

## **BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index**

**YOUNG, Sir (John Robertson) Rob, born 21 February 1945)**  
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**BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

**RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR ROB (JOHN ROBERTSON) YOUNG GCMG**

**RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CATHERINE MANNING**

*Today is Friday 15 March 2019 and this is the first interview with Sir Rob Young for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme; Catherine Manning recording.*

CM: Rob, I always start these interviews by asking why you chose the Foreign Office as a career.

RY: I was at a university – Leicester - which had not traditionally provided graduates for the Foreign Office. Indeed, I doubt that anyone from Leicester, a young university, had even joined the Civil Service. But we had a visit from a gentleman from London who painted an exciting picture about the prospects for joining the Foreign Office. At the time, the Labour Government was making quite an effort to diversify away from Oxbridge and attract more people from red brick universities. So I threw my hat into the ring. The first part of the exam was in December 1966. I staggered through the various parts of the process and got in, much to my surprise. Asked the same question, why I wanted to join the Foreign Office, at the Final Selection Board, I think I put most of the emphasis on wanting to travel and use what I thought was a reasonable language ability; but I also had a vague notion, which I probably wasn't able to articulate properly at the time, of wanting to do something to serve the country, rather than simply making money in the City.

CM: You joined the Foreign Office in 1967. What was the induction process like in those days?

RY: I joined in September 1967; there were about 20 of us. The induction process was two weeks of talks from various grey-haired individuals, who all looked frightfully ancient. There were also one or two more memorable talks, like the one from the Foreign Office locksmith, who told us how to open safes and briefcases, which was very thrilling. And we had a mock cocktail party to introduce us to the delights of diplomatic receptions. That was a rather curious affair, not least because I think there was just a glass of sherry rather than anything stronger. The talks covered the whole range of Foreign Office activity and at the end of it we were all a bit bemused. We were then thrown in at the deep end, and put on

desks in departments as humble third secretaries, trying to discover what the different coloured bits of paper were for. I should just add that the Induction Course contrasted rather starkly with the way the French do it, which I discovered somewhat later. If you go to the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* it's over two years of fairly hard slog, mostly on the theory, before you're allowed to do anything substantive at all. Two ends of the spectrum, Britain and France, on how to train people for jobs in the Civil Service.

CM: You were then sent to West and Central Africa Department.

RY: Yes, which covered the whole of Africa south of the Sahara - non-Commonwealth countries I should stress, because the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office were still separate. The decision to merge was taken in 1967 and was carried out in 1968. We had non-Commonwealth countries, south of the Sahara. I was put in charge, so to speak, of the UK's relations with all the ex-French countries south of the Sahara. A huge area. I had to get a map and find out where they all were. The Department's main focus was South Africa, which I wasn't involved in, but one learned quite a lot about what was going on there. There were a lot of planning papers about how South Africa might evolve over the years, and I don't recall reading one in which bloodshed was not forecast as part of the process of moving towards majority rule, a multi-racial democracy. How differently it turned out – and happily so.

My tasks were much less dramatic than that. Much of my time was spent on briefing for ministerial visits, draft answers for parliamentary questions, that sort of thing. One task which took up a lot of time: *coups d'état* and what to do about them. The British government recognised states. But we also had the practice of recognising new governments. So every time there was a change of government, we had to go through a formal process within the Office of deciding whether the new government exercised effective control and then advise Ministers on whether to agree to recognise it, so I was constantly writing submissions on that subject. There was a joke going around that there was a bridge club in Paris of ex-presidents of Dahomey (Benin now), because they had had four *coups d'état* in six years. It wasn't until 1980 that the British government, in line with many European partners, decided to drop the practice of recognising governments.

Can I just mention a couple of people in West and Central African Department who influenced me enormously? My immediate line manager was Catherine Pestell, who was brilliant and able to cover up for all my deficiencies. The Head of Department was Martin

LeQuesne, who was rather fierce. But in a year he and Catherine taught me all I ever needed to know about officemanship, which was important in those days. It wasn't just about which bit of coloured paper to use, but it was actually about how best to present a case to Ministers, which one spent the rest of one's career doing. So that was really valuable. Between them, in their very different ways, they also taught me a lot about how to bring out the best in people, how to motivate effectively, which very much stayed with me throughout my career.

One of the things that I retain from that year was the very seedy physical state of the Foreign Office. It was quite shocking really. The place was dirty and dusty and full of cupboards littering the corridors. Frock-coated messengers still brought despatch boxes, or coal for the fire, depending on how many times you pressed the buzzer on the wall. I think it was four buzzes for coal. In the Durbar Court there were prefabs, dating from the Second World War, and the Locarno Room was still partitioned. Discussions were taking place about re-building the Foreign Office – perhaps locating it elsewhere. Fortunately that did not happen. But it was not until the mid-1980s that there was the major refurbishment which rectified all that and turned all these lovely rooms back into their original state.

CM: You worked in the Department for a year and I think it was normally during this first year that the Foreign Office put their new recruits through a hard language assessment test. I didn't ask you about your languages. What did you read at university?

RY: I had done French, German and Latin to A level. I did French and Latin at university and I kept my German up a bit. As part of the university course I'd spent a year in France, so my French was OK - and nobody wanted me to speak Latin in the office, I'm relieved to say.

CM: Were you interested in more languages? Did you want to take on a hard language?

RY: Yes, I did. I don't recall our having a choice about which language. I think we were channelled into what the results of the tests suggested we might learn most easily. I was told around about June/July 1968 that I was going to learn Russian. So we geared ourselves up mentally for this and even went off to look at the army site in Beaconsfield where I would have been learning it. But then I was told unexpectedly in August that it had been changed - for reasons which were never revealed to me. (Later on, as Chief Clerk I was allowed to read every personnel file except my own!) I was then told I was going to learn Arabic, so we went instead to Shemlan in Lebanon in September of that year.

## **MECAS, Lebanon, 1968**

CM: So that was the first moment that you started focussing on the Arab world, its language and culture, which was to be a very important element in your career.

RY: Exactly, and I don't regret it for a moment. It is an absolutely fascinating area. Looking back, I'm not at all sure that one made a jot of difference to the course of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict during a career, but the Middle East was perennially challenging and remains so.

CM: Indeed, you have looked after a Syrian refugee couple and welcomed them into your home in France, so you continue with your interest in Syria and the Arab world right into retirement.

RY: Yes, we took in a young Syrian couple two years ago and I must say they were absolutely delightful. They had an extraordinarily hard time getting here; it took them nearly four years to travel from Syria to France, including a perilous boat crossing from Turkey to Greece. But now they're settling and integrating very, very well, I am happy to say. It took them time to open up about the civil war in Syria, and the conditions which obliged them to leave. But they were relieved to be with people who knew and understood their country.

CM: Now, Lebanon in 1968, before the civil war and all the disasters and destruction of later years was a very glamorous place, was it not? It had a reputation for being so. How did you find it?

RY: It was really. We were closeted in MECAS (Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies) up in the mountains, in Shemlan. Being married, I didn't dash off to Beirut every evening to have some fun; some of the bachelors did. But there were extraordinary aspects to it. Studies permitting, you could ski up at the Cedars of a morning and drive down and swim in the Mediterranean in the afternoon. It was very secure, even though for six months of the time we were in Lebanon there was no government. You wouldn't have guessed that: everything functioned perfectly normally. We lived in a bubble in Shemlan, a very pleasant one. The quality of Arabic taught was very high; the teachers were terrific, nearly all Palestinians. We were in syndicate groups of four people, so you couldn't hide behind anybody if you hadn't done your homework. It was extremely hard work. I found it quite difficult, as most of us did I think. The school also took in not just British Foreign Office students but members of other foreign services and indeed people from the private sector, which all helped to fund it,

of course. I went back to Shemlan in 1996/7. The site was overgrown and everything movable from the Centre had been looted at some stage, even piping and window frames, everything had gone. It was a like a mini-Angkor Wat. It was very sad.

The course gave us a wonderful grounding in the language and, thinking back on it, it's not difficult to sustain the argument for teaching hard languages. If you're in a country like the UK that claims to have global interests then you've got to have a foreign policy that is capable of analysing the risks and opportunities around the world in a sustained way. You cannot do that effectively unless you can have people on the ground who can communicate with the locals. It all sounds very obvious really, but there have been periods since I retired when the Office's ability to teach these hard languages has suffered. I think we're back again on track; I hope we are. But I don't believe that you can have any kind of edge in international affairs unless you have people who are experts in the regions in which you have interests. To create experts you've got to make sure that they can speak the local language.

The long course took about ten months and then there was another six months of the advanced course, so we were there about a year and a half altogether and we could certainly communicate on a whole range of subjects. We weren't frightfully good at going to markets and buying a pound of tomatoes, but very good at talking about the latest discussions in the Council of Ministers and what the economy was doing and that sort of thing. That was all very necessary. When I was posted to Syria, later on, we met a lot of people with whom I could not have communicated unless I had had Arabic. It was less the case in Cairo, where I was posted immediately after Shemlan, because so many interlocutors spoke English or French.

CM: And was the form of Arabic you were taught comprehensible everywhere?

RY: Well, that's a huge problem in the Gulf, and indeed in North Africa. There's a wonderful photo I saw many years ago of a Pan-Arab conference in Rabat where half the Arab leaders had headphones on listening to a translation. I was fortunate in that I stayed in the Near East. There are certain differences of vocabulary and pronunciation in Egyptian Arabic, but it's not very far from Palestinian. In Syria, where we were later, it is very much Palestinian Arabic, so I didn't have that problem. The idea of the Arabic language providing the basis for Arab unity is stretching things a bit.

CM: In your notes you mention Israeli raids, so the political situation did impinge on you on your mountain.

RY: Yes, Shemlan overlooks Beirut and there was a ringside view of the Israeli commando raid on Beirut airport on the 28<sup>th</sup> December 1968, when they destroyed fourteen aircraft of MEA, Middle East Airlines, in retaliation for an attack on El Al aircraft by the Lebanon-based PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine). That was a big firework display down at the airport, fifteen hundred feet below. There were tensions, but the raid didn't lead to anything more generalised until several years later.

### **Third Secretary, Cairo, 1970**

CM: At the end of your year and a half of training, you moved to Cairo, first as Third Secretary and then as Second Secretary. In those days, one didn't come back to London with anything like the frequency that people do now. Did you just go from Lebanon to Cairo without going home?

RY: Yes, we went straight to Cairo. It was in February 1970 and I went straight into the job. Cairo was thrilling.

CM: Can one say that at that time Cairo was the big post in the Arab world? Egypt was the most populous country, the most prestigious...

RY: And with on-going pretensions to be the leader of the Arab world. Nasser set out to dominate the Arab world and in many ways he did. He had the advantage of what we would call soft diplomacy these days, I suppose. Egyptian culture, radio, television, films were all-pervasive in the Arab world and that was a big plus.

Cairo was just a most extraordinary city to get to know and to explore. But we started off rather badly. The first weekend we decided to drive out to the pyramids and on the way back, by mischance, we strayed into a military zone and were arrested. I had a camera in the car; I spoke Arabic, which was a mistake (they knew all about Shemlan, 'the spy school'). We were taken off to the police station and asked for identification. Our passports were at the Ministry of Interior being stamped, as we had just arrived, so we had no means of identification at all. It must have all looked very suspicious. Eventually the Embassy got us out, late on the Sunday night (we had been picked up at four in the afternoon). I have to say I thought, 'This isn't a very glorious start to my diplomatic career, to have to be bailed out of a police station

at ten o'clock at night.' But it did illustrate the nature of how far Nasser's Egypt was a police state. They were on to you very quickly. You had to assume that every public place, restaurants and bars, were bugged - and indeed private homes. The only safe place to talk was out in the desert or at the seaside. You had to be very careful. At one point the Egyptians claimed to have the capacity to listen in to ten thousand telephone calls simultaneously, the technology coming from Eastern Europe mainly.

In 1970 Egypt was officially still part of the United Arab Republic, even though Syria, the other part of it, had pulled out of the union in 1961. It was, coming back to the point I made earlier, the first step, in Nasser's mind, towards creating a unified pan-Arab entity. It failed with Syria because of Egypt's rather dominating attitude. It had to be top dog and couldn't conceive of sharing power in a meaningful way. But Egypt remained nevertheless the pivot of the Arab world throughout the 1960s, with this cultural underpinning that we talked about. Then there was the 1967 war with Israel which caused a massive dent in Egypt's standing, from which she didn't recover until Sadat found a new way forward later on.

When we were in Cairo, which was between the 1967 and 1973 Wars between Israel and Egypt, there was a war of attrition going on. This sometimes involved Israeli bombing of the outskirts of Cairo, so there was a blackout part of the time; cars had their headlights painted. As diplomats we were forbidden to travel to the Red Sea or to the Western Desert. You could only travel south by train or by air, not by car, so there were quite heavy restrictions on freedom of movement within the country.

When Nasser died on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1970 it was one of the most extraordinary weeks of my life. We worked non-stop in the Embassy for several days. Nasser was deeply mourned in Egypt. Our nanny, who was a fairly solid, sane person, cried as if she had lost a member of her own family, and that was the general sentiment. He was the man who, for most Egyptians, had restored dignity to Egypt. On the day of the funeral itself it was calculated that there were four million people out on the streets of Cairo. We used that week to try to rebuild bilateral bridges, because relations between Egypt and the UK had been very tense all year for various reasons. We thought that if we sent someone senior to the funeral we could perhaps contrive to hold some conversations and begin to rebuild things. Alec Douglas-Home, the Foreign Secretary, came out as British government representative.

In the middle of all this, the night before the funeral, which was on 1<sup>st</sup> October, Leila Khaled popped up – I don't know if you remember that name. She had been arrested after a



hijacking and it had been decided that she would be released and exchanged for hostages taken in another hijacking. She was flown out to Cairo from London and handed over in the middle of the night on Wednesday. Nobody noticed because there was so much going on around Nasser's funeral.

On the day of the funeral, all the foreign dignitaries went to join the procession the other side of the Tahrir Bridge and such was the press of people on the route of the cortège that the VIPS did not move for ages. Unknown to us in the Embassy, most of the foreign dignitaries, including Alec Douglas-Home, decided to abandon the procession and come back. We, meanwhile, the junior members of Chancery, were relaxing over a bottle in my office, when suddenly I heard the familiar voice of the Ambassador in the corridor. I thought, 'Heavens, this is awful.' He was walking down the corridor with Sir Alec, going towards his own office and because they heard some noise in my office, they came in and I remember Sir Alec looked round and said, 'Oh, so this is where you ...' And then he stopped, because he saw the bottle and didn't quite know how to finish the sentence. Being rather young and green at the time, I didn't have the wit to offer him a glass. I was petrified at being caught in the middle of the morning with a bottle in my office.

Things did settle down in the relationship after that, not least because Sadat shifted Egypt's international stance. He got rid of the pro-Soviet elements, Ali Sabry and co, who had been working with Nasser and turned Egypt very much in a westward direction. Before his accession, Sadat had been underestimated. He had been Vice-President and in charge of Egypt's actions in Yemen for a number of years, without really distinguishing himself. He was an interesting example of someone dismissed as a nonentity in political terms who grew rapidly into the new role and used the authority of the job to carve a real niche for himself. Quite unexpectedly, he showed great force of character, imagination and political will, but nobody in the late 1960s would ever have dreamt that he would have been capable of that, had he not been thrust into the role.

We lived to start with in a tower block in Zamalek, but that we thought was a little risky with small children who were climbing everywhere. So we moved into a much smaller block in Dokki, in a very quiet, tree-lined street, just the other side of the Tahrir Bridge. It was very comfortable. I drove to work; it took about five minutes. I could park in the Embassy. The Embassy was very large at the time; the Ambassador was Dick, Sir Richard, Beaumont, who was one of our most distinguished Arabists. He'd spent his whole career in the Middle East,

spoke wonderful Arabic and really was utterly steeped in all matters Arab, and taught me a lot. Given the difficulties of communicating with the Egyptian government at times, I remember on one occasion he brought several of us into his office and said, 'Look, I've had these instructions from London. I'm supposed to be talking to the Minister of something. I've been trying for ten days, and I cannot get to see him, so I am now...' He raised his voice; he said, 'I am now going to address anyone listening to whatever bugging device may be in my office, and I am going to carry out my instructions in that way.' He read out his telegram of instructions in his own office, because in fact bugs had been picked up there. For example, someone had earlier come in with a cigarette lighter with a bug in and left it on the table.

CM: What about relations with Egyptians? Did you have normal social relations with Egyptians? Since you spoke Arabic you had the means to do so. Was it possible?

RY: Yes, it was. We had a lot of Egyptian friends who were cosmopolitan, very well educated, spoke several languages. We kept in touch with quite a few of them after we left. They spoke very freely. Egyptians, amongst the Arabs, have the best sense of humour; they could be self-deprecatory and laugh at their own regime and country in a way which was very refreshing. It was much easier to get to know a range of Egyptians than it was Syrians later on. They were civil servants, businessmen, journalists and also I made a point of getting to know trades unionists. Nobody had ever talked to trades unionists, as far as I could see, so in order to branch out a little, I decided to go and talk to them. They had an interesting slant on events. Journalists were generally willing to talk.

CM: As I remember it, in that period of the early '70s, the wives of Egyptian diplomats serving abroad did not wear a headscarf. They were very westernised in their appearance. Was that the case in Cairo?

RY: Yes, hardly anyone wore a headscarf. I don't remember anybody wearing a headscarf among the middle classes and there were very few in the street or in the market. It really only began to become commonplace in Egypt after the Iranian Revolution. The practice of showing your religious fidelity in your dress spread to the Gulf and then to Egypt after the Revolution. When we were in Cairo, there was a layer of society which was westernised, wealthy, at ease with itself and at ease with foreigners. There was a real middle class – Nasser hadn't killed that off – and there was extreme poverty as well. You could walk round the Old City and see people who were manifestly very poor; people living in the City of the

Dead for example, in tombs, obviously very poor. Out in the countryside things didn't look as though they had changed very much for several thousand years.

### **Second Secretary, Middle East Department, FCO, 1972-75**

CM: You were in Cairo for two years and came back to London in 1972, having been abroad for four years.

RY: I came back in September 1972. I didn't go straight into a department. I was sent to Brussels for two or three weeks, to learn about the Common Market, because the UK was just joining; we were starting on 1 January 1973. I went to the Commission; I thought it was rather thoughtful of the Office to try to get us to understand what was going on in the rest of Europe. I had two or three weeks in the Planning Department of the Commission, which was very valuable. Then I went into Middle East Department, the Arabian Peninsula Section, as Head of Section, covering Saudi Arabia, Yemen and all the Gulf States. The main task there was creating new, non-colonial relationships with the Gulf States following the British military withdrawal in 1971. It was very soon after and it wasn't very easy, because most of the states had been perfectly happy with the status quo and were fearful that we were going to leave them on their own to fend for themselves. One of the Trucial States had even offered to pay for us to stay. But it was the logical conclusion of the decisions taken by the Labour Government in the 1960s and we had to modernise our relationships. The United Arab Emirates was one of the big worries, the long-term cohesion and viability of this very curious collection of small states - there was such a disparity of income already between Ras al Khaimah at one end and Abu Dhabi at the other. And complicating all this were the endless Iranian territorial claims over bits of the Gulf; at various times they claimed Bahrain, Abu Musa, islands called the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. All these disputes were settled eventually, but only one of them through international arbitration. The big Iranian spectre was hanging over these states which caused them considerable anxiety. The only entity that saw Iran as less than a threat was Dubai, because of traditional commercial links. There had always been traffic between Iran and Dubai, so they were less worried; they were simply making money out of it.

I visited Saudi Arabia and Oman. That was very interesting because it was very soon after the overthrow of Sultan Said. We'd engineered the coup in 1970 because Sultan Said was living in the middle ages, really, and putting the brakes on any kind of modernisation in the country. He was also losing the war in Dhofar, so it was essential to get somebody on the

throne who could cope with that. The war was beginning to threaten the country more widely. Sultan Qaboos took over very young. Dhofar was a big worry, but we put quite a lot of military effort into it. It was not widely known at the time that both British regular and Special Forces were involved. The Special Forces did fantastic work. They had had a lot of experience in Malaysia and places like that and they knew how to handle not just local conditions, physical conditions, but also hearts and minds. They were terrific at that. The war ended in 1975, so it was going on all the time I was in the Department. There were some quite nasty moments, but it was a classic example of how highly trained specialised forces, even if not numerous, can make a difference. The other problem was that Qaboos had a lot of understandably ambitious plans for modernising the country. We encouraged him after all. But he went at it with such enthusiasm, that we were worried at the time whether he could afford to do everything on his agenda. The cost of modernisation was quite a drain on Oman's very limited resources; it is not a big oil-producer, by comparison with the Gulf States. There were worries about over-reach which have been happily not been borne out.

CM: Did you meet Sultan Qaboos?

RY: Yes, at a later stage. Very impressive. A man with real presence and quiet authority, without asserting himself. Quite clearly, he's not just respected but loved in his country, and I think that is a huge achievement. He has done very well for Oman over what is now, after all, the best part of fifty years. There were quite a lot of Brits in the civil service and in some sensitive Army/Air Force and intelligence posts at the time, to help him. He handled that very well because it could have been a source of friction within the country but I don't think it really has been.

CM: During your time in Middle East Department there was the oil crisis of 1973 as a result of the Yom Kippur War, perhaps the biggest economic shock until the financial crisis of 2008. How did that play out for you?

RY: I would simply applaud the wisdom of those who decided at the time – one of the key figures in arguing this was Tony Parsons – that we shouldn't supply arms to either side. The Israelis were deeply upset; the Arabs less surprised. It was a very wise decision and it meant that we avoided the worst of the oil embargo which was slapped on a number of western countries. The UK was not as deeply affected as some others. The Netherlands, for example, was very badly affected. The longer term implications for energy supplies and costs – everybody knows all that – the boost it gave to finding alternative sources of energy was

important, of course. Also perhaps to be borne in mind, nothing to do with me in the Gulf, but it gave an enormous boost to American investment in alternative energy sources, including shale, and if the US is producing so much shale oil and gas now, it's largely because of the investment they made in that nascent industry in the 1970s.

CM: Did you feel hostility in your contacts in the Arab world at the time?

RY: Yes. I can't think of negative consequences flowing from that in terms of say, a cancelled deal or cancelled contracts. Perhaps there were. Of course, the Arabs are absolutely past masters at disguising their deepest feelings and they will always be polite, friendly even, with people they know and respect, whatever the policies of the countries those people represent. It is often quite difficult to gauge depths of hostility or the extent of any antagonism because they are so unfailingly polite. I think there is a tension in their minds between what they know about the policies of a country and the respect and trust they feel for the individual representatives of that country.

CM: So if you are in post working out how deeply a country feels about a particular issue and what they're going to do about, it is probably quite difficult.

RY: Yes, you probably get as much guidance from the editorials in the government-controlled press as you do from personal contacts.

CM: The next stage, three years on, you moved to being Private Secretary to the Minister of State.

### **Private Secretary to Minister of State, 1975**

It was only just over two years actually, because it was quite early in 1975 that I went into Joan Lestor's office. She was then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, covering Africa and Latin America. I was only her Private Secretary for three months and then she was moved on to Education. To be perfectly honest, she wasn't very reliable in the Foreign Office. She was an absolutely lovely person. I was very fond of her, but she wore her left-wing views very firmly on her sleeve.

CM: I ought to anchor this. This was 1975. Harold Wilson was still Prime Minister. The Labour Party came in in 1974 until 1979. Callaghan was Foreign Secretary. And Joan Lestor was thought to be too left-wing for the Foreign Office?

RY: Well, she had difficulty sticking to her brief. I was at a meeting when she said, 'Look, my brief says this, but I don't agree.' She would then give her personal, very Socialist-tinted view of what should happen, which wasn't necessarily government policy. So she was moved sideways to Education. She was absolutely delightful to work for and I was sorry to see her go, in many ways, but life was a little more predictable afterwards. She was replaced by Ted Rowlands, who had been the youngest minister in government when he was appointed to the Welsh Office in 1969; he was 29 then. He was MP for Merthyr Tydfil; for many years he had the largest parliamentary majority in the House of Commons. The fascination in the first few weeks was actually being his mentor for everything. He was a protégé of Callaghan's who personally picked him out and brought him into the Foreign Office. It was just so interesting to initiate somebody who knew absolutely nothing about the Foreign Office and not a great deal about foreign affairs. I found that a very fulfilling challenge. He was an extremely nice person who was always very keen to listen and learn and was always very grateful for what was being done. He had a gift for motivating people and I think people really respected him. There was a problem later on, over the Falklands, but that does nothing in my mind to detract from the impact he had as Minister in the Foreign Office. Callaghan obviously respected his judgment. His remit was the same: Africa and Latin America. He learned very quickly and he taught me a lot about ministerial preoccupations, how ministers approach things, which was very valuable later on. The first thing he did every morning was not to read the Foreign Office telegrams but the newspaper editorials, in particular *the Sun*, because what *the Sun* said in ten lines was likely to influence millions of people that day. He absorbed things very quickly and we got on very well.

CM: Did his Party and constituency concerns produce a particular attitude towards Africa or Latin America?

RY: No, I can't say that I think it did. He was very objective about the issues and I don't think that I can recall his views being particularly coloured by what one might term a party political background. Of course, it was the period when the Labour government was trying very hard to persuade our remaining territories to go independent. Most of them didn't want to because they were perfectly happy as they were, thank you very much. The UK looked after all the difficult bits, like defence and foreign policy, while they could get on with making money. We toured round the Caribbean, knocking on doors and Ted had honed his eloquent speech about the benefits of independence. I was quite persuaded, but they weren't, on the whole. We had very little success. We went round places like Bermuda and Turks

and Caicos, but nobody was interested really. I think it was the Minister of Finance of Bermuda who came to see him and Ted did his spiel and at the end of it the Minister said, 'Well, I've heard what you have to say, Minister, but you have to realise that in my country what beats here,' pumping his heart, 'is a cash register', so we had to give up.

Another issue which was floating around in the background at the time – I can remember talking to Ted a lot about it – was the Falklands, because Labour ministers at that time were not against a compromise agreement with Argentina. Following the negotiations which had taken place earlier in the 1960s, we talked a lot about what a compromise solution might contain. We were looking at things like shared sovereignty of the sea bed, shared exploitation of maritime resources, all that sort of thing. Their minds were not at all closed, on the contrary.

The other conflict which was much on our mind, which doesn't figure large in the annals of history, was between Belize and Guatemala, which was a constant headache. There was Guatemala's outstanding claim on great chunks of the territory. The Minister could never understand why they claimed it because as far as he could see it was uninhabited bog. Anyway Guatemala was quite vociferous about it. There were negotiations during that period. We, he and the Foreign Office officials and myself, went to Guatemala City and there were bi-lateral negotiations in New Orleans. Ivor Richard, who was our UN Representative in New York, chaired the talks I remember on that occasion. They didn't get anywhere at all, but it was very pleasant being in New Orleans for a few days. Then the Guatemalans went in for one of their bouts of sabre-rattling and that meant that the talks were broken off and we had to reinforce militarily, including with a Harrier squadron on the border. Belize later opted to take the whole matter to international fora and not bother with bilateral talks. At this time Belize was self-governing, but its route to independence was being blocked by the Guatemalan claims.

CM: In your notes you mention Human Rights, and since it was a Labour government I can imagine that was quite important for them.

RY: There was quite a lot going on at the UN in EcoSoc and back in the Office an exercise was started, I'm not sure by whom, to try to establish a more coherent approach to human rights and human rights abuses around the world. There was talk of drawing up a sort of global league table of countries, according to how they dealt with the issue of human rights and how we might reduce the risk, for example, of being accused of double standards.

You can imagine the sorts of questions. Well, there was a lengthy internal discussion about it led, I think, by Evan Luard and the whole thing ended as a damp squib. A paper eventually went up to Callaghan who, I believe, wrote on the top something like, 'If we rely on countries' human rights records, we shall end up trading only with Botswana.' That was the end of the exercise. It went into the too difficult slot. But you can understand that, for a Labour government, there was quite a lot of grass roots concern in the Party about how we were dealing with human rights abuses abroad and there were, I seem to recall, various lobbying groups about particular countries, so it was understandable that Ministers took these issues seriously.

### **Private Secretary to Ivor Richard, Rhodesia Conference, 1976**

CM: Then you became Private Secretary to Ivor Richard at the first Rhodesia Conference in 1976. What was the context of this move?

RY: I had earlier been chosen to go to spend a year at the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, which was due to start in September but at the last minute, I had already left Ted's office or was in the process of leaving Ted's office, when they said, 'Ivor Richard needs a private secretary in Geneva next week. Please go.' So Catherine and the family had to move to Paris on their own and settle in and do all the things one does when one goes to a new post, while I was swanning around in Geneva from 28<sup>th</sup> October 1976 to 14<sup>th</sup> December. It was held in Geneva, on the neutral ground of the UN offices. It was the first time that the leaders of the various groups in Rhodesia had ever sat round the same table. There were Smith, Mugabe, Muzorewa, all the usual Rhodesian suspects. It was convened after the African front line states had rejected Kissinger's agreement with Smith about the creation of an interim government while they wrote a new constitution. That had all gone wrong and in the aftermath we somehow managed to persuade everybody to come together for these talks. But the conference never managed to overcome the antagonism between Smith and the Nationalists and so there was no progress at all over the six weeks.

CM: You were sitting round the table, or behind the table, with Smith, Mugabe, Muzorewa, Nkomo. How did they appear to you?

RY: Smith was absolutely as hard as nails, flanked by people with bulging armpits: he wasn't taking any chances. Mugabe was aggressive, I would say, but cleverly so. Intellectually, he was head and shoulders over everybody else in the room. It makes it all the sadder to see



what has happened in the last twenty years or so. Muzorewa was never going to be the lynchpin of the exercise. We spent two weeks deciding where they were all going to sit. Eventually we got them all in the same room. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife it was so tense. Mugabe was twenty minutes late for the first plenary. He eventually walked in with his red scarf around his neck. Smith stood up and said, 'Mr Chairman, I wish to lodge a formal complaint about the behaviour of Mr Mugabe. He's treating this conference with contempt.' He went on and on in this vein. Mugabe stood up when Smith had finished and said, 'Mr Chairman, when you've been waiting seventy years for your independence, twenty minutes is neither here nor there.' It was hopeless. We tried hard but we didn't get anywhere. The participants found it very difficult to come to terms with the fact that they were sitting in same room, because after all, Mugabe had spent years in prison and the Nationalists' relationship with the whites, Smith in particular, had been dreadful. It needed longer for them to get used to the idea that they could negotiate with each other.

One of the things one learns early in diplomacy is that if the best ideas aren't properly timed, they will fail. But don't necessarily discard them; wait until the circumstances are ripe, then try again, with a few tweaks perhaps ... Timing is all. One should never be disheartened. I spent my life thinking up plans C, D, E, F, G, H, for getting round obstacles, trying to keep the destination in view, but always being flexible about how to get there. Sometimes it means stopping and doing nothing. I often thought, even in those first few years, do we need actually to be doing anything at this juncture? There was a pervasive tendency in the Foreign Office to react to everything. Doing nothing was not often regarded as acceptable as a policy; and that was a mistake, I think. Often we didn't have the resources or the influence to make a difference anyway and it probably wasn't going to change the situation much if we just sat on our hands for a few weeks. We were not good at doing that.

CM: At the weekends you were going back to Paris?

RY: I did go back once or twice, but we were working at weekends. It wasn't a sort of Monday to Friday affair. It was quite intense, and lots of bilateral meetings to try to get everybody together, but they were quite entrenched.

### **First Secretary, Paris, 1977**

CM: The next stage, in January 1977, you went to Paris to the Ecole Nationale d'Administration which is the elite school for French high civil servants.

RY: Yes, I had six months there instead of ten months. The first term was in fact a *stage en prefecture*, so the actual classes for foreign students only started when I was available. Most of the classes were as for the French students. There was a course called *Textes et Documents Administratifs*, for example, where you were given a dossier and you had to produce *arrêtés* or a *synthèse* or whatever on a particular subject. Then there were some separate courses for the foreign students, for example on strategic affairs. It was a wonderful opportunity to get to know a lot of future French high flyers, which served me very well later on. Not simply those I met during the time I was there, but the fact that I could say that I had been to ENA, in the *promotion* Pierre Mendès-France, immediately removed a barrier or two between me and the interlocutor, if he had been there as well. I think it was a very good insight into the way France functions, the extraordinarily centralised nature of the French system, the way the French administrative mind works. There's that old joke about the Frenchman saying about some proposition put forward by a Brit, 'Well, that's all very well in practice, but what about the theory?' I was constantly brought up against this, because they would analyse a particular problem, draw up a wonderful set of extraordinarily clear-sighted recommendations, but say nothing about how to put those recommendations into practice. No plan of action at all: that was somebody else's problem. I found that very revealing.

CM: Who were the French high flyers who were in the year Pierre Mendès-France?

RY: No presidents or prime ministers, unlike one or two of the years around mine. But some interesting people went into the Quai d'Orsay afterwards. One person that I have remained close to, called Gérard Mestrallet, went on to have a career first in the French civil service; then he joined Jacques Delors' cabinet in Brussels and then he eventually went into the private sector and became head of what was then the Suez group and is now Engie. He has just retired from being Chairman and CEO of Engie. It was not just about getting to know people who were going to be interesting contacts in the administration but also good contacts in the private sector, as it turned out, because so many of them, like Mestrallet, after a few years in public administration move into the private sector. It was a very good experience indeed, but quite hard to go back to school, I found. I had been working already then for ten years, and it was quite tough to discipline oneself to sit down in the morning and write an essay when you'd been for years reacting to what the outside world was throwing at you.

CM: After six months you went into the Embassy in Paris as First Secretary in 1977. What was your brief?

RY: My brief was External Relations, Pol/Mil and European Defence. The Ambassador was Nico Henderson to start with and then Reg Hibbert. The President was Giscard d'Estaing and his Prime Minister was Raymond Barre. I was there until September 1981 and I just saw the arrival of Mitterrand. I'll come on to that, as it is interesting in the way the Embassy handled it. We lived to start with in a little street off the Quai, Rue Jean Nicot, just by the American Church and then we moved to the Rue de Martignac, at the back of St Clothilde, in the 7<sup>th</sup>, right in the centre, so I could walk to work.

CM: For you with a French wife and French-speaking children going to French schools, you must have been very well integrated into Parisian life.

RY: Yes, there were the friends we had in Paris anyway and the people I had met at ENA so it was a very easy transition. I should say first that Paris has always been for me the most intellectually stimulating of postings – after all, I had two in Paris, and I don't think my brain has ever had to work as hard as it did on those two postings, as the French constantly keep you on your toes. I can remember dinner parties where we would talk endlessly about Britain's attitude to Europe and there was a great deal of scepticism around the table, even in the late 1970s, about whether we were really committed, about our longer term intentions in the community. *Plus ça change*. The quality, the level of debate was extremely high. I enjoyed that hugely; I never had more fulfilling postings, intellectually speaking, than Paris.

The external relations side of the job was very much a question of keeping tabs on France's relations with a whole range of foreign countries, visits to Paris that one would send reports on, all that was pretty routine. One of the big issues we were facing was theatre nuclear weapons in Europe which took up an enormous amount of time. The Soviet Union had deployed SS20 missiles in Eastern Europe, but they were mobile and their range took in the whole of Western Europe, so there was a big problem for a while of lack of intermediate nuclear balance. There was obviously the inter-ballistic stuff, but there was no theatre balance, and the US responded with Pershing II and Cruise missiles from 1979, but all that took time and debating with the French about how to respond to these issues was something that London was very keen on, even though France was no longer a member of NATO's integrated military structure – they left in '66 and didn't go back until the '90s – and that made bilateral co-ordination all the more important because it wasn't happening in Brussels. That was a big issue.

There were all sorts of other ad hoc things. The Queen paid a 'semi-official visit' to France in 1979 and we went round various places in the Loire valley and to Vézelay. She had lunch and dinner with friends around France and all that was very jolly, but it took weeks and weeks of organising. She was very gracious with everybody, as always, but it was a lot of work and I don't remember doing much else during the time I was preparing it.

Nico Henderson was Ambassador when I arrived. It's worth remembering his role in promoting British participation in Airbus. He spent a huge amount of time on that, writing from Paris, lobbying in London. One of the major elements in our joining Airbus was Nico Henderson's advocacy of it. I admired him enormously for that. He is best known for his farewell despatch on Britain's decline which "by chance" found its way into *the Economist*. It's perhaps not so well known that several of us in the Embassy spent quite a long time over the preceding six months working on that despatch. It was very well researched, but he didn't do all the research himself! The result was a masterly piece of work and led to his being appointed Ambassador in Washington after he had retired from the Foreign Office. He was very demanding, in some ways, to work for; very political, which was good because he knew how to pull levers in Whitehall. A very productive and effective ambassador.

Reg Hibbert was very rigorous, both in his approach to the job and in the way he treated his staff, if I may put it like that. He could be a bully. He was very good with everybody outside; people found him charming. But inside the Embassy it was tough going at times. He got bees in his bonnet about things. He was very, very hard on certain issues. For example, he was ambassador during one of the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland, and I can remember he personally wrote most of the replies to letters from the public and they were in the hardest conceivable terms. Not an ounce of sympathy or compassion. That he felt was politically necessary, I suppose. He also had a bee in his bonnet about the New Hebrides, which was causing some problems at the time. It later became Vanuatu. He would come back from the Quai after a particularly rugged exchange and he'd say, 'I think I won on points.' That was his general approach to dealing with the French.

His greatest failure, if I may put it like that, was that he refused to contemplate the possibility of a Mitterrand victory in the 1981 elections and he refused to let us send any assessments of future Socialist government policies. We did send them back, but surreptitiously, without his knowing, because we felt London needed to know what policy was likely to be, according to the manifesto. But he set his face against it. The result was, of course, that on the evening of

the results, he was caught short and he had to write a very, very hurried telegram trying to explain why he had underestimated the Mitterrand movement. I never understood why. In the Embassy we all knew that a Mitterrand victory could not be ruled out. So Reg had to dig himself out of his hole.

CM: Once President Mitterrand had come in, you participated as an interpreter in a number of meetings between him and Mrs Thatcher.

RY: It is worth saying at this point that Mitterrand was the first head of state or head of government to telephone Thatcher on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1982 to offer his support to the UK after the Falklands Invasion and she never forgot that and she quoted it to people. She had that sense of loyalty. He did a lot of the right things.

CM: Please set the scene. What was the occasion when you were called upon to interpret for Mrs Thatcher?

RY: The first requirement for an interpreter was at the Luxembourg European Council in June 1981, just after Mitterrand's election and it was his first international sortie after his election. It had been agreed that he and Margaret Thatcher would have a tête-à-tête breakfast before the meeting of the European leaders and it was fixed for Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> June at 9am at the French Ambassador's Residence. With their customary prescience, the Foreign Office decided the previous Friday that they would need an interpreter suddenly, and rather than pay for a professional they sent me to do it. I therefore flew to Luxembourg the afternoon before. I should say that the evening before this first meeting with Mitterrand was enlivened by Mrs Thatcher's and Lord Carrington's accounts of the opening dinner of the European Council. Mrs Thatcher had got hold of the wrong end of the stick concerning President Mitterrand's views on East-West arms balance and the effect of SS20s and she was abrasive about the European Parliament. She was only stilled by Lord Carrington's argument that he couldn't be nasty to the Parliament because he had to live with it for the following six months as the President of the Council of Ministers.

At the French Ambassador's Residence the following morning there was a lot of interest in the meeting, with photographers and journalists much in evidence, and also people had latched onto the fact that President Mitterrand was not going to have a bilateral summit with Chancellor Schmidt, somewhat surprisingly. He had already in his public pronouncements

somewhat played down the relative importance to France of her relationship with Germany. So expectations were therefore fairly high.

The meeting was stiff, but friendly. There were no note-takers, just the two interpreters. President Mitterrand tucked into a hearty breakfast, while Mrs Thatcher, who had already had her breakfast, toyed with some toast and orange juice. The discussion took a rather perilous turn at the outset. Mitterrand had started off, it was his home ground after all, with a very nice piece about France's debt to the UK in World War II, very tactful indeed. Margaret Thatcher immediately launched into current EC problems concerning fish and sheep meat, in particular fish net sizes in the Irish Sea, expressing the hope that these irritants could be disposed of quickly and allow the bilateral relationship to develop naturally. President Mitterrand was manifestly taken aback by this down-to-earth approach. As far as I could judge, he hadn't been briefed about any of these rather nitty-gritty subjects at all. He countered by saying that the new government needed time to look at the whole range of Community issues and he pointed to a bilateral summit in September as a time to deal with such matters substantively. Then they turned to the safer ground of East-West relations and at this point the analyses of the two were almost identical. Negotiate only from a position of strength was their bottom line. Indeed, the whole issue of the balance of power in Europe, the East-West relationship and relations with the Soviet Union, in other words, the overarching issue of security in Europe, was the issue that held them together throughout the 1980s and their analyses remained very close to the point where they both misread events in Germany in 1989, and were both behind the game. The meeting overran by twenty minutes and the two of them arrived late for the photo call at the European Council.

The atmosphere at this first bilateral meeting was perfectly friendly after that rather bizarre start. At that early stage, Mrs Thatcher found President Mitterrand quite wooden and he must have found her pretty overbearing. But he seems to have liked her frankness and recognised another political animal, the same kind of strength as his own. Her relative openness allowed him to play what I suspect was his preferred political game of 'reserved generalisation'; he never committed himself to detail. I found it difficult, probably she did too, to get behind that rather impassive exterior. Remember his election slogan on one occasion of '*La Force Tranquille*'. It was very apt. There was a sense of great determination and inner strength, but he kept his cards very close to his chest and I think she found that quite difficult to cope with. She couldn't dent him very easily.

The second bout of interpreting was on the afternoon of the Prince of Wales's wedding on 29 July 1981 and it was altogether more relaxed. He had come over for the wedding. The bilateral was in the drawing room at No. 10. Lord Carrington was there and the two Ambassadors. There were no contentious issues raised; both sides were imbued with the goodwill generated by the wedding festivities and by the lunch at the Bank. The regular professional interpreter for Mitterrand was there, a man called Christopher Thierry, who had interpreted for all French presidents since Vincent Auriol (President 1947-54). Imagine how I felt.

They talked about East-West relations, Poland, preparations for the bilateral Summit in September. Mitterrand took quite a clever line. He was asked to bring a wide-ranging ministerial team. So he said, OK, provided that I am assured in advance that practical results will emerge. In other words the UK was being put on probation, I think, to deliver some concrete conclusions before the Summit. It struck me at the time that he was trying to regenerate the bilateral relationship, but as far as possible on French terms. I thought, too, at the time, that the kind of conditionality he was putting forward then was quite absent from Franco-German summits, where there was a quite different approach on both sides. Always heavily attended by Ministers, but where concrete results were often quite meagre: the fact of meeting was what mattered, demonstrating that there was a will to co-operate. With us he wanted to see some genuine, practical results emerge quickly. The tone was very amicable. I had the impression that President Mitterrand was beginning to enjoy his encounters with Mrs Thatcher. Mutual respect was developing.

Lord Carrington commented afterwards, 'It could have been worse,' he said. I thought that somewhat understated the result. But I could see why he put it like that because, in fact, it was as though President Mitterrand had won on points on her home ground. I thought at the time that because she wasn't quite sure of how to handle him, how to pin him down, he made her a bit nervous, which you don't associate with Margaret Thatcher at all. It was not because he had a tendency to be slithery or devious, though he was perfectly capable of it, but his natural instinct was to pitch discussion at a level of generality which was way above her tendency to be down-to-earth, nitty-gritty, practical.

Round three was the annual Summit held in London on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> September 1981. It was an entirely different affair, of course, spread over 24 hours and intended to consolidate the personal relationship and to bring together a lot of Ministers who didn't know each other and

to look at areas of potential collaboration. Also to clear away a lot of the undergrowth surrounding the current Community negotiations on budget restructuring, CAP reform, etc, and to convince the French that the UK wanted to achieve results quickly in these Community negotiations. The French had a tendency to waffle about social areas and *relance*, which irritated London.

Mrs Thatcher went out to meet Mitterrand at a windswept Northolt. There was an impressive rendering of the Marseillaise, despite the wind. Back in No. 10, the first tête-à-tête lasted two hours. Mitterrand had a habit of sketching out the reasoning behind an idea, without necessarily expressing the idea itself clearly or succinctly, until perhaps right at the end. If you're interpreting, and if you're not sure what exactly someone is going to conclude, it can make a difference to the way you interpret the intervening argument. There was a long discussion on Community issues, Mitterrand arguing that it was no good concentrating solely on those issues in which the UK was at a disadvantage, since they tended to be areas where France derived benefits. Britain's accounting problems and CAP surpluses had to be placed in a wider context. He was nonetheless willing to talk about those issues immediately and was flexible on procedure. After that, discussion turned to East-West relations, Poland and defence collaboration. It was clear, a point I made earlier, that the two were developing a real understanding on East-West relations which saw them through a lot of the problems of the 1980s. It was Mitterrand who took the initiative in sketching out a number of areas for possible bilateral co-operation. Hardly by co-incidence, they nearly all concerned high-technology industries where France had something to gain from co-operation with the UK, and not vice versa. It placed the onus squarely on the UK to respond favourably or to be accused of not really being interested in developing bilateral cooperation at all. Mitterrand raised the idea of a Channel Tunnel, to which Mrs Thatcher, who I don't think had been properly briefed on the subject, immediately replied that it would have to be privately financed.

Then on to dinner in No. 10. Mrs Thatcher arrived in a bad mood, because she'd been booed at a Prom Concert. My translation stint at dinner was largely taken up by a dialogue between President Mitterrand and Lord Weinstock. Mrs Thatcher talked mainly about civil nuclear energy and the problem of public opinion. The laugh of the evening came at the moment of the toasts. Mrs Thatcher and President Mitterrand got up, but before they could start to propose the toast, Denis Thatcher raised his glass and said, 'The Queen' in a loud voice. It was widely audible. I didn't know where to put myself.



President Mitterrand included in his speech a story about his return to France from London in early 1944. He'd been told, when he got on the train in London disguised as a British officer, to keep his identity secret and his mouth shut, which he did. When he got out of his carriage on arrival, he saw a notice on the window of his compartment which read FRENCH OFFICER. So much for British secrecy, he said. The atmosphere at dinner was very lively, the noise level high. It was like a jolly house party.

The following morning began with another tête-à-tête. Mrs Thatcher gave President Mitterrand a long lecture on Northern Ireland. He listened patiently and said the right things about British sovereignty, non-interference, etc. Then they moved on to North-South relations and the Cancun Summit. President Mitterrand took a very pragmatic line for a man who was a supposed champion of the Third World. The plenary session in the Cabinet Room at the end of the whole proceedings was, from an interpreter's point of view, quite demanding. I had to sit beside the Prime Minister and whisper the interpretation into her ear. President Mitterrand practically took over Mrs Thatcher's résumé of the talks and spoke at length and at speed. Mrs Thatcher and President Mitterrand left early to go to their press conference. There was one discordant note in the whole proceedings which was a report by the Lord Privy Seal and M. Chandernagor on their talks on Europe. Still the good humour and bonhomie persisted, rounded off by a good lunch, where the subjects covered included unemployment, youth training, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Papandreou and the EC, the iniquity of long communiqués at international conferences. Then they said farewell to one another at 2:30 with smiles all round. M. Chevènement lost his briefcase and Mrs Thatcher dispatched a bevy of Cabinet Ministers to look for it.

Then after they'd all gone, she kept everybody, including half her Cabinet, in the front hall of No. 10 and said, 'It has come to my attention that some of you don't know anything about the pictures on the walls in the dining room.' So she took them all upstairs and told them what they all were. She said, 'Next time we have visitors, you'll be able to tell them.' It was striking, I thought, that in her day in No. 10, there were nothing but portraits. I couldn't see a single landscape. Nature didn't seem to feature in her existence, at all. I also noted that, in my hearing at any rate, she didn't ask Mitterrand any questions about himself, only about his politics.

At the time I thought the Summit had been a success: the atmospherics were good and there were prospects for a revival of Anglo-French industrial co-operation. I wondered whether the

changed tone and developing rapport between Margaret Thatcher and President Mitterrand would survive the autumn's Community negotiations. It did.

CM: Let me just ask you about how the interpreting was done. When the meeting was a tête-à-tête did you sit beside Mrs Thatcher, behind her?

RY: Well, tête-à-tête is a slightly misleading term. There would usually be three a side: Thatcher, note-taker and me, and I would just be sitting slightly behind her, to one side.

CM: When President Mitterrand was speaking, did he pause to allow you to interpret as he went along?

RY: He paused from time to time and if she wanted to comment, she let me translate before she commented, obviously. I doubt if the chunks of interpreting were ever longer than a minute or two minutes at a time. I took full notes. I have never learned shorthand. Christopher Thierry, the other interpreter, just used to write the odd word and when you looked at his page of notes, there were just half a dozen words. His interpreting was absolutely impeccable. I had read the briefs beforehand: that was essential. But there were very few technical problems in interpreting for Mitterrand, because of his more elevated style – no net sizes in the Irish Sea.

The first bit of interpreting I ever did for the Foreign Office was in 1967, soon after I'd joined. I had to go across to No. 10 to help interpret at a dinner party that the Prime Minister was giving for the Prime Minister of Luxembourg. I wasn't interpreting for Harold Wilson, but for George Brown. There was I sitting behind George Brown, not eating, and he was sitting next to the wife of the Luxembourg Foreign Minister when he suddenly said out of the blue, 'I suppose you must hate the Germans.' I was translating both ways on this occasion. So I said in my translation, 'I suppose you probably don't like the Germans very much.' But I'm sure she'd understood it. There was a dreadful pause and then she said, 'Well, not really. My mother's German.' It just sailed over George's head. I don't think he'd heard. I think he'd had too much to drink by then. On these occasions, Harold Wilson – despite the gorgeous wines – always drank beer, never any of the Chateau Margaux that was being offered.

### Assistant Head, Western European Department, FCO, 1982-84

CM: It was in September 1981 you went back to London to be Assistant Head of Western European Department in the Foreign Office.

RY: Europe geographically at this time was divided into three departments, as I recall: Western European Department, Southern European Department, which dealt with Spain and Gibraltar and Cyprus and so on, and Eastern and Central European Department. Western European had a lot of friendly countries to deal with and as Assistant Head I was really charged with ensuring that the Department ran smoothly. I did most of the personnel work and tried to ensure that all the business being undertaken by the work horses at desk level was done on time and to the right standard. I do not recall having a particular block of work. I organised it a bit differently when I became Head of Middle East Department later. It was an inspiration working under Andrew Wood. He was brilliant and I had a very enjoyable two years working with him.

I cannot say that anything particularly dramatic happened in western Europe during my time there. We were basically trying to keep abreast of developments. One of the roles of the Department was making sure that the interests of the functional departments, like Defence Department, which also, after all, were working on policies relevant to the countries we were dealing with, that all the functional issues were welded into an overall bilateral policy that was properly weighted and made sense in rounded terms. Because some of the functional departments pursued their interests quite vigorously, and one had to make sure that they didn't dictate or take over or dominate a relationship in a way which we, with our geographical perspective, thought might be overbearing. It wasn't too difficult keeping abreast of political developments across Western Europe, except for Belgium. I had enormous difficulty in understanding what was going on in Belgium at any time. I would put a wet towel round my head and grasp it for about twenty-four hours and then it would go again.

Just a small example of the things we dealt with, which I recalled as I was doing these notes. Very early on we had an issue over the Apostolic Nunciature in London. It had been decided, I don't when or by whom, that we should exchange representatives between the UK and the Holy See at ambassadorial level. There had been diplomatic relations since the 1920s or 30s, but these were going to be raised to ambassadorial level. It was trickier than it seemed, because of the general baggage of relations between the Holy See and the Crown since the

sixteenth century. In the end, the existing Nuncio who saw his status raised, a man called Monsignor Bruno Heim, was accredited to Great Britain, not to the United Kingdom. It was decided that the Nuncio in Dublin should deal with Northern Ireland. Isn't that interesting?

CM: I suppose you have to say in religion as in rugby – all Ireland.

RY: It just goes to show what a complicating factor Ireland is in so many issues. The main event during the time I was there was the Falklands War which affected all our relationships - let's put it like this, we had to take special care to manage all our bilateral relationships.

There was a lot of scepticism about our response. There wasn't instant support for the idea that we should go and battle our way back. The French understood because they'd got colonies and were opposed to the idea of changing their status by force. But I think Germany was a bit of a problem, so they needed a lot of bilateral action. The biggest challenge was the United States, but that wasn't in our purview.

### **Counsellor, Damascus, 1984-86**

CM: In 1984 you were promoted to counsellor and you went off to Damascus in Syria, a country that is so much and tragically in the news now. How was it in 1984?

RY: We drove to Damascus in our Land Rover, across Europe. The children stayed with Catherine's mother and were shipped out by air after we'd arrived. I shall never forget the thrill of arriving in Aleppo and seeing the citadel. When we arrived, it was less than two years after the massacre at Hama. You may remember that the Muslim Brotherhood staged an uprising which was ferociously put down by Assad. The details came out quite slowly, because no journalists were allowed anywhere near it, but the whole of the city centre was destroyed and 20,000 people died in the bombing raids. When we went to Hama a year or so later after our arrival, it was desolate. We had our 1967 Blue Guide with us, and when we found where we thought the great mosque should be there was just a hole in the ground. An ancient lady walked past and we asked her where the great mosque was. Without stopping, she simply pointed. The atmosphere of fear which was still there two years later was almost palpable. The Assad regime was fundamentally brutal and nasty. He kept himself in power with the support of the army and a range of intelligence agencies that he played off against each other all the time. I'm not too surprised that the son has inherited some of his father's traits. When you come from a minority of 11% of the population, which was the situation of the Alawites, you have to employ fairly nasty techniques to stay in power. Take Palmyra, for

example, where we used to go regularly. There were no tourists, but a very large prison, with hundreds of political prisoners in it. If you mentioned Palmyra to a Syrian at the time, the first thing they thought of was the prison and the political prisoners, not the Roman ruins.

It was a frustrating posting professionally because we were just an observation post, looking at Middle Eastern politics generally and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) in particular. There was very little bilateral substance. We never saw the Baath Party leadership; you couldn't get at them, except occasionally when there was a ministerial visit. The Ambassador saw Assad a couple of times because of ministerial visits, but the bilateral relationship was extremely thin. The Soviets were pervasive. One sometimes saw lorries full of Soviet soldiers. The Soviets were providing all the weaponry. They often tried out their new equipment in Syria, so it was an observation post in another sense for our military attachés to try to get glimpses of new Soviet equipment that couldn't be seen elsewhere. That was quite difficult because it was usually under tarpaulins. We all had crash courses in recognising shapes under tarpaulins.

CM: Were you able to meet and have social contacts with journalists, civil servants?

RY: Any invitations to receptions or dinners or lunches had to go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and they passed on the ones they thought were suitable. Very often the people who came were interrogated by the Syrian authorities afterwards as to what had been discussed. There was a coterie of very nice, well-educated, cosmopolitan Syrians who were judged to be reliable enough to frequent foreign diplomats. They tended to be the same ones for every embassy. There were some very nice people that we got to know, but it was a very limited circle.

CM: What about travel?

RY: You could travel almost anywhere, provided you kept off the military roads. But one knew where they were and it wasn't too difficult. We saw pretty well the whole country, except the Golan Heights, of course. All the Crusader castles, the lost cities of the north, the Euphrates valley, Palmyra and the other Roman sites and so forth - we were able to visit all those and we did a lot of touring.

CM: Did you have a preference among the Arab countries that you lived in and visited?

RY: Because it was a more rounded experience, professionally as well as personally, Egypt comes out top.

During this time the civil war was raging in Lebanon. Because shopping was so difficult in Damascus we used to go across the border once a month into Lebanon to shop at the supermarkets there where you could get anything: half a dozen different types of French champagne, which had been through twenty check points and was still no more expensive than you'd pay in France. I don't know how it was done. I remember on one occasion I needed new tyres for my car; we ordered them one month and the next month they were there. You could get anything. There were numerous stories about donkey trails from Lebanon into Syria where Syrians could bring in fridges and washing machines.

CM: So the shortages in Syria were simply because of running a Soviet-style economy?

RY: Yes, exactly. When you think that Syria had been a net exporter of grain in the 1960s, it was absurd. A very rich country, but very badly run.

CM: In your notes you mention the hostages in Lebanon. We had some hostages during this time?

RY: We did. Some were killed; some got out. There were progressive waves of hostage-taking and the motives were not always very clear. It was often, however, anti-western, and anti-US in particular - reprisals for alleged US 'atrocities', such as when the Americans bombed Libya in April 1986. On that occasion – I mention this in particular, you'll see why – two Brits were kidnapped, Lee Douglas and Philip Padfield. They were kidnapped and later killed by the Revolutionary Organisation of Socialist Muslims and this was in retaliation for the US raid on Libya. I was Chargé d'Affaires at the time; the Ambassador was away. I was asked by London whether the Prime Minister should write to Assad to intervene to try to get them released, because Syrian influence in Lebanon at the time was very great, over a range of different groups. I remember agonising over this. In the end I advised against on the grounds that it was unwise to seek to help from a tyrant who might then have leverage over us. I was influenced by the government's policy of not negotiating with hostage-takers. However, the issue still haunts me, because I wonder whether, if I'd advised differently, those two hostages might still be alive. They weren't held for long; there wasn't the luxury of a long time to think about it. I wasn't aware at the time of any country having intervened with Assad to get him to try, but that doesn't mean to say that it didn't happen. One might not

have known. That was a very difficult moment and I still debate within myself the moral pros and cons.

That leads us on to Iran, just to underline the fact that Iranian influence in Syria is not new. There was a lot going on even then. The Syrians and the Iranians saw each other regularly; there were ministerial visits. Shia only account for 1.5% of the population of Syria, so the influence of Iran was more political than social or religious. They were already meddling in Lebanon. I remember one lovely moment. There had been an Iranian ministerial visit to Syria and I thought I had detected some shift in the Syrian position. I went round to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to talk to somebody about it and I laid out my case. My interlocutor said, po-faced, no hint of irony on his face at all, 'Mr Young, you have to understand that Syrian policy is based on principles. One principle, one week; another principle, another.' They weren't all totally oppressed victims of the regime; they could show a sense of humour.

Can I just mention one thing which totally dominated our last year? It was the Hindawi affair. Hindawi, a Jordanian Palestinian, was arrested in London in April 1986 for having tried to plant a bomb on an El Al airplane from Heathrow to Tel Aviv and the way he had tried to do it was by putting it in the baggage of his fiancée. The plot was, we believe, concocted by Syrian Air Force Intelligence. Though there are alternative theories. There is one that tries to argue that it was an *acte provocateur* by Mossad to discredit Syria. But the main evidence points to a Syrian Air Force Intelligence plot.

Hindawi is arrested. The government decides that if he is convicted at his trial later in the year, we shall break relations with Syria (for the third or fourth time since independence). So we had plenty of time to prepare for this outcome. He was convicted in October 1986 in London, so the Embassy then had to pack up. We had arranged for removal lorries to come from London and arrive in Damascus at the right time. Catherine and I didn't do any packing up - we helped other people - because it had been decided that I would stay on as the head of a tiny interest section in the Australian Embassy. At the last minute, with about two days to go before we were due out, the Syrians decided that they weren't going to allow anybody to stay, including the British Council, who all had to pack up in a hurry too. So the Youngs had two days in which to pack up. We all went out on the Saturday, I remember and scrambled back to London. So our last year in Damascus, 1986, was a non-year in professional terms,

except for the Hindawi affair and our preparations for dealing with the outcome of the trial. He was convicted and sentenced to forty five years.

We were talking earlier about how polite and courteous the Arabs are, whatever the problems in the relationship. We had a striking example of that in Damascus after breaking relations with them. Despite that slap in the face, the Ambassador, Roger Tomkys, and I were invited to a farewell lunch at the Foreign Ministry and they all said how sorry they were to see us go. No rancour. It was partly because of the solidarity that diplomats feel in difficult circumstances and which, I think, they felt for us, but it is an interesting example of how personal relationships can transcend the political in these difficult places.

CM: Just before we finish this session, I want to ask you a general question which is this: the Foreign Office of your period and earlier has been seen by many people as the Camel Corps, that it had a very visceral feeling and sympathy for the Arab world. Do you think that is true?

RY: Yes, and no. 'Yes', because there are far more Arabists than Hebrew speakers, and many more countries and so inevitably there was going to be a weighting in the numbers of people dealing with the Arab world. There was bound to be a pre-dominance. I think we all tried to be objective, but undeniably there was a sense of sympathy for the underdog. The Dick Beaumont generation, my Ambassador in Cairo, spent all their careers in the Middle East and there, I suspect, a level of bias could creep in. That said, the number of officers who went native was small.

'No', because the problems and irritants in our relations with various Middle Eastern countries over the years helped to redress the balance in people's minds. It wasn't all plain sailing. You might feel a lot of sympathy for the Arab cause, only to find yourself at loggerheads with a particular country over something. That reduced the sympathy level. In addition, it was becoming the norm in my time to spend part of one's career away from one's area of specialisation. That helped to reduce the risk of bias. I regret that the Foreign Office, unlike the US State Department, did not systematically post Arabists once to Tel Aviv. That would have helped to achieve balance.



Interview 2 with Sir Rob (John Robertson) Young

*Today is Friday 22 March 2019 and this is the second interview with Sir Rob Young for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme; Catherine Manning recording.*

CM: Rob, we are picking up your career in 1987 when you had just, rather abruptly, returned to London after Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Syria, as a result of the Hindawi affair. You were not expected back in London. Everyone expected you to stay in Damascus to run the British Interests Section. What happened when you got home?

RY: There was a gap between my leaving Damascus and re-starting in the FCO and in that period it was decided that I should take over as Head of Middle East Department. There were other candidates for the job, including David Gore-Booth, who then went to Planning Staff instead. I took over as Head in January 1987. The key issues in the four years I did that job were the Iran-Iraq War, UK relations with both Iraq and Iran, the Rushdie affair and the Iraq invasion of Kuwait.

### **Head of Middle East Department, FCO, 1987-91**

As far as the Iran-Iraq War was concerned, that's covered in very great detail in public documentation. The first major challenge that hit me after I took over was the Iranian mining of the Gulf in the summer of 1987. The Prime Minister called a meeting at No. 10. David Mellor (who had just taken over as Minister of State) attended because Geoffrey Howe was on holiday. It wasn't a particularly successful meeting, because she asked the chaps from the Ministry of Defence what the depth of the Gulf was at the Straits of Hormuz, obviously thinking it might be possible to put submarines in. Nobody knew. So she sent everyone off with a flea in their ear and told them to come back the next day when they had marshalled a few facts, so that they could take some decisions. It was a baptism of fire for David Mellor. What happened after that, in fact, was that a decision was taken to invoke Article 8.3 of the WEU Treaty, which is about threats to peace. It was the first time the WEU had undertaken a military operation since its inception in the late 1940s. Operation Clean Sweep was set up to protect allied shipping in the Gulf. At this point, Iraq was beginning to step up the pressure on Iran, Iran having lost hundreds of thousands of men and being forced to employ boys of twelve, thirteen, fourteen on the front line. A war-weary Iran eventually accepted a cease-fire brokered by the UN in August 1988.

Moving on to the issue of UK bilateral relations with these two countries, Iran and Iraq, during my time in Middle East Department relations were dominated by the war itself and, in particular, the thorny issue of arms sales to Iraq. Public guidelines had been issued in 1985 by Geoffrey Howe which said that orders should not be approved which ‘which would significantly enhance the capability of either side to prolong or exacerbate the conflict.’ There were accusations that the government were being slipshod about applying these guidelines. My experience was that the export applications were very rigorously examined. The obvious problem was always the end user, because the certificates had to indicate who the end users were and Iraq was using intermediaries not only to buy the weapons, but falsely stating end use as well. So that was sensitive to handle and required quite a lot of help from the intelligence agencies. A particular problem arose over the sale of dual-use equipment – equipment that could be used to manufacture either guns or perfectly harmless civilian equipment – and that was later the subject of the Scott Enquiry in the early 1990s.

Interestingly, relations with Iraq had stabilised during the war to the point where David Mellor as Minister of State paid a visit to Baghdad in February 1988. I was in the party and we met Saddam and that was chilling. One couldn’t get out of one’s mind that here was a man who had committed his first murder aged twelve. Quite clearly, he inspired deep fear in his entourage. They seemed to creep about, hoping that he wouldn’t notice them. He was physically an impressive person who commanded the room. Of course, he ruled Iraq by fear in the utmost degree. He knew at that point that he was winning the war and that gave him a degree of greater confidence. It was quite a moment. I do not recall any decisions being made at the meeting, but later the British government did decide to extend more credit for the purchase of British (non-military) goods.

CM: That’s a very interesting photo. (Of Sir Rob shaking hands with Saddam.) He looks as if he is gritting his teeth as he smiles at you, doesn’t he?

RY: Yes, I think there were conflicting emotions in his mind, too, about the ex-colonial power, I suppose.

Bilateral relations with Iran were endlessly bumpy following the Revolution. Problem after problem. I’ll just mention a few. Edward Chaplin – the number two in the Embassy - was picked up in May 1987 and taken off by some shadowy organisation, vaguely connected with the government. He was treated roughly, but released fairly quickly. This action was allegedly in retaliation for our arresting an Iranian diplomat in Manchester. We retaliated to

their retaliation by closing their consulate in Manchester. The relationship was very fraught for about a year and then we negotiated a resumption of full relations. David Miers, the Assistant Under-Secretary, and I met an Iranian delegation in Geneva for three or four days. It was difficult. They were very slippery, perfectly capable of arguing that black was white. Every night we closed the meeting and they said they had to go off and consult Tehran about the proceedings. The following morning they would come back and deny that they had agreed to anything the day before, so we kept finding ourselves back at square one.

Eventually we managed to reach an agreement, but hardly had we restored relations to a relatively even keel when the Rushdie affair broke. The Iranian fatwa was issued on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1988. However, the problem had surfaced some time before. India had already banned *The Satanic Verses* two or three months earlier. The Iranians were quite slow to react. When the blow fell in mid-February, Nick Brown was our Chargé d'Affaires in Tehran; he had only been there three weeks and he had to leave. It was clearly unthinkable not to back freedom of expression in the face of this obscurantist Iranian action. It was a shocking thing to do and Rushdie had to live in hiding with police protection for a very long time. Wherever he went he had to be protected. It was a tough time for him. There was a degree of public consensus in the UK about supporting Rushdie which made our handling of policy that much easier. In 1990 we restored relations again at Chargé level, but they were a roller coaster.

The fourth problem was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. I returned from leave on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1990 and everything seemed fairly quiet. I remember thinking that I could have stayed away for another week at least! The warning signs were considerable Iraqi troop movements near the Kuwait border. There was a review of intelligence by the JIC (Joint Intelligence Committee) on the afternoon of the 31<sup>st</sup>, I recall.

CM: Had there been any other, previous, indications that Saddam was threatening Kuwait?

RY: You may remember the famous discussion he had had earlier with April Glaspie, the American Ambassador. I don't recall our having seen a full transcript of that interview by 30<sup>th</sup> July, but Saddam was obviously testing the water with her. In retrospect it is clear that he concluded – wrongly, of course - that if he pursued Iraq's longstanding claim to Kuwait, the US would do nothing. The problem was that at no time during Saddam's reign did we have intelligence from deep in the regime, so we had no idea at all what he was thinking. All we could do was to monitor what was going on physically and on the afternoon of 31<sup>st</sup> July it

looked as if he might be going in for a bout of sabre-rattling on the border, but not much worse than that. Then suddenly he invaded overnight on 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> August.

I was woken up early in the morning and went into the Office at 6am and we decided that this was a full-blown crisis which required the opening up of the Emergency Unit. I moved most of Middle East Department, lock stock and barrel, into the Emergency Unit because I knew we'd need quite a lot of pairs of hands. The first thing we did then was to organise a meeting of interested Whitehall departments at 11 o'clock that morning (about 12 hours after the invasion), chaired by the Deputy Under-Secretary, Roger Tomkys. This led to the freezing of Kuwaiti assets, so the Iraqis couldn't get at them. Things began to move quite quickly within the Civil Service.

Margaret Thatcher immediately seized the implications of it all. It wasn't just about oil; it was about the unwarranted invasion of a sovereign state. She was either in America or just going to America. She saw President Bush and helped to stiffen his resolve that the Iraqi action required a strong response. Some people, I think, were inclined to underestimate the significance of the invasion, because it hadn't happened before under Saddam and his intentions were not entirely clear. Was he going to stay? Was he going to press on further? It took a while to realise that, were he not stopped, he was going to go on. In Saddam's mind he was creating Greater Iraq, rather like one saw, later on, with Greater Serbia. In his eyes it was perfectly justified because of the long-standing Iraqi claim.

Once the decision was taken to fight back and remove Iraq from Kuwait, the timetable really depended on how quickly we could arrange the necessary military build-up. It took five months. Over thirty countries – 36, I think - came on board and it was a very impressive force, in the end. It was absolutely right to take the time to build up a large enough force to do the job properly. Some people might make interesting comparisons with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when it was arguable that there wasn't adequate force to do the job effectively. I won't go into the details of the actual campaign, because I had left Middle East Department just before the allied bombing started, but a bit about the crisis management perhaps?

CM: Can I ask you about the British Airways plane which landed during the invasion and was held in Kuwait. Did that impinge on you at all?

RY: Oh, yes, British citizens caught in Iraq and Kuwait were a major problem. I think the BA plane landed while the invasion was taking place and then got stuck. Then there were all

the Brits living in Iraq, too, whom Saddam tried to use as a human shield. It took various visits, not least by Edward Heath, to get them all released. In a publicity stunt, Saddam was seen with some of the foreigners, and patted a child's head in an avuncular way. Do you remember that photograph? The consular side of the Emergency Unit had to expand very fast, because we were inundated with calls from families trying to find out what was happening to their kith and kin. The consular aspect was a hugely important one.

As the crisis continued, co-ordination in Whitehall became increasingly complex. There had to be co-ordination within the FCO, of course; many departments were involved. With other Whitehall Departments, that required a string of ministerial meetings every day, to try to make sure everybody was in the loop. The main Whitehall co-ordination meeting at official level was at 11 o'clock at the Cabinet Office, chaired by the Overseas Policy Directorate (OPD). Then there was the news handling side of it, which was quite testing. An area where we fell down to start with was correspondence. We were flooded with letters and we got terribly behind. We had to draft in dozens of people, just to cope with the correspondence. Then there were the lifelines we had to keep open: communications with our Embassies in Kuwait and Baghdad, because we couldn't get them out to start with. I remember the only way we could communicate with Kuwait was by telex and that required setting their generator in motion and they had got very limited oil supplies. We had to ration that and communication had to be very succinct. I must say the morale of the staff in both missions was marvellous. They kept going under a lot of pressure.

Then there were the instructions to the posts round the world, telling them what was going on and what they needed to do with local governments, especially those governments that we wanted to take part, or who had offered already to take part, in the military operation. How was all that orchestrated? Since this was recognised from the outset as pure aggression, the UN operation, mainly in the Security Council, functioned quite smoothly. The principal Resolutions were 660, which was the first after the attack and then 678, which was the green light to use 'all necessary force'. France hesitated to join the military coalition, despite Mitterrand, because he had a Socialist Minister of Defence who was not at all keen on France's being involved. So Mitterrand had to be given time to coax his government along to give the right answer. Jordan and the Arab countries, of course, required a lot of massaging. The Jordanian attitude was very ambivalent. Jordan had at first been neutral, and then in February 1991 decided to back Iraq.

Then there was another sidelight on all this. The Kuwaitis decided to set up a government in exile at Taif in Yemen. We sent somebody from the Foreign Office, Ian Blackley, to be the British representative. We were the first government to send a representative and the Kuwaitis much appreciated that. Quite apart from what was going on militarily further north, they felt that was very welcome political support at a difficult time.

Hanging over it all was the risk, I think a real risk, that Saddam might resort to chemical weapons, either against the Coalition forces or against Israel or both. He'd, after all, used chemical weapons against his own population in Halabja and he was deemed capable of doing anything to survive. He survived that war in the end, because the Coalition decided not to march on to Baghdad.

I mentioned the consular pressures, which were considerable. Consular work was part of the remit of the Emergency Unit, which remained the hub of the Foreign Office effort. I and a deputy carved up the day between us. I would get in about 5am and stay until 9 o'clock at night; and then my deputy would come in after lunch and stay until 4 or 5 in the morning. Everybody else was on 8 hour shifts, so it was a round-the-clock service, sustained, not to everybody's satisfaction, by food from the Metropolitan Police! You've got to imagine that every single piece of information which was being generated by the crisis came to us, not necessarily for action, but we saw it all. Just physically handling all that paper in those days was quite a task - making sure it was all looked at and that suitable action was being taken. We were the centre of the spider's web really, without the benefit of the internet. The problem with information overload affected every level of the Office. How to ensure that Ministers had enough information with which to take the key decisions, without missing what was possibly a vital ingredient? I may be re-writing history, but I don't recall a dropped catch. In the five months that I was Head of the Emergency Unit we had a through-put of 350 staff, with anything between 25 and 50 people working in the Emergency Unit at any given time.

CM: Where did you get them from?

RY: Oh, departments all over the Office. They were commandeered by the Administration who in effect said, 'You will send x, y and z to the Emergency Unit,' so we weren't short of good staff.

CM: They were weren't all Arabists, either?

RY: They didn't really need to be all the time. Those on the policy side did, obviously, but if you were on the consular side, you needed to have consular skills and it didn't really matter if you knew where Baghdad was or not.

The physical conditions were tough because the Emergency Unit was underground with no natural light. We were working like moles day and night. At least I got out to go to meetings, but some people were stuck there all day long, which was testing.

It was decided that I would stop before the bombing campaign started and Patrick Nixon took over.

CM: That was because your time as Head of Middle East Department had come to an end?

RY: That was the natural end and I had already been appointed to my next post. The bombing started in the second half of January 1991 and I left the Unit in early January 1991. I'd done four years in the Department anyway.

#### **Minister, Paris, 1991-94**

CM: At the beginning of 1991 you went back to Paris as Minister. What did you feel about returning to Paris? Was this something you wanted to do or had you got your eyes on something else and they said, 'No, no, we need you in Paris?'

RY: It was the latter. I hadn't really got my eye on anything particular elsewhere, but it would have been quite nice by then to have become a head of mission. Indeed, one person fought very hard not to let me go to Paris, on the grounds that I should run my own post. But in the end those in favour of sending me to Paris prevailed and I was perfectly happy to go back. We'd had such a wonderful time on our first posting that to go back to Paris was really quite a delightful prospect for me and I had no regrets about it. I was particularly happy to be working, to start with, under Ewen Fergusson whom I knew and loved dearly. He immediately made life easy for me by determining a satisfactory division of labour. I was supposed to make sure the Embassy ran reasonably smoothly and to keep in touch with the senior officials, especially in the Quai d'Orsay but also other ministries as necessary. He dealt with Ministers and the public.

CM: Did you know Ewen already? Had you worked with him before?

RY: I'd not worked with him before, but I knew him.

CM: Would you like to give us a little character sketch? Ewen was a famous figure in the Foreign Office and I think it would be worth saying what he was like.

RY: I was so fond of him and he was a joy to work for. He was larger than life, in every way, a big personality, a big man, with a big sense of humour and big capacity for life. He physically dominated any room that he walked into and had the intellect to go with it. It wasn't simply charisma; he had a very good brain indeed.

CM: But he cultivated, perhaps not so much with you, but with his younger staff, a manner of, 'I'm just here as decoration and you are the clever young things who are working so hard to get it all sorted out. What do I know about it?' He also had remarkable gifts of personality; he understood people very well and knew how to deal with them.

RY: Absolutely, that's exactly right. He did like to give the impression that he was a sort of front man, a kind of tailor's dummy in the window. Far from it. When he had to deal with a government minister, or the prime minister or whomever, he displayed a mixture of intelligence and charm which was a winner every time. People loved him; there are no two ways about it. Added to that, of course, he and Sara entertained magnificently. People decry this sort of thing nowadays, but it was and should still be, in my view, an essential tool of diplomacy, because people relax when they are being entertained and you can often get across messages and receive, sometimes, interesting messages of a kind that you might not in their own offices. In any case, it is all part of the process of building trust in yourself and your government. I don't think any couple since the War have entertained and used that Residence more effectively than the Fergussons did. He travelled a lot. He put himself about, as people say, around the country, and was well known. He did a lot of television and radio and was the public face of Britain in France in a very significant way. That was important. It is something I shall pick up a bit later on. You must not simply convince people in private in France, but make an impact on public opinion as well. It really makes a difference. He did that. He stayed on, unusually, for three months longer than his official retirement date in order to be there for the Queen's state visit at the end of 1992, which he handled superbly, as you can imagine. There was something very comforting about Ewen. You felt that if you were with Ewen that nothing could go seriously wrong.

CM: He was a wonderful ambassador. He filled his role splendidly. I just thought it was worth having your account of him, since you spoke at his memorial. You obviously knew him extraordinarily well and his family appreciated his relationship with you.



RY: We did hit it off. I remember the day I arrived; Catherine wasn't there yet and Sara was away too. It was the day before Easter and Ewen said to a few of us in the Embassy, 'Come round to dinner tomorrow evening. I've got some bin ends of Chateau Palmer that I want to try out.' So we solemnly drank some absolutely wonderful Chateau Palmer from the 1970s at an informal dinner. That was typical of Ewen; he was very generous in every way, both in the way he dealt with people and the way he looked after them and entertained them. It was all of a piece.

CM: You mention in your notes 'carving out a role' and I think that is very interesting, because it is well known that in big posts the role of the minister is a difficult one. On one level, you're basically there so the ambassador can go on leave, but you've got to have something to do the rest of the time.

RY: Well, as I said, Ewen was very good about leaving me a real block of political work to do. Senior officials, including for example the Political Director at the Quai d'Orsay - he never went to see them. It was always I who dealt with the Political Director, the Diplomatic Adviser at the Elysée as well, whom I saw regularly. So I felt that I was able to plug in at senior level whenever needed on any given issue. When Christopher Mallaby took over, he let me carry on in the same vein, so there wasn't any restriction of my role. I was lucky, because, as you say, sometimes a minister can be really squeezed between an all-embracing ambassador and some very hard-working and ambitious counsellors.

I have always been fascinated by the relationship between the UK and France. That was one of the reasons why I was happy to go back, because it is uniquely challenging. The national circumstances of both our countries had changed from the time of my first posting in Paris ten years before. Our relative economic weight had shifted, thanks to Margaret Thatcher's reforms. Britain was on the up again, on the move economically. The fact that France in 1980 had had a GDP almost 25% larger than ours had been largely eroded and we were now very much on a par. Thanks again to Margaret Thatcher in large measure, Britain had regained a lot of international clout and influence during the 1980s, so the balance was different. Both countries when I got to Paris in 1991 were adjusting to the collapse of the Soviet Union and I mentioned last time the way in which both she and Mitterrand misjudged the events of 1989, because of the difficulty they had in conceiving of a Europe different from that which had prevailed throughout the Cold War. There was a changed global

environment. And, both countries, when I arrived in Paris in 1991, had taken part in the Gulf War, which was a plus.

But to understand the dynamic of the relationship we need to go back quite a long way. France emerged humiliated from the Second World War; after all, it had been occupied three times by Germany in eighty years and there was a huge need to rebuild national self-confidence. There was still a residual sense of national feeling in France, a certain pride in being French, but that had to be recharged and it was - by a series of post-War successes in France (not in chronological order): reconciliation with Germany; creation of a European Community tailored very much to France's interests; the transformation of France into a nuclear power, both military and civil; the shedding of Empire - bloody, but they'd done it; a high level of economic growth since the Fourth Republic; and finally the re-forging of political stability through the creation of the Fifth Republic. All these things were a success story for France, which was riding high in many ways by 1991. All those successes were brought about independently, not as in the UK case virtually in the alliance with the United States. For decades following the Second World War the French body politic was cemented by this sense of national independence. You may argue that it was a rather superficial form of independence, but nonetheless it was interpreted and exploited as genuine national independence. That is what is at the root, I think, of the sense of re-found national self-confidence that the French were displaying by the 1970s, let alone the 1980s or 90s.

One of the problems for the UK was that this emphasis on national independence often led French leaders to resist US leadership, at least publicly. There was an inevitable clash then with UK instincts. Our instinct has always been to accommodate the US point of view, wherever possible. The French instinct is always not to do so, or at least to appear not to do so. The French also, for example, also sought an independent relationship with the Soviet Union, long before the end of the Cold War. That yearning for independence percolates the whole French character. It's the most highly individualistic country that I can think of. There are three elements I'd like to underline in this context: (i) the competitive nature of French education. There's no tradition of team sports, at all; the emphasis is on coming out on top; (ii) the antithetical way of French thinking: *thèse*, *anti-thèse*, *synthèse*, which is inculcated into children from an early age, into the way they think, and it leads to a tendency to confrontational argument; (iii) the prevailing sense of mutual distrust: *méfiance*. Art Buchwald once said, 'Most Frenchmen can't stand one another, so why on earth should you expect them to like us?'

Then, of course, the European Community, the European Union, has been a perennial problem in our relationship. The French never believed, long before Brexit, that the UK was committed to developing the European Community, except when it served our interests. I remember endless arguments about this on both my postings to Paris. Our penchant for opt-outs simply confirmed the French in that view. But, of course, there are contradictions in the French approach; it's far from black and white. French political elites never whole-heartedly embraced ever-closer union or a federal Europe. After all, Giscard's invention of the European Council was designed precisely to ensure the continued supremacy of national governments. But the French were cleverer than us British at cloaking their national interests in *communautaire* language. They cheerfully ignored or watered down what they did not like coming out of Brussels. So they played a very different game. In terms of diplomacy, as seen from the Embassy in that second period, the trick was constantly to off-set arguments about the EC, 'our money' in the 1980s for example, with other areas where agreement was clearer and easier. So we were on a track of collaboration, if you like, alongside the track where we were diverging. That required systematic cultivation of decision-makers from the President downwards and opinion-formers. I have to say that, given the importance of France to our interests, the case for a large Embassy seemed to me to be thoroughly justified. It wasn't just in Paris, which is a microcosm; we had to really have a properly thought-through programme of projecting Britain throughout the country, public speeches, television, radio and so forth, because those media remained influential in the lives of Frenchmen. I have to say that both Ambassadors I worked for, Ewen in particular, were supremely good at that projection of Britain throughout the country.

CM: How did the State Visit go?

RY: That went extremely well. State Visits are so well organised, they run on rails. The Queen is marvellous at all this. I wasn't involved in the detailed arrangements for the state visit. Ewen was running the show and he said, 'Get on with running the Embassy while I do this.' So he looked after all that. He upstaged – I think it came out in one or two of the obituaries about Ewen – he upstaged the French at the return dinner in the French President's honour at the Residence, by serving 1964 Château Latour, which was even better than the wine served at the Elysée. It was such a grand affair; a hundred and sixty sitting down at different tables in the Ballroom and in the Dining room. Ewen's idea was that the State Visit should re-affirm the "eternal verities" in the relationship. That was his watchword, his motto.

It is always difficult to measure the impact and value of State Visits. They strike a lot of chords. They very often don't have any immediate or tangible impact in terms of bilateral agreements, but they help to underline a certain depth of feeling in the relationship which is good cementing, I think. The question is whether the results, however you define them, justify the huge amount of time, labour and effort that go into such visits. You will gather than I am not an unconditional fan of State Visits, but they can be valuable.

CM: Three years? Three and a half years in Paris? And still not a head of mission!

RY: Three and a half years. My mother could not understand why I wasn't an ambassador. She thought I was doing quite well in the Office, but had occasional doubts when I failed at the next posting to get to the top of an embassy. She said, 'Rob, are you sure you're doing well?' 'Yes, yes, mother.' 'So when are you going to be an ambassador?'

#### **Deputy Under-Secretary of State, 1994–98, and Chief Clerk, 1995–98, FCO**

CM: You went back to London in 1994 as Deputy Under-Secretary and then you became Chief Clerk in 1995. What were you doing in between?

RY: Well, I went back in June 1994 to take up a newly created DUS job, covering Europe and the Middle East. It turned out to be a non-job because there were so many other people, senior people, with well entrenched fingers in these pies, like the Political Director and Economic Director and so on, that I found it very difficult to add any value whatsoever. It was therefore a relief when I moved to being Chief Clerk less than a year later in 1995. Andrew Wood, the previous Chief Clerk, had come to the end of his time there.

CM: Were you glad to be Chief Clerk?

RY: I've always enjoyed administration and managing people and there were quite a lot of things I thought I could do, or wanted to try to do.

CM: And it was a period when a whole lot of changes were taking place in the Foreign Office.

RY: I think it might be worth, for the record, explaining what I covered. The Chief Clerk is a wonderful title, now defunct, sadly. I supervised 34 departments, covering administration, finance, personnel, security, protocol, estates, consular, visa, even News Department. It was too much in some ways, but there were some excellent assistant Under-Secretaries and heads

of department under me, so it was manageable, even if it took me quite a long time to get round and visit them all.

The core task turned out to be negotiating with the Treasury over the FCO budget. It is worth pointing out that in those days the FCO budget, including 220 posts overseas and grants in aid to the British Council and the BBC World Service, was 0.03% of public expenditure. It's a rounding up figure for some Government Departments. Yet, every year, until we got three-year settlements, every year the Treasury questioned our very existence. You had to start from scratch, justifying the need for a Foreign Office, which I found extremely tedious and annoying.

'Modernisation' was the great mantra in government at the time. Michael Heseltine was trying to turn the Civil Service into a reflection of the private sector, trying to align Whitehall management practice with that of the private sector. Some Foreign Secretaries fought harder for the Department than others. I have to say I had a depressing first year, because in that expenditure round Malcolm Rifkind gave away £50 million on the capital expenditure baseline, at the last minute. The Treasury was so surprised that they rang up and asked me what was going on. It took us a while to absorb that. Mind you, there were some victories. A year or so later there was a Senior Management Review across Whitehall where we had to cut a certain percentage of all senior posts. I took great delight in cutting the new DUS post I had filled in 1994, which gave us exactly the savings we needed. So we were back to the status quo ante without really having felt any pain at all.

There were two particular initiatives that I am proud of. One was the review of allowances, known as the Hornby Review. It redistributed allowances worldwide. It was a huge job, but we managed to achieve a better balance between OECD posts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and harder, tougher posts. There was also much more devolution, both at home and abroad, so that people could manage their budgets at a lower level and not have to come through the Administration all the time. There was also an element of spouse compensation - 'spouse' being the word used then. And we created – this is my second proud action – a FCO Association for retired staff and that has proved very successful, I think. I have to say that throughout this period I was much helped by the fact that my wife, Catherine, was the Chairman of the British Diplomatic Spouses' Association, so we settled a lot of problems over dinner.

When I took over as Chief Clerk in 1995 I said that I wanted the Foreign Office to be a series of things:

- global. We did manage to maintain the global network, in spite of some staff cuts. Indeed we had reversed those staff cuts by the time I left and we were in the process in 1998/9 of recruiting 400 more staff.

- flexible. Again, devolution was the key word here. We just needed to give posts abroad much greater control of the budget and take it away from the central administration. I should say that there were two methods of entry into the Foreign Office, what was known as A and B fifty years ago, and later the administrative and the executive streams. We merged those after the entry process, and by the time I left the Office 30% of all heads of mission were from the executive stream. There was a greater integration of UK staff and locally-engaged staff overseas, locally-engaged staff doing a lot more of the jobs that used to be done by UK-based staff.

- professional. We introduced more training, greater specialisation, including the maintenance of hard language training, in order to try and achieve a better balance between breadth of experience and depth of experience. It was certainly the case that heads of mission who had had a certain breadth of experience found it easier to cope when they had the responsibility of running a whole mission. Developing staff skills and deploying them effectively worldwide was a centralised personnel function. Even in the mid-1990s when I was Chief Clerk there was some pressure to let staff manage their own careers. I resisted that, firmly.

CM: At that time UK-based staff in the Foreign Office had to go where they were sent.

RY: Well, there was a degree of negotiation, but that was the commitment they made on joining. There was a central personnel department deciding where best to deploy people and I still believe that deploying the talents you've got to the best advantage over a career does require a degree of centralised planning and administration. It needn't be dictatorial. One was always trying to find a balance between operational needs on the one hand and individual career and postings choices on the other. That's always existed and the best personnel managers were very good at managing that.

We also gave a boost to equal opportunities; we tried to do more for ethnic minorities both in terms of recruitment and the way they were treated within the Office, because there was sometimes some friction. Not everybody is as un-racist as one likes to think. And we also

made it easier for women to stay on after having children, with job-shares and so forth. It was only quite shortly before that homosexuality had been accepted within the Office in 1991.

CM: It might be worth saying something about the situation before 1991 because, although homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967, there was still a barrier to employment in the Foreign Office, was there not?

RY: Yes, there was. Homosexuals tended to hide their homosexuality in order to get in and to stay in. It caused a great deal of anxiety, tension and sadness for many of them. There was quite a lot of debate within the Office before the situation was finally eased in 1991, but there had always been the argument in many people's minds that, if you were homosexual, you laid yourself open to blackmail by a foreign power.

CM: It was a circular argument, because if you're not allowed to be open about it, you can be blackmailed. But if you're allowed to be open, you can't be blackmailed. What happened in 1991?

RY: It simply became acceptable for people to declare themselves as homosexuals. There was a ruling; I don't recall in what form it was promulgated around the Office, but there was formal discussion and acceptance by ministers in 1991. It was a huge relief to a lot of people, there's no doubt about it.

CM: Our first gay ambassador?

RY: I haven't tracked down our first gay ambassador, so I can't tell you exactly when that was, but we certainly had a gay head of mission by 2000; Simon Scaddan in Papua New Guinea was there with his partner. Then there was an ambassador in Europe in 2004 – it took a while to get this moving. Another argument that people had put forward previously was that in a number of countries around the world homosexuality was illegal and it would therefore be very provocative and could cause local ructions if we appointed a homosexual as head of mission. But even there we have found that in practice it has not proved half as big a problem as a lot of people claimed.

CM: At the same time as the liberalisation for gays, there was the question of unmarried partners. Was it in your time in the mid-90s that the Foreign Office had started accepting and paying allowances to partners who went out to posts without being married?

RY: It was essentially about bringing Foreign Office practice into line with domestic legislation and mores. I can't remember the exact date of that ruling, but the 1990s was a period of considerable liberalisation.

The fourth objective that I set myself was that the Foreign Office should be cost-effective. Well, that meant getting better value for money by devolving budgets and we found almost immediately – it's pretty obvious – the more responsibility you give to people further down the system for managing their budgets the better they manage them and the more they get out of them. One problem I found throughout my career was that we were – perhaps we're better nowadays – bad at prioritisation. We tried to do everything in policy terms. I remember in departments that it was very difficult to convince somebody further up the system that you could actually not do something, just drop it, because people were too busy. No – 'It's got to be done. It's got to be done.' This failure to prioritise was a major factor in the long hours which plagued the Office.

- well managed. One of the problems I found as I went round the world – I went to 70 countries during my time as Chief Clerk – was that there were far too many posts re-inventing the wheel over good management practice. So I tried to find ways of spreading best practice around the world to avoid people having to think it up for themselves. It sounds simple, but in fact it is very difficult when you've got such a very spread-out network. It was also the case that too many bad managers were being promoted. When it came to the promotion boards, people tended to be judged on their policy abilities rather than on their management skills. I tried to make sure that management skills were given higher priority, because if you can't manage and motivate people effectively, you're not going to get anything like the best out of them and you're probably going to end up with an unhappy mission that's underperforming.

I've talked about pressures on staff. Linked to that, one point worth making – I was really struck by this quite late in my career – is that foreign *stagiaires* quite often remarked that the system didn't encourage original thought or initiative-taking at junior level. Pushing down responsibility is very difficult in a system where you need political-level approval for a wide range of issues before you can put them into practice, before you can issue instructions to a post to take action. It was interesting that it was foreigners very often who realised quite quickly that we were stifling, that the system was stifling, the capacity of junior staff to take the initiative and think for themselves. I don't know whether they've managed to overcome this problem. I certainly couldn't. I failed really to make much of a dent on that. I



constantly tried to cut down the size of the administration, and devolution helped us to do that. In 1992 the administration accounted for 33% of home expenditure and in 1998 it was down to 21%. That was good.

- well motivated and personally satisfying. I don't think the outside world really understands the extraordinary strains and pressures that the diplomatic life makes on officers and their children, their families and partners. One of the things which always impressed me as Chief Clerk was reading the personnel files of individual officers and realising in many cases what an incredible job they were doing, despite some intense health or family worries, personal tragedies. The ethos was intact. It was only when you read the file and saw what some people had been through in their lives that you realised how heavy the stresses and strains could be.

We tried to find ways of recognising the contribution made by spouses, partners. Again, this all sounds a bit, how shall I put it, inadequate by comparison with the way people view things nowadays. But twenty years ago it was quite a break through. We agreed that spouses could be employed and paid as residence managers; we gave reinforced priority to spouse employment in embassies; we improved family entitlements. At the time these were welcomed as important and useful improvements. One can never do enough really to compensation for the pressures of the diplomatic life.

A final point on all this. For the very first time in the mid-90s I was meeting young new entrants who were saying, quite openly, 'Oh, I thought I'd give it a try. No, I'm not committed to this for more than a few years. I'll see how I like it.' That contrasts so strongly with the attitude when I joined which was that basically joining the FCO was a lifelong commitment. Of course, some of my contemporaries didn't stay, but the attitude when you went in was: this is going to be a career for life. That had changed dramatically by the mid-90s. We were already seeing some turnover in younger staff, people realising that if they wanted to work beyond 60, they'd have to get out of the Foreign Office in their 40s, because in those days the retirement age was 60, and if they wanted a second career which would take them way beyond 60, they'd better get out in good time, rather than wait until they were forced to retire. There were voluntary retirement schemes. The problem with those schemes was that very often it was the most adaptable and most mobile who jumped, because they could see that they might have a decent chance of finding a job somewhere else; while the ones we were less keen to keep tended to stay, because they were afraid of not being able to

find alternative employment outside. So it didn't always have the right result. We weren't into the really severe cuts of the 2000s; we had a few blows but it wasn't as bad as people were to suffer later on.

May I make one or two points about life at the top table? It was the group of Deputy Under-Secretaries ...

CM: Was this the Foreign Office Board? All the DUSs sat on the Board ...

RY: Yes, and the Board wore different hats. It might be the appointments board; it might be a board looking at policy planning; it might be a board looking at administrative issues; we changed hats, but basically it was the same group of people. There was a genuine collegiate sense about it and it functioned pretty well, I think. There was very little back-stabbing in the Office, on the whole. The flip side of that was that, if anything, senior staff tended to be reluctant to confront juniors if they weren't performing properly. One tended to be rather indulgent with people who weren't quite up to scratch. There was a sense of common purpose, which I enjoyed throughout my career, and it was particularly tangible at DUS level. Unlike the private sector, where information is power, in the Foreign Office information was not only shared freely, but properly analysed formed the basis of advice to Ministers, one hopes sound advice to Ministers, and hence of sensible decision-making. And that's always seemed to me to be one of the biggest differences between the public and private sector, this attitude to information.

When I returned to London in 1994, my first PUS (Permanent Under-Secretary) was David Gillmore, who was succeeded by John Coles, who was succeeded by John Kerr, so I had three PUSs. Different styles. David Gillmore, extremely shrewd, but apparently quite laid back. I stress 'apparently'. What a fine mind. John Coles: ditto, with an enormous capacity for detail and keeping tabs on the myriad issues crossing his desk. I found him very easy to work with. For the Administration, the key issues, the key changes, the key reforms all came to the Board and he was very supportive indeed, and he was very supportive of the BDSA as well. John Kerr was more difficult to work with in some ways. He suffered from always having been a very high flier and couldn't really understand that some people in the Office, including the two and a half thousand home civil servants, were not prepared to work twenty hours a day to further the interests of the nation and their own careers. From time to time I had to be a breakwater between him and the Administration. But he appointed me to Delhi as High Commissioner, so I cannot complain!

Who were the Foreign Secretaries when I was Chief Clerk? First it was Malcolm Rifkind, who gave away £50 million, and then Robin Cook after the election in 1997.

CM: How did you find Robin Cook when he became Foreign Secretary?

RY: He didn't take a huge amount of interest in administration, to be perfectly honest. The Ministers of State took more interest, Baroness Symons, for example, who was a trade unionist. She was very interested and I spent quite a lot of time talking to her. She was very supportive, too. I think there was a sense among Labour ministers in 1997 that the Foreign Office was rather old-fashioned and needed a boot up the pants, but we were able to convince them that we were not totally impervious to change.

CM: It's my impression that they came in with the idea of trying to get more women into responsible jobs and more minority representation.

RY: You're right. It was something that we were trying to do already, but they gave it a boost. They put extra pressure on us, and quite rightly. One couldn't disagree with that.

The only other thing that I wanted to mention at this stage was that, in 1997, at the time of the change from Conservative to Labour one was struck by how, politically, the Foreign Office is generally helped by the bi-partisan Tory/Labour approach to foreign affairs. Over the period when I was in the Foreign Office there were not many fundamental differences of approach in foreign affairs. That relative continuity of policy between the two main parties made life easier for us civil servants. The joker in the pack, as always, was Europe.

### **High Commissioner, New Delhi, 1999–2003**

CM: That was three years as Chief Clerk and in 1999 your mother's ambitions were at last fulfilled and you went to Delhi as High Commissioner. She must have been so thrilled.

RY: *Enfin*, at last, a proper job! She was!

CM: I hope you are going to say it was worth the wait, because to be High Commissioner in India – you're going to tell us all about it – is a big job. But one remark I would make is that India is a huge country and very conscious of its importance and its role in the world, and there is an extra layer of delicacy and sensitivity in our dealings with it, as the former colonial power. Were you thrilled to get this job?

RY: I was absolutely thrilled. I hadn't thought it was likely that it would come free when it did. David Gore-Booth had only been there two and a half years; he suddenly decided that he wanted to retire from the Foreign Office and so the post became vacant. Otherwise - as Chief Clerk I knew pretty well what jobs were going to come up on the postings chess board for years ahead - and it didn't look as if there was very much on the horizon at my level. So I was absolutely thrilled and it proved to be in many ways for us as a couple, for Catherine and myself, the most satisfying five years of our lives. India was really quite extraordinary, almost like living on another planet.

What you say about the delicacies of the relationship is perfectly true. The short-term challenge was to get over a real frostiness in relations, occasioned by two things: the first was some injudicious remarks by Robin Cook in November 1997 when he accompanied the Queen on her state visit to India and he tried to muscle in on the Kashmir dispute. Well, if there was one thing at that point - and indeed it had been the case since 1947 - one thing the Indians could not stomach was anybody, least of all Britain, trying to intervene on Kashmir. The second irritant were the Indian nuclear tests in the spring of 1998, to which Britain reacted very sharply and indeed led the pack in condemning India. That really got up Indian noses, as you can imagine. So there was that to sort out.

Then, for the longer term, one wanted to do what one could to help create a modern relationship, fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, building on the goodwill that was there, is still there, which I discovered with relief when I got to India. In a sense, it's surprising, given what you've said about the colonial past and that baggage, that very few Indians wanted to berate me for the sins of the Raj. On the whole their attitude was, well, if we haven't managed to sort things out in the last fifty years, that's our fault, not yours. One simple trick, which I am sure other High Commissioners have adopted, was never to criticise Indian policy in public. I was just totally bland and reserved my critical comments, when they were necessary, for private discussion. The Indians fairly quickly learned that that was going to be the rule that I was adopting. It was a little awkward at times, because after a meeting there was always a television camera or a radio reporter outside the Prime Minister's office or the Foreign Ministry. I just stuck to platitudes. The Indian media in those days were not very probing, so that wasn't too difficult. As in any diplomatic post, one had to build trust as quickly as one could to get the Indians to understand that they could rely on my discretion. There's nothing unique to India about that, but as you say there is an added layer of sensitivity because of the colonial past.

If I could run through the role the High Commission played, one major task was to explain India to Whitehall, highlighting the threats and the opportunities. We were far enough away from Whitehall for people to need the High Commission to do that. I suspect that in Europe, because of the frequent meetings between ministers in the EU context, there might have been a tendency within some government departments to think that an embassy was not terribly useful or important. The further away you get geographically from London, the more that explanation is needed. What I enjoyed particularly was the sense of representing the government as a whole. As High Commissioner you are a conduit for the policies and activities of all government departments. You can imagine that in a country as large as India, a lot of aspects of government, of what the British government was up to, had some relevance somewhere. We spent a lot of time on trade and investment. I suppose at least 50% of my time was devoted to commercial promotion of one sort or another and inward investment from India to the UK. Another growth area was education links, and that was helped while I was in India by a British government decision to allow British students in the UK to convert their student visas into work permits on the spot, without having to go home. That was a big change and it made a difference to the UK as a magnet for Indian students. We also spent a lot of time encouraging international co-operation on international issues like terrorism and climate change.

One of the issues which we had to worry about was visas. People in the outside world probably don't realise how much time, effort and resources go into the business of visa processing. We got to the point that growth in visa applications was so rapid that our building programme could not keep pace - because you have to actually house your visa staff and you have to shelter the people coming in with their applications. We were just falling behind. There were dreadful queues of people waiting to make their visa applications. So we piloted the first visa outsourcing scheme; we got a private firm to do all the visa processing up to the point where a decision was taken about whether to grant it and then of course it had to be a British officer who did that.

There was the usual enormous range of opportunities for interaction with Indian elites and broader society. The great thing was that as British High Commissioner every door opened when you knocked on it, so I had no difficulty in getting in to see people. I used to make a point of spending about ten days a month out of Delhi. That was important because we had to get to know the state governments. You never knew when there was going to be a problem that required you to pick up the phone to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh or Kerala, so

he or she had to know who you were before answering the phone. In fact, I had some really interesting contacts right across the country at the state prime minister level. It was all the more important to do that when I was there, because the government was a patchwork of about 18 coalition partners, most of whom were based in states outside Delhi.

We injected impetus into the work we were doing through ministerial visits, again a classic device. Half a dozen Cabinet ministers came every year when I was there. They just loved going to India and, from John Prescott downwards, were very good at working there. Ministers like Patricia Hewitt and Jack Straw had a feel for India, because they had large numbers of Indians in their constituencies and that made for very easy contact and interaction. The key thing there was always to make sure that these visits had clear objectives. It was hopeless if Ministers were allowed to turn up saying, 'I thought it would be a good idea to come to India.' No, thank you. There had to be clear objectives which fitted in with our overall priorities.

Because of staff cuts at the London end we found ourselves as a High Commission taking part much more in formulating policy. In the old days you would feed in information and analysis and some ideas to London; but policy would be made in the FCO; and then it would come back to the post to carry out. We found ourselves in Delhi actually writing policy submissions and, when not writing the submissions ourselves, helping to formulate that policy advice in detail. It gave an added layer of satisfaction, particularly to the Chancery.

One of the big elements of our relationship was the bi-lateral aid programme, which I had increasing doubts about as time went on. It was £300 million a year when I was there. And yet the Indians were net exporters of aid by then. We were in the extraordinary situation of still giving them aid, while they were giving much larger sums to Africa. I don't know what the situation is now (£52 million in 18/19 and £46 in 19/20). It was difficult to spend such large sums of money. DFID was reduced to giving money to states as budgetary aid; heaven knows where it went. Keeping tabs on that was impossible, so I was increasingly sceptical about the value of all that.

Then consular work. Everyone is familiar in posts abroad with the way a consular case can blow up in your face and be on the front page of *The Sun* in no time at all. We had one or two quite difficult cases, including a man called Peter Bleach who had been piloting a plane that had been involved in dropping arms to rebels in north-east India. The Purulia arms case, it was called. He had been in prison for several years by the time I got to Delhi. We got him

out eventually, in 2004, just after I left. It was very time-consuming. It meant raising it every time I went to Kolkata and with the Minister of the Interior in Delhi. I went to see Bleach as well. I had not much sympathy with him personally, because he hadn't done something very noble, but he'd been in prison long enough. He'd had nothing to do with setting up the operation; he simply drove the plane.

I talked about trade and economic relations briefly. One of the major tools in our armoury, if I can mix my metaphors, was the British Council who by the time I got to Delhi were no longer primarily a purveyor of British culture, but were working hard to get the younger generation in India to think UK rather than the US for higher education. They were doing a tremendous job attracting young Indians to study in England and also devising ways of teaching English in India. By the time I left India they were already doing online teaching programmes, very successfully. The handicap we had was a relatively small number of scholarships and bursaries. I calculated that overall, throughout the United Kingdom, there were something like 700 scholarships and bursaries available per year for all overseas students. That's a far smaller number than in the United States.

I haven't mentioned arms sales. There is one cautionary tale to relate, which shows the value of patience in dealing with India. Several western embassies were trying to sell arms and to break the Russian monopoly on arms sales. There had been some UK sales in the past. We'd sold Jaguar and some helicopters, though there were heated arguments about maintenance and spares, I remember. When I arrived in Delhi in 1999 the sale of Hawk trainer aircraft had been under discussion since 1985. The French competitor, Alphajet, dropped out because it was no longer being manufactured. Then the Americans tried to muscle in through the Czechs, but we saw them off. Eventually the sale was agreed just before I left in 2003 (and concluded in 2004). It was a time-consuming exercise, not least keeping track of where the file was, in which part of the Indian government. The length of time it took to finalise the deal - 18 years - showed how paralysed the Indian government were over arms purchases generally. This dated from the Bofors affair in the 1980s. There had been a purchase of Swedish Bofors guns and the bribery allegations were continuing; the Gandhi family were implicated. This was still hanging over the Ministry of Defence and making them more than cautious about new contracts. We also tried to negotiate local manufacture of some arms, but it didn't happen in my time.

The way in which I was informed about the Hawk sale was rather nice. I had a farewell lunch with the National Security Adviser, just he and I at home at the Residence about ten days before I left. As we were walking across the hall on his way out, he whispered in my ear, 'You've got the Hawk contract.' That was one success.

One thing that annoyed me about the incoming Labour government in 1997 was their "discovery" of commercial work. Embassies were to be turned into commercial sales offices, as though we had not been involved in commercial work at all for the previous 30 years. The turning point was the Plowden Report in the 1960s and most heads of mission had spent half their lives doing this work ever since. Yet the Labour government came in, reinvented the wheel and made a great fuss about it. I suppose we should have expected new brooms.

CM: The India-Pakistan nuclear stand-off was the big issue of your time. Were there any others before we talk about that one?

RY: There had been a sort of prelude to it. The Pakistanis came across the border in Kargil in May 1999 and the Indian Prime Minister, Mr Vajpayee, showed great restraint. He was under pressure to bomb Pakistani positions across the border. He resisted that, to his great credit. In the end the Americans got involved and managed to negotiate a pull-back, but after the Indians had undertaken a physical assault of some of the positions that the Pakistanis had occupied, high up in the mountains. It was an extraordinary feat by the Indian soldiers to climb up these sheer cliffs with 60lb packs on their backs and dislodge the Pakistanis from their eyries at the top. Vajpayee was a very shrewd, experienced and basically pacific man and the acceptable face of the BJP, in comparison with the current regime. I said to him once - I can't remember the exact date - I met him at an Army Day reception and there had been some further problem with Pakistan. I said, 'It must be awfully difficult for you to know how to react for the best when something like this happens.' All he said to me was, 'High Commissioner, you know, Musharraf carries a heavy burden.' I think he meant that Musharraf should not be judged too harshly, partly because he was an army man; the army was pressurising him all the time to take a tough stance on India; and if Musharraf did not always react as India wished, you had to take into account the internal dynamics of Pakistan. Of course, in Pakistan one of the few unifying features in the country is the Army and its anti-Indian stance. I think that's what Vajpayee meant; that's all he said, and I thought that, as long as Vajpayee is in charge, there will be some caution and understanding in dealing with Pakistan.



As proved to be the case in the confrontation in 2002. The proximate cause of it was the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2001. Some people were killed, but fortunately the terrorists were stopped before they reached government Ministers. That attack was believed to be the work of Lashkar-e-Toiba, one of the main terrorist groups.

The Indian response was immediately to cut transport links with Pakistan and to mobilise the armed forces. There was no dialogue between India and Pakistan at the time. There was no hotline between the two Prime Ministers or between the two National Security Advisers. No back channels in regular use. So India needed third party help, and all the more so because, although they could march their men up to the top of the hill, they had no strategy for getting them back down again. Against a background of extreme Indian sensitivity about any third party involvement in Kashmir, particularly British, since 1947, I nonetheless thought that here was an opportunity for the UK to try and insert ourselves, with the US, as an intermediary - not trying to tell the Indians and Pakistanis what to do necessarily, but to act as a channel of communication, to try to reduce the tensions and to help find a peaceful solution.

CM: How did you go about this?

RY: I had early chats with the Foreign Minister, the Defence Minister and with the National Security Adviser, edging towards the goal of a UK role. It took a while for them to reach the point that they were prepared to talk to us openly and accept us in an intermediary. They were obviously having to swallow a certain amount of pride. I can understand that. If you've had a policy for fifty years of not involving outsiders in a particular problem, it's uncomfortable to find yourself having to do it. By that time I'd been in India for nearly three years, so I did know the people involved well enough for them to feel perhaps more at ease with me than if I had just arrived. I spent the major part of the next six months on what a hitherto been a taboo subject. It was an interesting example of what I was saying earlier about the High Commission's growing role in formulating policy, because in the first two weeks after the 13<sup>th</sup> December I received no written instructions from London. I just got on with it. I sent in reports and nobody seemed to think I was doing the wrong thing, so that was fine. It was just odd not have feedback from London. I was flying solo really. But, after all, in a sense, this crisis was what one had spent a career preparing for.

CM: What this made crisis different from previous ones, like the Kuwait invasion, was that these were two nuclear powers. At what stage did you start to have fears for their handling of their nuclear weapons?

RY: Well, we began to realise fairly quickly that what made this crisis different was the nuclear dimension. London and Washington began to do some war-gaming and in almost every scenario they could think of, there was pretty rapid vertical escalation to the nuclear level.

CM: Mostly because of the Pakistanis?

RY: Absolutely right. Going back a step, the interesting thing about Pakistan's nuclear weapons was that they had neutralised India's conventional superiority. India had enjoyed conventional superiority for decades and then they lost it, because Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons. But the fact that Pakistan had nuclear weapons and had neutralised India's conventional superiority meant that they were much freer to pursue low-intensity warfare. They had less to fear. We found pretty rapidly, too, that there was a real lack of understanding, even at senior levels in the government, let alone in public opinion, about deterrence. In Europe we lived with the threat of nuclear war for decades during the Cold War, but they hadn't in the subcontinent and there was a lot of loose talk: 'We can absorb any nuclear shocks that the Pakistanis send us and then we'll annihilate them.' That of course was a total misreading of the situation. First of all, there was a belief that if there were a nuclear exchange, yes, Pakistan would initiate it, because under almost any scenario, India would invade and, therefore, Pakistan would have to find a way of stopping Indian conventional forces advancing further into their territory. But the thought was, 'Oh, well, in those circumstances, Pakistan will probably send one or two nuclear missiles as a warning'. This was a fundamental miscalculation. If that situation had arisen and Lahore, say, had been threatened by Indian troops, Pakistan would have loosed off most of its nuclear arsenal in a first strike.

CM: To prevent retaliation. Of course.

RY: Yes. It took time for the Indians to work that out. Indeed, we went to considerable lengths to help them understand this, with articles in the press and interviews. Also we asked Michael Quinlan, who had been PUS at the Ministry of Defence and was one of the world's greatest experts on nuclear deterrence, to visit and talk to senior members of government and to give seminars.

CM: And the senior Indian military or staff college hadn't worked out ideas of what would happen if the Pakistanis launched nuclear missiles, where would they target, what they would do in response?

RY: Well, presumably they had some battle plan, but the fundamental misunderstanding was that many Indians thought that Pakistan would fire a warning shot, which would give the Indians a chance for massive retaliation. They probably also underestimated the number of nuclear weapons the Pakistanis had got; they probably had fifty or sixty. I remember saying to people, 'You must realise that if they loose off twenty or thirty of those, the whole of northern India will be devastated for generations.' So there was quite a process of education involved.

CM: Would it also be true to say that the Indians were a bit like the Chinese under Mao: if we lose a million or two, it doesn't matter, we've got plenty left.

RY: Exactly. There were certainly people there who thought that losing ten, fifteen, twenty million was a price worth paying for 'solving the Pakistan issue once and for all.' i.e. by eradicating it from the map. That was what several people I spoke to at that period, both politicians and military men, were quite seriously advocating. Fortunately, within government, saner counsels were prevailing and against that background there was a lot of diplomacy taking place throughout this period, January – June 2002. The key was to try to get undertakings from Musharraf that Pakistan would cease support for terrorism across the Line of Control and dismantle the camps. That's what the Indians wanted to see and that point was reached eventually in early June after a visit by Richard Armitage from Washington. In return India began to disengage. But before that we were so alarmed by the situation and by the failure to reach any form of agreement that we had actually decided to evacuate British citizens from northern India. Three quarters of the High Commission staff and all the families left; they went back to London. We advised the British working in north India to leave. The Americans did it before us and I think Canada, Australia and one or two of the Europeans also did it. Quite a few European colleagues did not agree about the level of risk. The Indians were furious, of course, with our asking people to leave. Indians themselves, those with the money to do so, didn't start leaving, to my knowledge. But it showed how seriously we viewed the situation. We had contingency plans for getting out of Delhi if the war started, for those of us remaining in the Embassy. We even had a team come out to look at the feasibility of building bunkers in the Embassy compound. Under the

scenarios that were worked out, there would have been a period of conventional warfare of a few days, probably. Enough time to leave.

CM: Were you in touch with the High Commission in Islamabad? Was their reading of the situation the same as yours?

RY: Yes and yes. I had a close relationship with Hilary Synnott, the High Commissioner there.

CM: And they found that the Pakistanis were as insouciant as the Indians?

RY: The analysis about Pakistani intentions was done by the Intelligence Services and the Ministry of Defence in London. I don't think we had much of an input into that, frankly. My memory is of very closely aligned thinking between the High Commissions in Delhi and Islamabad.

The key external players were the US and the UK because we had influence in Pakistan, which the Indians needed, and because we had better intelligence on the region than any other country. Co-ordination was on two tracks: between ourselves and the Americans and also with the parties. Sometimes the US Ambassador and I would see the National Security Adviser together; more often I would see him separately. There was frequent co-ordination between London and Washington, between the Prime Minister and the President, Ministers, senior officials and so forth. In Delhi, there was an innovation. In early May the American Ambassador and I instituted joint daily meetings, which I don't think had been done before anywhere. We and senior colleagues met at 9 o'clock every morning to discuss the latest news, what was going on and what needed to be done and whom we would see. That was very valuable. Then there were my frequent meetings with the National Security Adviser, the Foreign Minister and the Defence Minister. And of course visits by Tony Blair (who had been planning to come to India anyway at the end of 2001, a visit arranged before the attack on the Indian Parliament), Jack Straw and David Manning. It was comforting, I have to say, to have visitors from London, because I felt a bit out on a limb. It underlined the very real anxiety that was felt in London about all this. It was an attempt to persuade the Indians to keep the brakes on.

By May there were over a million men confronting one another on the Line of Control. It was a colossal mobilisation and, as I said, once they were there, they didn't know how to withdraw. As I also said, the key was getting the Pakistanis to cease support for 'activity'

across the Line of Control. Of course, they didn't call it terrorism: it was legitimate activity by Kashmiri freedom fighters, you understand. The Pakistanis did, temporarily, cease support and there was some dismantling of camps, but they were rebuilt a little further away and attacks started again in September, on a minor scale. But the Indians were desperate for a branch to climb down, so the fact that the proxy war resumed in September, albeit in fairly low key, they were neither surprised nor too worried.

The other players in all this, on a much reduced scale, were the EU, the P5 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council) not the UN as a whole, the G8 and the Commonwealth. This crisis showed the limits of EU co-ordination, because I could hardly tell EU colleagues anything. EU meetings were a challenge, because it was a real test to try to keep colleagues on side, without actually saying much about what we were doing. I had good relations with the Canadians, the Australians and New Zealanders. They were very helpful and I wanted to keep them on side, because they provided useful pressure on the Indians too. They intervened through their own Ministerial visits: we co-ordinated beforehand and they would speak up very firmly. Of course, as Old Commonwealth they saw quite a lot of the intelligence, so they were inclined to take the situation as seriously as we did. It may sound pretentious, but I do think that US and UK efforts helped to avert a nuclear war.

CM: It's interesting that when you succeed in something like this, people - for sure, they don't know half of it - don't have a very strong memory of it, because it gave a little frisson and then it went away. I suppose that is a mark of your success, because if it all goes wrong, everybody knows about it.

RY: And the diplomacy was secret. That wasn't going to be fuelling people's understanding of the situation either. The FCO afterwards undertook a study, for use with the Treasury in the next expenditure round, to try to calculate how much that exercise in preventive diplomacy had saved the British taxpayer.

It's interesting that the current Indian Prime Minister, Modi, after the recent terrorist incident, retaliated by attacking Pakistani positions, which Vajpayee never did. It was the first time since the 1971 war that the Indians attacked over the border and it was very, very risky. I think Imran Khan deserves huge plaudits for defusing that. It can't have been easy because there will have been a lot of gung-ho people in the Pakistani military.

I think my time in India underlined what for me – other people will have a different view – are the three essential ingredients for trying to ensure the proper defence and pursuit of British national interests abroad. The first element is people with experience, expertise, temperament and intellectual honesty to provide coherent analysis and sensible policy options for ministers and to dissuade them from doing un-sensible things. I talked earlier in the Chief Clerk context about the need for professionalism. But it's more than that. Above all, I think it's about intellectual honesty, sometimes indeed courage. Secondly, ideally you need a policy-making process which allows for input from all interested parties, not necessarily just in Whitehall, but also outside, to be factored into recommendations - if there's time. Sometimes you're in such a hurry to advise Ministers that that's impossible. But at best the process should ensure a broad base of support for whatever option is eventually followed. Then, finally, I think you need an end product in the shape of clear policies which are properly resourced and clearly understood inside and outside government. They've got to be realistic policies. We are a second tier power and we must tailor our ambitions. What has been clear to me from my career, I think, is that our influence and standing on the world scene will always depend on our national and economic strength and how much we are prepared to spend on projecting Britain overseas. You can't do it with smoke and mirrors; it's got to be on a solid basis of national economic robustness and strength and a willingness to invest enough - whether in defence, diplomacy, education, intelligence work or trade promotion - to make a difference, publicly and privately, overseas.

CM: It's been our policy over the last 40 years to belong to every organisation that we can join – P5, EU, NATO, Commonwealth, WEU and all the others - every club we can join, we've joined - in order to extend our reach. How far do you think that is a good policy or should we be standing on our own as an independent and sovereign nation?

RY: No, I think it is essential, if we are going to optimise our influence, to do it through other organisations, when appropriate, as well as on our own. Which is one of the many reasons why it's so foolhardy to be leaving the European Union, because we are at present part of an organisation which will always carry far more clout economically and commercially than we can as an individual nation. The EU won't necessarily ever have a foreign policy commensurate with its economic clout. But if we in the UK are serious about pursuing our interests worldwide in an imaginative, coherent and effective way, we need to use every instrument at our disposal: national, bi-lateral, multi-lateral.