else. They did superbly well with very good leadership from the Consul General.

My own activity quickly settled into a pattern which lasted for at least the subsequent three months. Firstly in Whitehall David Manning pulled together a small group of senior officials to meet regularly under his chairmanship to develop the UK response and I was involved in those meetings which led on to follow on action with the Cabinet Office, the MOD and the FCO and so on. So that was my framework looking outwards from the FCO. Everything was coordinated. Within the FCO I was given charge of the FCO coordination. The FCO Emergency Units were opened and quickly went on a 24-hour working basis. People were drafted in to work in the Emergency Unit and that took priority over their day jobs, although their day jobs did continue. We very quickly got into the practice and systems of 24-hour working with rotating shifts of staff. This required very good information systems. There was a morning meeting in the Emergency room of everybody involved in the FCO, I think at 8am, and I chaired that. That had to be prepared, the agenda at least thought through. There wasn't time to write things down but we had to think through what that meeting needed to do on any given day and there had to be decisions for action out of it. That also involved coordinating with the worldwide network, partly by the traditional method of telegrams but partly also by live contact. I have to say that the morale and the effectiveness of the FCO as a whole and certainly of the people in the Emergency response, both in the unit and around the world, was first class. This made everything a great deal easier because you had confidence that firstly they, like you, were concentrated on this set of issues, it was everybody's top priority, and secondly that if you took a decision in a proper matter, it would be acted on sensibly and intelligently. And when it came to matter of staffing, calling for volunteers, the whole Service responded with enthusiasm. I think this wasn't just commitment to the core values of the FCO but also a recognition by everybody involved that this was truly historic and if they were being asked to volunteer for some very uncomfortable duty or assignment, they would have to think for themselves and that this was something that was going to be really worthwhile.

Very quickly it came to a decision to reopen the British Embassy in Kabul, which had been closed for a number of years. How was it going to be staffed? Worldwide volunteers were asked for to do short periods of duty in an Embassy that hadn't functioned for a number of years and which had no services of its own, and people flocked to that.

I think that a large part of the focus of the FCO was on what was happening in Afghanistan, because if you remember Al Qaeda had been given a home there because the Taliban were in charge. The UK/US allies very quickly took military action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, initially by bombing and missile attack while the Northern Alliance, who was the other faction in Afghanistan, progressed by pushing back the Taliban regime. They were doing this already but the UK and US gave them a great deal more support after 9/11 than they had been doing before. Bear in mind, of course, that the day before the 9/11 attacks the leader of the Northern Alliance, Sheikh Masood, had been assassinated by Al Qaeda in a suicide bomb from somebody who was posing as a cameraman. We didn't know what to make of that at the time but it very quickly became clear what it was about. So the Northern Alliance was energised through the loss of their leader and they were responding to an emergency and sweeping southward to expel the Taliban which they initially were successful at. So there was a new regime coming into place in Afghanistan which was much more directly aligned with the interests of the US and the UK and which needed to be supported. That was why we needed to reopen our Embassy quickly and to start improvising our services in the country quickly. It certainly wasn't a neatly functioning Embassy at that time but people living out of suitcases and having to forage, beg, steal and borrow essentials like fuel and food.

Another part of the work was the international role in support of what we were trying to do in Afghanistan. A UN sponsored political process was quite quickly put in place which resulted in early December in an international agreement called the Bonn Agreement, because it was done in Bonn, in which all the EU and all the allied nations were participants along with the new regime of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan which by then was led by President Karzai. So there was an international initiative and circus to be managed and led by the UN but we had to play our part in it.

The Americans were setting up their own military force in Afghanistan called Operation Enduring Freedom whose goal was to capture Osama Bin Laden and dismantle Al Qaeda.

They were not asking for allied support for that, but what they were not doing in Operation Enduring Freedom was providing Western military support to bring about the conditions for democratic and stable government in Afghanistan. There was a new regime which had nothing other than a certain amount of military capability. There was a bit of a vacuum caused by the pushing back of the Taliban but the Taliban hadn't disappeared off the face of the earth and were capable of mounting resistance. There was a real security problem in the capital as well as in outlying parts of the country. This led to the NATO decision to create the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The UK volunteered to be the first core nation and to take command of ISAF but it was clear that our NATO allies wanted to participate in making up this international force which, again, would have to operate in very improvised conditions, so the force would have to be pretty much self-sufficient. In November and early December, we in the UK, Whitehall, the FCO were very focussed on designing, putting together and enabling that force to come into existence. Because it had to be self-sufficient, the force had to be small, the Defence Chiefs were insistent that its role should be limited to Kabul because they couldn't see how to conduct a safe operation in other parts of Afghanistan at that stage. So we had to have a small self-sufficient force to function in and around Kabul to provide conditions for security to enable the new government to embark on its business and to enable the initial steps, laid down in the Bonn Agreement, for elections and to institute a democratic process in Afghanistan.

The MOD and the Chiefs said they would accept the role of being the initial core component and so it fell to the UK to hold the ring and put together all the other participants in the force. I was much involved in this because it was a diplomatic question as well as a military one. Essentially most of our allies were eager to participate and were able and willing to offer formations of troops but could not be self-sufficient at that distance. They were saying "We can send you a battalion of infantry but we can't provide our own logistics, we must depend on you for logistics". And also for security and the support services you need, like medical services, catering and so on. The UK found itself in the position of saying "Thanks very much but no thanks because we can't support this". What we needed was limited forces but who were capable of being self-sufficient, so we were looking around the Alliance for people who could provide all the services. Bit by bit it was put together but there were moments of comedy. One of the key components in the first ISAF was the Bulgarian offer of a mobile bath and laundry unit. They were prepared to provide bathing and laundry for forces and get it there from Bulgaria and that was exactly one of the things we needed so the Bulgarian Bath

Unit was a key element of putting together this force. There were at least two conferences in London, run by the MOD, in which decisions were taken as to what components would come from where. I remember having quite a difficult conversation with the Canadians because they wanted to participate but couldn't quite bring themselves to do it the way the MOD wanted it to happen, so there was a lot of diplomacy in all that.

Another element in the initial responses to 9/11, which was also for the future, was trying to organise the Western response in a way that drew in Russia into the effort. The Americans needed that because they needed an airbase in Kyrgyzstan, which they secured, and they needed tacit Russian acceptance of that. But also the Russians were the closest major power in the North and they were as much threatened by Al Qaeda as everybody else because they had a lot of populations if not in Russia then at least in the former Soviet republics of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and so they had real security interests. From the beginning we were trying to coordinate, consult, inform and keep them on side. That became a continuing theme after the initial phase of the emergency.

So what did that add up to? That certainly added up to three to four months of continuous work in which I really didn't do anything else. I can't really remember much of the detail because it all moved so fast and you had to keep so many balls moving in the air. But I do remember we got the FCO responding well, partly through the energy and commitment of all the people involved but also because I think we got the organisation right. Nobody ever quite said it to me "I think you've done a good job Stephen", but I think it was, and I think John Kerr as PUS thought I knew what I was doing and he would come quite frequently to the 8am meetings but wanted me to chair them and he sat there and listened and contributed. I think Ministers were content, I didn't have much time to stop and ask them because the Ministerial guidelines were being set by the Cabinet and the Cabinet Office staffed that. It wasn't controversial in Whitehall or inside the Government. I think I did a pretty good job leading the team but it was a big team. I really only began to come up for air and scaling down my commitment to the Emergency Unit at about the end of end of January 2002 and start to refocus on other strands of work.

AW: Later on you had a little more, what shall we say, light relief? Deputising for John Kerr and going to the Palace?

SW: Yes that all came later, but since you ask, yes that was one of the least expected and most enjoyable elements in my role. Part of the PUS's responsibilities was to attend Her Majesty in her receiving of incoming new Ambassadors to the UK, so that they could present their letters of credentials to her as the Sovereign. That was clearly diplomatic business and was staffed by the FCO Protocol Department on a routine basis. As a consequence of that the FCO attended Her Majesty and it was the PUS's job to do that. But the PUS couldn't always do it himself and he had authority to deputise a small number of alternates when he was prevented, and one of them was me.

John Kerr called me down one day and I thought "Oh what have I done?" He said he wanted to talk to me about something and he sat me down and he described this responsibility. He did so very humorously. He got up, went to his cupboard and came back with a diplomatic uniform hat with its ostrich feather plumes, put it on his head and then proceeded to explain what was involved. This included getting dressed up in full diplomatic uniform with a sword, carrying the hat with its plumes and wearing white gloves, getting all that into a car and going to the Palace. So it had its moments of Ruritanian comedy but he was effectively selling me the job.

Obviously I was terrified because it's not often you get the opportunity to attend upon Her Majesty yourself. The drill was that about five minutes before the time was set for Her Majesty to receive the incoming ambassador I was admitted to her presence, ostensibly to brief her. She had had a written brief, but I was there to supplement that in any way needed. The Queen, being The Queen, didn't need a lot of briefing because she'd done the homework and knew an awful lot already because she'd done far more of these than I ever had, or would. But she did have questions, for example, topical questions about the incoming country's affairs, issues with the UK, international affairs, and often wanted to talk about the brief. It was actually a conversation but initiated by a question. Like everyone else who has spent time with The Queen, I was amazed by her agility of mind, her knowledge, her huge experience and her humanity in ways in which she deals with people and deals with issues. Eventually, after a few rounds of this process I did begin to feel a bit less terrified but I never went below completely awestruck by the occasion and the significance of it. So there was five minutes beforehand with The Queen, then the Ambassador was admitted and my role was simply to stand there and look elegant and distinguished, not to say anything but to physically receive the letters that the ambassador presented to The Queen and The Queen

passed them to me, and I made sure they were delivered to the FCO Protocol Department. Then the ambassador was invited to bring his wife and a few members of his senior staff in so the room filled up. Then after the Ambassador had withdrawn the drill was that I stayed behind ostensibly for any follow up matters that The Queen might have on the ceremony. She actually used it as an occasion to talk about all kind of things in the international world and especially about things of concern to her, about state visits and what was going on with other heads of state and, again, she was completely agile and stimulating. I would say that cumulatively those conversations before and after the credential ceremonies were quite the most stimulating thing I did in the FCO. It was a complete honour and a unique experience that most people don't have. I thought it was just the best thing. So that was, not exactly light relief, but it was different!

SW: Other things intervened in the role after 9/11, some of them consequences of 9/11. For example the UK and Russia set up a dialogue on international terrorism, in other words about Afghanistan and Al Qaeda and about continuing efforts to bring it under control and protect ourselves against threats. We felt the need for a dialogue with Russia, as well as everybody else, and I led that dialogue. I found myself visiting Moscow two or three times in my remaining period in that job for encounters with a man called Trubnikov who was one of the Deputy Foreign Ministers at that time and who was leading this area of work in the Russian administration. I was told that he hadn't always been a diplomat and had, in fact, been Head of the SVR which was the new KGB. So he was basically a spook of the Russian sort and not many people got to meet him either! He was immensely genial, I gradually realised that he was probably an alcoholic. He drank a lot of vodka and got me to drink a lot of vodka at banquets. We had some talks. It was a good thing to try. There wasn't any real negotiation of anything concrete between us but it was better to have it than not to have it. In the process I visited Moscow so I was dealing with our Embassy in Moscow a lot and staying in our Embassy. I did other things on the side of these talks which all helped in my interest and appreciation for the place, but the centre of it was dealing with this arch Russian spook who did once take me to visit the SVR itself. The SVR gave me a presentation bit of pottery with its logo on it which I duly had investigated when I got it back to London, but it was alright!

Separately, and not a consequence of 9/11, except in the broadest sense, Libya. Libya had been under sanctions ever since the terrorist attack on the PanAm flight over Lockerbie in

Scotland many years previously. The investigation of that bombing had laid the finger against Libya. The Libyans had always refused to extradite the individuals who had been identified as likely perpetrators of this and so for many years had been under sanction. Gadhafi was changing and wanted Libya to reengage with the West and mend fences for his own reasons. We got to the point where the Libyans had made it clear that they wanted to do what was necessary to get rid of the sanctions and a dialogue started up between the UK and the US on the one side and the designated Libyan representatives on the other.

It was not concluded in my time although it was concluded later on under my successor. But I was instrumental in setting this up and representing the UK component of it because it was deliberately being done at senior official level. My American opposite number was a man called Bill Burns at that time Assistant Secretary for the Middle East who went on to be Under Secretary for Political Affairs, which is the top job in the State Department. He was obviously an American diplomat of great skill and creativity. This endeavour which went through two or three rounds in my time was immensely rewarding for working with Bill Burns and his officials as well, of course, with their Embassy in London. Bill Burns was doing what I mentioned earlier (about senior US officials) himself taking charge of the detail and getting involved in the detail even though he had the whole of the Middle East to be concerned about, and so setting up quite a challenging level of engagement which I needed to match. The Libyan team was a real bunch of hoods consisting of Brother Musa Kusa, Head of the Libyan Intelligence Service, Brother Abeidi who was known to be a confidant of Gadhafi and was at that time Libyan Ambassador in Rome and the Libyan Ambassador in London. He was definitely the less important part of this troika, the leader of it was clearly Brother Musa who was a very experienced intelligence officer (and we all knew that) and who was trying to fill the mandate his boss had given him, namely to come to terms.

It was clearly a delicate and difficult diplomatic negotiation above all for the Americans because most of the public pressure against the Libyans was focussed in the United States rather than the UK. There were individuals in the UK representing Lockerbie and representing people who had suffered from the results of the debris from the crash, there were UK interests and UK citizens representing those interests and they had to be engaged, consulted with, reassured and brought along. But the much bigger issue was for the American Government with the American lobby groups. I thought it was astonishing that Bill Burns was able to do anything positive in this role other than demand unconditional

surrender from the Libyans re the surrender of the individuals who would eventually face charges. I think he was taking his courage in his hands and he was really impressive because this thing was really sensitive in the United States and he was taking risks in order to move the thing forward. He clearly had the authority to do so but he was also the right man to push this negotiation.

The issues were about the terms and conditions under which the UN sanctions would be lifted, and had to do with the surrender of the named individuals, of who the main one was Megrahi, and the conditions under which he would be tried. There as we all know a truly inventive compromise was eventually worked out. I was involved in sketching out the beginnings of it. We and the Americans were insistent that the crime had taken place in the UK and must therefore be tried by a UK court. The Americans were on board for that. The Libyans were not prepared to let their man Megrahi be surrendered physically to the UK and so we were seemingly at a stalemate. The solution that was arrived at was that the Libyans were prepared for him to be delivered into international control and being held on remand in another country, which ended up being The Netherlands, in a special remand centre set up for the purposes of this and was managed by the UK Prison Service and was deemed to be a Scottish Remand Centre. When the time came the trial was held and it was a Scottish trial, under Scottish law, conducted in a court in the Hague. I don't know of any case where that has been done before or since but it was a response that worked for all parties and eventually Megrahi was surrendered, held in remand in acceptable circumstances and we did the rest of the business with the UN and eased sanctions. I don't think we fully abolished sanctions because there were also sanctions relating to Libyan weapons of mass destruction, which were the subject of later discussions after the surrender of Megrahi and went beyond my time in the job. I assume that Bill Burns continued to run the negotiation for the United States, a major commitment of his time to a specific issue, but that's the way they did things and it wouldn't have succeeded without him. Fascinating. All of this done with FCO coordination which I had to run.

The final part of my role, which was important and special, was being the FCO representative on the Joint Intelligence Committee. The permanent members of the JIC are the intelligence agencies at senior level, the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Defence and the FCO. Other departments came in as needed. The FCO seat was occupied by the person in my role. I, as you know, had worked on the Assessments Staff preparing paperwork for the JIC so I knew a

certain about the intellectual process that the JIC was engaged in, namely producing and agreeing at senior level a common shared assessment between all the parties in Whitehall, on any given issue, for submission to Ministers so they would receive a single coherent agreed picture. It had its defects as well as its strengths but I thought it was a really valuable instrument of government. Without it there would have been disagreement and tension between the Armed Forces and the civilians right up to the Cabinet level and cause real trouble. I thought it was a really valuable bit of government and the process of arriving at those agreements was pretty rigorous, of high intellectual order, challenging to say something positive and clear without too many caveats, and I thoroughly enjoyed the process. I rather beefed up the internal FCO process in support of all of that. If the JIC was taking a paper on, shall we say the Middle East, I was not expert on that but we had people who were and who had contributed to the preparation of the paper. I needed to know their thoughts and views and the points on which they were happy and the points they weren't. I insisted on doing that pretty thoroughly. Such was the standing of the JIC it didn't quite have the authority I thought it ought to have around Whitehall. A lot of mid ranking officials tended to shrug it off a bit and do it a bit lightly and I wanted them to take it as seriously as I thought I needed to take it, so I was conducting a culture-changing exercise in the FCO as well as briefing myself. I think we did it as well as we could.

A lot of the agenda was about Iraq because Iraq had always been, for the whole of the nineties, a continuing preoccupation. We were aware of the direction of American thinking and had to brief our own Ministers on our assessments. They were always uncertain and always hedged about with references to the inadequacy of our information, but we did our best and I think that's really all one can say about that in which I was engaged up to 2002.

AW: This is the 19th November and Stephen Wright is resuming his recollections with Abbey Wright.

HM Ambassador to Spain, 2003-2007

AW: The time has come to move on to your appointment at HM Ambassador to Spain which you took up in May 2003. I think you started the preparations for this appointment in October of the previous year?

SW: Yes I did. The appointment was made in the summer of 2002. There had been some discussion because there were some other options for my next appointment and there were several appointments made at the same time, but the result was that I was appointed to Spain which pleased me a lot. I had always been interested in Spain and had exposure to the Spanish especially since my experience in Brussels of being part of the negotiation for their accession to the EU. I had always followed Spanish affairs and had some knowledge of the language.

I resolved that I wanted to do something that was already becoming a little bit out of fashion, namely to prepare thoroughly for the role. I arranged to end my role as Director General in October 2002 and initially embarked upon language training in the FCO. I had a very good teacher and we set about it systematically. For me it felt more like archaeology than new learning. The Spanish was buried in my brain and the work felt like digging it out, dusting it off and polishing it up again.

AW: And your teacher didn't like your accent much to begin with?

SW: Yes, I think she thought that I was a bit Latin American about it! But she put that right fairly quickly. The good thing about the language training as it was in those days, in other words in the hands of professional FCO language tutors, was that I wasn't just learning the language but I was also preparing for the role because the language material that I was working on was all about the political and economic affairs of Spain. We systematically worked through all the current government in Spain and studied their backgrounds and we took up issues that were current in Spanish affairs and so in many ways it was a professional preparation as well as a language preparation.

I did that continuously, that is every day, from mid October until the Christmas break and I continued part time for another month or so after the resumption of work in January. But I spent increasing amounts of time in the New Year of 2003 in making calls on Government Departments, business representatives, everyone I could think of really who had interests in London in Spain and Spanish affairs in order firstly to introduce myself and secondly to find out how they thought the Embassy and the Ambassador in Madrid could be of service to their aspects of British interests in Spain. That continued up until quite close to our departure time which was May 2003.

AW: You also saw some of the previous British Ambassadors to Spain?

SW: Yes I made a point of meeting all the surviving recent British Ambassadors to ask their advice and to seek their guidance on what the job was like. We met Robin and Sally Fearn and we met Nicky and Mary Gordon-Lennox. I didn't realise it at the time but Nicky Gordon-Lennox was extremely ill when he met us but he nevertheless made the effort to come up to London and have lunch with us which I valued enormously. I also saw David Brighty who was immediately before Peter Torry my immediate predecessor, the person I was replacing.

AW: So you arrived in May 2003 to an Aznar-governed Spain, close allies of the then Blair government?

SW: The relationship was very close. At that time in 2003 and from the autumn of 2002, the UK had been building up to the invasion of Iraq and the Spanish Government under Aznar had been actively supportive of this. There had been the famous meeting in the Azores of the three leaders before I got to Spain. It was clear from my briefings in London and also from exposure to Spanish Ministers, and in particular the Prime Minister's office that they valued the very close identity of views with the British Government about that and about Transatlantic affairs and European affairs more generally. So it is true to say that there was a very close relationship between the British and Spanish Governments in place at the time that I arrived. We were in a phase in European affairs where there was quite a fierce competition for dominance between the UK and Spanish Governments with some support from others such as the Polish Government and some others, there were about eight of them who were supportive of the UK/US line on Iraq, and the others led by France and Germany, who were actively against it. There was a real competition in the European Union for primacy and for the direction of EU policy at that time which was unhealthy for Europe but really quite worrying for those who cared about the need to have a strong European Union policy based on realism in time for the coming operation in Iraq. The divided Europe was not good but from my particular situation the relationship was strong and my own role was valued because of the close views held between the two governments.

AW: This close cooperation never managed to stop storms over Gibraltar?

SW: Gibraltar is a permanent difficulty in UK-Spain relations and it has its ups and its downs. At that time it was really quite difficult. We had recently had the experience of the British nuclear submarine *Tireless* which had been repaired in Gibraltar and had caused great offence to the Spanish and had been difficult for my predecessor to manage. The *Tireless* had gone by the time I got to Spain but, nevertheless, the Gibraltar relationship was very difficult. However, both the UK Government and the Spanish Government recognised that the problem had to be managed between us within the context of the overall bilateral relationship which was very strong. It was a process of managing a difficult problem in which the two parties, the UK and Spanish Governments, and for that matter the Gibraltar Government, had differing viewpoints but there was a common interest on the part of the Spanish and the British to keep those differences under control and to try to make progress where it was possible to do so. Consequently my relationship with the State Secretary in the Spanish Foreign Ministry who was responsible for Gibraltar was actually a very close and warm relationship and we were very frank with each other about the realities. It helped that the individual was Ramon de Miguel who I had known well and worked closely with during my time in Brussels when he had been Chef de Cabinet to the Spanish Commissioner. We had collaborated on humanitarian aid to the former Yugoslavia. I knew Ramon well and he was genuinely glad to welcome me to Madrid. He was the only Spanish official who came to the *vin d'honneur* which we held in the Residence after my presentation of Credentials. Nevertheless, we had a difficult problem.

To jump forward a bit, it reached a critical point in the autumn of 2003 when there was a cruise ship in the Mediterranean which had developed a public health problem. It put into Gibraltar in order to deal with the problem which I think was a mass outbreak of the norovirus or something like it on board the ship. It gave rise to a very acute, difficult weekend between the UK, the Gibraltarian and the Spanish authorities, and the outcome was extremely severe and irrational in that the Spanish Foreign Minister, not Ramon de Miguel but his boss Ana Palacios, ordered that the frontier between Gibraltar and Spain should be closed on the Monday morning after this weekend of dealing with the ship. This was the first time that the frontier had been closed since Spain had joined the European Union in 1986 and indeed had committed to open the border in 1984. So it was a pretty severe incident. I think that the effect of it was very quickly apparent, namely that the people who suffered from the closure of the frontier were the Spanish workers who wanted to go into Gibraltar on the

Monday morning to do their normal jobs. The frontier was reopened very quickly but just for a day or two we had a severe problem and I was exposed, for the first time really, to Spanish official behaviour and attitudes at their most extreme and frankly their most irrational.

AW: And then the following year there was the huge shock of the March bombings in Madrid which seemed to change everything?

SW: Yes, 11 March 2004. To put that event into context, there was a general election campaign taking place in Spain at that time. The elections were due on Sunday 14 March 2004 and from memory the attacks took place on Thursday 11 March. That was after at least three weeks of election campaigning between the two main parties, the Socialist centre left party, PSOE and the Partido Popular, centre right party, PP. The PP was the governing party under Aznar and, before the campaign, was pretty confident that it would win the election. Aznar himself had announced earlier that he would not run again for the Prime Ministership and he had nominated Mariano Rajoy as his successor. He, at that point, was a Minister but was not terribly well known to the public. It was clear to me that, as the campaign went on, the Socialists were advancing and the Partido Popular were struggling a bit. The opinion polls still suggested that the PP would come out the largest party but without an overall majority, but would still be able to form a government. But there was no doubt that things were shifting.

The attacks happened on Thursday 11 March. For us in the Embassy this was a day of extreme activity and our first priority was to establish whether any British citizens had suffered in the attacks. It was fairly quickly apparent that there were no casualties of British citizens, although we continued to check throughout the day in case any emerged. I think that finally there were two British citizens slightly affected but both of them were Spanish residents and neither of them was seriously injured. For me as Ambassador I was able, fairly soon by the afternoon of that Thursday, to turn my attention more to the political effects and away from the consular implications of the attacks. The consular team were busy getting on with that work and there was every indication that no British citizen had been seriously affected.

I talked to the Foreign Secretary that afternoon on the telephone to give my first impressions. My first impression of the attack was that it was quite possible that the attacks were the work of the Basque extremists ETA. My reasons were that the ETA campaign was continuing at a moderately low level, that there had been an ETA attempt to bomb a train into Madrid the previous Christmas and that a van had been intercepted by the police and driven by Basques some weeks before the attack. The van had been carrying explosives and had been heading for Madrid. So there were reasons to think that these attacks might possibly be the work of ETA.

It quite soon became apparent, and by quite soon I mean later on the Thursday, that there were indications that it might alternatively be the work of other terrorists and possibly Islamic terrorists. By late on Thursday there was uncertainty and the police were producing the first indications of an Islamic link. The Spanish Government, however, chose to believe that the attacks were definitely the work of ETA and went on a loud public campaign condemning ETA and attributing the responsibility to them, including demanding that the UN Security Council in New York should adopt a resolution that night not only deploring the attacks, which it was more than happy to do, but also attributing the blame to ETA. A lot of members of the Security Council thought that this was unwise and questioned it, and some opposed it. But I think that the UK Government's view was that this wasn't an argument they wished to have with the Spanish at that time and they supported the resolution. But of course by the Saturday, if not the Friday, it was already clear that the attacks were not the work of ETA but had been the work of Islamic extremists. So the Spanish Government was looking extremely foolish, leaping to conclusions and trying to make political propaganda out of it. I think it really backfired on them at the polls. But the main effect on the opinion polls and has been shown by subsequent study was that the attacks brought out more voters. They caused more people to vote than would normally have been the case. It increased the turnout and especially the turnout amongst the segments of voters who were less likely to vote. Those were women and young voters, and those two segments were disproportionately more likely to vote for the Socialists.

The immediate reaction in the United States and UK and in Western Europe that somehow the Islamic attacks had caused the Partido Popular to lose the election was clearly too simple and clearly too quick. It was a lot more complex than that. There was no doubt that the Socialists had been winning the campaign, and there was no doubt in my mind that they

actually won the election with the assistance of a larger turnout than they might otherwise have expected. I think the fact that there was a larger turnout after the bombs was a natural and healthy reaction of the electorate to what was clearly a major challenge to the stability and wellbeing of Spain. In the days that followed there was a public march against terrorism which took place in Madrid and was attended by a whole range of international leaders including the UK Deputy Prime Minister. There was a massive turnout of over a million people in Madrid in awful conditions, it was pouring with rain, and a very serious public demonstration of popular rejection of terrorism, done in a very Spanish style. That is to say, people turning out in the street to make their views known. In addition to more than a million people who turned out in Madrid there were large numbers in other Spanish cities on the same evening. I calculated that possibly 20-25% of the entire electorate had turned out on the streets in Spain in various places, which was a very impressive expression of public rejection and solidarity in the face of the attacks.

The consequence of all that, as I wrote in my annual review at the end of 2004, was that basically everything that happened of importance in 2004 took place in the space of four days, between Thursday 11th and Sunday 14th March. And it dominated most of Spanish life for the rest of the year. The change of government for me meant that, having invested my first ten months or so in establishing relationships with the PP Government, I had to start all over again with the new Government.

AW: But you had been developing links with the PSOE?

SW: Yes of course and I knew their Foreign Affairs team. But I didn't know many others and we hadn't had to deal with them on the basis that they were likely to be the next government, because frankly nobody believed that and I don't know that even they expected to be the next government. Whereas I had accompanied Mariano Rajoy as the Leader of the PP and potentially the next Prime Minister on a round of calls in London, I hadn't done the same for the socialist leader Zapatero, who in fact became the Prime Minister.

AW: Very quickly after the change in Government there was the State Funeral in Madrid with PM Tony Blair with a large team and the Prince of Wales descending upon us?

SW: Yes, the Spanish Government decided there should be a State event which was a religious ceremony in the Cathedral to be attended by the King and Queen of Spain, by other Heads of State from friendly countries as well as the families of the victims, to commemorate the dead. It was called the State Funeral but of course it wasn't exactly a funeral as we understand it, the dead were not part of the ceremony, but more what we would probably call a commemoration or a memorial service. It was attended, and this was still in the month of March, for the UK by the Prime Minister and Mrs Blair (it fortunately worked with his timetable because he was en route to Libya for an official visit to Colonel Gadhafi with whom relationships were improving at that time for quite other reasons) and also by HRH The Prince of Wales, representing HM The Queen.

For the Embassy of course this was a major affair. We had to be on our best behaviour to deliver support to all these VIPs. The Prince of Wales came for the day and did not stay overnight but the Prime Minister and Mrs Blair did stay overnight in the Residence as did a whole fleet of Number 10 officials. A small number stayed in the Residence and a lot more stayed in a nearby hotel and we had to convert the Residence Manager's office outside the building into a temporary branch of Number 10 with all its communications equipment. However the Number 10 team know how to do this and it was done very efficiently by the communicators and the security people. But there was a major influx of British officials, and that morning when the officials were reporting for work in the Residence because that's where the PM and the temporary Number 10 installations were, none of them had had breakfast. So our house staff found themselves preparing breakfast for some 40 people!

It was of course a great experience for us to have the Prime Minister and his wife there. The Prime Minister met Zapatero for the first time, certainly the first time since Zapatero's election. They had a bilateral which didn't have a great deal of content although we were already becoming aware of the stumbling block in the relationship because Zapatero kept referring to the illegality of the US/UK war in Iraq and he referred to it as illegal to Tony Blair's face. This was repeated at subsequent meetings and it was quite an issue for the remainder of 2004 and into 2005 that Iraq, which was the biggest thing happening at the time, was a subject on which the UK and Spanish Prime Ministers fundamentally disagreed.

It was also very valuable to have Mrs Blair in the house because you were able to arrange a small programme for her while the Prime Minister's bilateral with Zapatero was taking place.

She was able to use her skills as a high level British QC and expert on humanitarian and family law to advise and to make links with some Spanish organisations and female lawyers which was subsequently of use, I think.

AW: Yes, we were able to set up the first UK/Spain roundtable to share experience on domestic violence and it was really watching Mrs Blair with these Spanish lawyers that inspired us to do that. I am very grateful to her.

Conversely, during this period the Gibraltar issue became a little easier with the arrival of Foreign Minister Moratinos?

SW: It did. It became significantly easier because the new Spanish Government took an initiative for which we have to give them full marks, and I am not sure that they have ever really ever received due recognition from either the UK Government or the Gibraltar authorities, in that they consciously and deliberately changed their position on Gibraltar in order to create a better relationship and a better atmosphere. The specific change that they made was to accept for the first time that talks on Gibraltar could be three-sided rather than two-sided. Spanish Governments had previously always insisted that any discussion of Gibraltar had to take place between the two governments, that is to say the UK Government and the Spanish Government and that they would not accept any Gibraltar representatives at the table. The Zapatero Government, for the first time, accepted that there could be a three-sided process which was a very considerable breakthrough and did lead to a far better understanding, and a trilateral process which at the beginning was distinctly more positive for the gravity and sensitivity of the Gibraltar problem.

At the same time the Spanish were feeling very offended by the fact that Gibraltar was celebrating its Tercentenary, the third century of being a British colony since its capture in 1704. That was commemorated by a number of high level visits from the UK to Gibraltar by the Princess Royal and the Royal Navy. These visits caused significant offence to the Spanish and were the subject of Spanish protests to the UK Government which were conveyed through me. I think for a short while I was perhaps the most summoned foreign ambassador in Madrid, summoned to the Foreign Ministry to receive protests which I had to do in as straightforward a manner as I could. But that did not stop the development of the trilateral forum with the Gibraltarians which resulted from the Spanish initiative to change

their policy. I think that if the Spanish had been expecting more reward from the UK and Gibraltar for their change of position, they must have soon begun to realise that it wasn't going to happen.

AW: And in the following year, we had the UK Presidency of the European Union?

SW: Yes, the UK Presidency of the EU, if I remember rightly, was the first half of 2005. When a country takes on the Presidency it changes lots of ways in which business is handled. The Presidency country has to take the lead in meetings and this extended even to Madrid where there was a practice of EU Heads of Mission meeting monthly. It became our task to organise those meetings, which we duly did by arranging a couple of lunches in the house for the EU Heads of Mission, I think by then numbering, was it, 28? Numbers were becoming a logistical problem for all EU Heads of Mission. But more important as far as Spain was concerned, this Presidency was important because the UK had to preside over the discussions in Brussels of what was called the Financial Perspectives. In other words the financial envelope that was to govern the EU budget for the seven year period between 2007 and 2013. It was already clear that this was the period when EU money was going to have to be redirected away from beneficiaries such as Spain, who had benefited from considerable EU spending over the previous ten years and more since they joined the EU, towards the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe. The Spanish knew it was coming but they argued all the way about the level of the transfer of resources away from them towards the new members. It was the responsibility of the UK Presidency to get to an agreed outcome. This meant that the Prime Minister had to spend a good deal of time on the Spanish position. Senior officials did so too and we had a number of visits from senior EU people from London over these issues. There were a couple of bilateral meetings between the Prime Minister and Zapatero around the European process and there was at least one visit to Madrid by the Prime Minister. This had the beneficial effect, to some extent, of enabling them to get past the disagreement over Iraq because they had more pressing business to discuss on the EU front. That was certainly useful from all our points of view because it improved the relationship between Zapatero and Blair and more generally between the two governments. I think that Tony Blair did actually exert himself to deliver a pretty favourable deal to the Spanish which tacitly they acknowledged. I don't think I ever heard any Spanish official recognise it explicitly, but it was a pretty favourable deal and it was obvious to all that some of that was due to Tony Blair himself taking his own view on the right outcomes.

Later in 2005 we had major events of an entirely different nature. October 2005 was the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. It had been made very clear to my Naval Attaché, Nigel Dedman, by the First Sea Lord, then Admiral West, that the major priority of the Royal Navy was to organise a good commemoration (celebration in his eyes) of Trafalgar and that the Naval Attaché's number one task was to deliver the Spanish participation in that bicentenary. For the Spanish this was not simple because Admiral Nelson had destroyed their fleet in 1805. There was a lot of recognition in Spain that at that time Spain had been on the wrong side by being an ally of Napoleon, and that actually in the subsequent war Britain had done a lot to help Spain. So it was a very mixed question. That said, Nigel Dedman did exercise his naval diplomatic skills considerably throughout the year of 2005 and did secure Spanish participation not only in the Fleet Review in Portsmouth but also in enabling and authorising a good commemoration, as we had to call it in Spain, in Spanish waters, to commemorate the battle. That was a momentous event. The Spanish turned out their flagship the Principe de Asturias aircraft carrier. The UK, France and Spain each contributed a frigate and we had a very exciting and moving day at sea to commemorate the Battle of Trafalgar. "Le tout Madrid" and indeed "le tout Andalucía" turned out for the event and they were all on the aircraft carrier, and just for a moment the UK was the centre of Spanish attention. I say the UK because the French never seemed to have quite worked out what they ought to be doing about this commemoration. They did participate but they didn't really make a show of it and I don't think they really wanted to be there very much. The certainly gave the impression of being a bit reluctant and a bit half-hearted, so it was very much a UK/Spanish affair and it went extremely well from our point of view, including the acquiescence by the Spanish Royal Family.

AW: Another highlight was the Spanish Royal Wedding in 2006?

SW: Yes, the Spanish Principe de Asturias married his bride. She was not exactly the bride that everybody had been expecting since she was a previously divorced commoner and she became subject to a certain amount of public discussion and some sniffiness by the grand ladies of Spanish society. However there was a great celebration in Spain and everybody came including for the second time The Prince of Wales. And that time he stayed in the Residence. We were able to entertain him and to participate in a great festive Spanish State occasion.

Lest the readers think that this was all fun and games - and a lot of being in Spain was fun and games - it was thoroughly enjoyable - there was some serious structural professional work that had to be done. Firstly, the most important thing in Spain was to manage the consular network. We also had trade promotion teams around the country, but the most important team was the consular team stretched along the coasts and in the island resorts who handled British visitors in very large numbers. I estimated that the number of British visits to Spain was about 16 million a year. It was clearly the largest overseas destination of British tourists. Visits to Spain were said to account for 25% of passports issued in the UK (because the passport application form used to ask, I don't know if it still does, which country the passport was needed for). And there were the usual proportion of consular emergencies amongst those many visitors and we had to have teams ready and able to respond.

We had a very efficient and modernised presence in Spain to the point where we were leading the way in terms of consular practice around the world by putting in place initiatives such as to have a call centre, of working across frontiers, working with the consular teams in Portugal, eventually integrating them into one team, modernising the service to the public by arranging to take credit card payments for the first time, which we did with the help of one of our consuls who we had recruited. He was a professional banker and enabled us to get a deal with the credit card companies. The teams around Spain were well managed by the office in Madrid. It was a very important part of my job to go around the consular teams and understand their issues.

There were a number of consular issues which raised matters of government policy. There were for example issues which affected property owners in Murcia and in the region of Valencia, where there was a concern about the ability under Spanish law to make compulsory purchases of property in ways which were unfamiliar and not consistent with British principles of law on such matters, though entirely consistent with Spanish principles. We were also constantly on the alert for major consular emergencies such as a disaster, a bomb attack, a terrorist incident, a major road accident, and we were practicing procedures to be ready for all such eventualities. My particular nightmare was a repetition of something like the bomb that had gone off in Bali taking place in Ibiza, which was the destination for so many young British visitors who went there to celebrate, dance, to get drunk and stay up late and behave as the young do. If there had been a fire or a bomb attack in one of the large

discos in Ibiza it would have been disastrous and frankly the island didn't have the resources to cope. I did everything I could to alert the Spanish authorities to the risks, I did everything I could to alert the fire authorities and the hospital authorities on Ibiza to the risks and to get them to prepare, but it would have been a nightmare. I left Spain at the end feeling very grateful that nothing like that had actually happened during my time.

I think that the overall consular experience was that the teams worked very well and received a great deal of collaboration from the Spanish authorities who were extremely tolerant of foreign tourists in general and British tourists in particular because they weren't always well behaved and yet the Spanish were welcoming and relaxed about the behaviour of British tourists nearly all the time including when there was trouble. They were always helpful when bad things happened and when elderly people died because there were of course a lot of elderly British citizens in Spain as well as the young ones. This major consular responsibility was one of the things that marked out the diplomatic network as different from networks in other countries. Everywhere has consular issues but we had them in a really big strategic way.

AW: And in the Embassy in Madrid, you undertook quite a bit of change management?

SW: We had to deal with pressures on budgets, staff numbers and costs. The pay and employment system needed to be modernised and there were some people who needed to be modernised, frankly. With the help of Dominic Jerney, who was acting DHM for a period, and who was the Commercial Counsellor for the rest of his time, we undertook a very considerable effort to upgrade the terms of service for work in the Embassy, to upgrade the staff and the pay systems and to make them performance related and to generally get better performance for somewhat less money than had been the case in the past. This was a necessary grind, and it was a grind because Spanish labour law is not that flexible and we had to be ready to spend money to achieve adjustments, which fortunately we got authorisation from London to do.

The major change the Embassy had to undertake was to seek new premises for itself. This was for the offices. The building that we had occupied since the sixties in Central Madrid was well known, visible, architecturally interesting and recognisable. But it was on its last legs. The electrical system didn't work, the lifts were risky. There was always the possibility

of electrical malfunction. And, most important, the building was insecure from a terrorist point of view in that if there was a truck bomb in the street there was no protection. The standard for Embassy buildings was that they had to have 30 metres stand back from the nearest road. Well, we didn't have any stand back from the nearest road. In fact part of our building reached over the road at the upper storey level. There was no doubt, and professional estimates confirmed, that if there had been a truck bomb outside the Embassy there would have been very extensive casualties inside the building. So it was not secure and the infrastructure of the building was worn out.

Efforts had been made for quite a while to find new premises for the Embassy but it became urgent in my time and we had to set about it. It became apparent, and which I think we'd known for quite a while, that it would be very difficult to find any site in Madrid that was large enough to provide the stand back to comply with the standards and on which we could build a new building or adapt an existing building. Property prices in Spain at that time were such that if it had been available it would have been unaffordable. We were really rather stuck until the security advisers in the FCO advised us that if we couldn't get the stand back horizontally perhaps we should consider looking for it vertically, in other words going into a high rise building.

It so happened that at this time in 2005/6 there were some very high rise, high spec modern buildings being built in northern Madrid. I say northern. They were within the ring road and within the main city but in an area which hadn't yet been fully developed. The terrain on which these tower blocks were built had previously been a sports ground for the Real Madrid football team, which they had sold off for redevelopment and these tower blocks were the result. They were very high standard. The UK engineers who inspected them said they were very secure, solid, robust buildings being built to the highest international standards and would be suitable for embassy premises. And if we went to the mid to upper levels of the building we would have the separation from the road that was necessary and we could safely put vehicles underneath the building as well.

With all the preparations and precautions and studies that go with these things we gradually moved towards a decision to vacate the existing Embassy building, sell it and use it to acquire a lease on office space in one of the new tower blocks. Before I left Spain we did commit to just that, and it was for my successor to occupy the new premises, fit them out and adapt

them to working as an Embassy. But the decisions and studies were all carried out in my time. I had a certain amount of work to do with the Ministry and quite a lot of work to do with both the staff and with relevant parts of Spanish opinion to explain how it was compatible with the role of the British Embassy to move its premises to a high rise, which was a bit counter intuitive for Madrid.

AW: I see in your notes you have mentioned how the elites, politicians, business people are all interwoven in Spain, would you like to talk about that?

SW: My predecessor told me with slight exaggeration that there were only 300 people who mattered in Spain. It wasn't difficult to get to know all of them. Another Spanish contact who became a good friend said to me before we actually moved to Spain, at a dinner in London, that there was no one who the British Ambassador in Spain could not invite. Armed with those two guidelines, namely that the elite in Spain was limited in number and entirely knowable and approachable by the British Ambassador, we set about cultivating everybody who we thought was significant, not just in politics but also in business and in culture and social life. The key point about the Madrid elite, which differentiates it from the London elite, is that in Madrid they are a single ball of wax. In Spain people still have extended families and in the leading families you will find representatives of business, politics, law, medicine, journalism, academia, all part of the single family. They all knew each other and operated together, were inter-related and a great deal of networking is absolutely essential to Spanish middle class life. So they all networked with each other. It was like if you pulled a thread out of this complicated ball, it was amazing where it led to because you found yourself meeting and dealing with people who were related to the first one you knew who were valuable and interesting in all kinds of different contexts. So we made some very good relationships in Spain and were systematic about cultivating families and individuals who we thought were significant for business, politics and leadership of ideas in Spain and I think we were quite successful at that.

But I have to say that when people ask me what my time in Spain was like I say about 75% of it was pure pleasure, because the countryside was delightful, we had to travel to the various regions and know some very delightful people, a lot of whom became friends, we had means to invite them to events in our Residence, all of which were thoroughly enjoyable so there was a lot of pleasure in the job and we had some very interesting visitors from London as

well. About 15% of it was worth a salary, namely promotion, Embassy management, political issues with the government which were not easy and which needed hard work, concentration and effort. And 10% of the role was very difficult and that was largely made up of the Gibraltar issue. But that's a pretty good set of ratios I think for a final posting and I think we were able to go away at the end of it with a sense of pride and accomplishment and the sense that we had had four very good years in a delightful country and city where we made a lot of friends and had a happy time.

Fortunately I'd taken up the post in May 2003 and it was explicitly a four-year assignment which was going to take me to May 2007 which was six months after my 60th birthday. Traditionally in the Diplomatic Service officers had to retire by or on their 60th birthday. Recently the UK law had changed as a result of European anti-discrimination legislation to make such automatic retirement dates no longer viable or legal in the UK. This change had reached into the Diplomatic Service and I think by about early 2006 it had become established that retirement by 60 was no longer applicable. This gave me the great opportunity of celebrating my 60th birthday in Madrid using the Residence for a wonderful weekend party with friends both from the UK and Spain which you organised for me, so it was diplomatically a great occasion. But it was also personally a great occasion to celebrate my 60th birthday in my official residence in my official role.

That said, the FCO were making it pretty clear that there was not necessarily any continuation career for me or others for that matter beyond sixty and you were considered quite fortunate to have survived up to 60! I came to the conclusion that discretion was the better part of valour. Although I was very glad to establish the principle that I could go on beyond 60 and stay on for my fourth anniversary, and I insisted on calling it resignation rather than retirement, nevertheless I indicated that I was content to leave Spain after my four years rather than seek to extend, as my predecessor had done, and would resign from the Diplomatic Service shortly thereafter. So that's what happened and we left Madrid in May 2007 after the inevitable exhausting round of farewell events in which everyone was very nice to us, including our own staff, and there was a lot of nostalgia and sentiment. But we left with a sense of achievement and a sense of relief that we weren't going to do what many colleagues had done which was to go off to another country to be Head of Mission again and have to start all over again; and looking forward to life in the UK.

So that was resignation at the end of a career after 39 years in the Diplomatic Service. Through the complications of the rules, I had a full pension as if I had done 40 years. I actually had cause to be thankful for my time in Cuba, my first post, because it counted as double for pensionable service through an old system which had been abolished by that time. But nevertheless it still counted, so I had a full 40 years of pensionable service towards my official pension, which was very gratifying.

AW: In your notes you look back at your career, do you want to do that?

SW: Well it was a satisfying career and I feel grateful at having done it. I feel that it was valuable not only for us but also for the Foreign Service and the country. I genuinely have the sense that I gave service to my country and I was very gratified to have been awarded a knighthood in 2006. Many are not, and I felt very honoured to have been picked out for that award. But I also, and mainly, felt grateful for the recognition that I felt it implied from my peers of the service that I had done over 39 years.

I left at a time when a lot of people were getting very grumpy about the state of the Diplomatic Service and a lot of my colleagues were getting very cross about the way it was “being dumbed down” and that administration and management was taking over everything and that it was no longer what it had been. I think that the Foreign Service was changing, it was changing inevitably and rightly and it has changed much more since I left. It’s inevitable that change in the Service reflects the fact that the country has changed. The UK is not the same international power that it was in the years in which I joined. Its hard power has diminished hugely, but at the same time I think its soft power has, if anything, increased. I think that over those years I lived through the transition of the UK from being an exhausted economy and society after World War II, a society which hadn’t really found its way in the world. It was Dean Acheson who said that “Britain had lost an empire and not yet found a role” and I think it was one of the phrases of which I was very conscious throughout all my time. We have found a role and I think the Foreign Service helped to find its role in a reunified Europe which is a great unexpected blessing of our lives, with a strong trans-Atlantic partnership and a strong global economic role. I think we have found our way in the world and we are no longer a post-Imperial power, we are something else that is much healthier as a result. And I am proud and glad to have played a small part, my “small grain of sand” as the French say, in that endeavour.

AW: That's lovely. Thank you very much Stephen.