

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

**GORDON, Robert Anthony Eagleson (born 9 February 1952)**

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**BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**  
**THE RECOLLECTIONS OF ROBERT GORDON CMG OBE**  
**RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CATHERINE MANNING**

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*Today is Tuesday 16 November 2021. This is the first interview with Robert Gordon for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording.*

CM: Robert, can you tell me what led you to think of the Foreign Office as a career?

RG: It was partly my international background, coming as I do from an Italian mother and a grandmother born in Austro-Hungary, and an English father whose mother was born in Shanghai and who had many experiences in the Far East. Both of these grandmothers were interesting and unusual personalities, from whom I learned so much about their lives, so I'm sure that contributed to a fascination with abroad. As my English grandparents were quite conventional - my grandfather was an Indian Army colonel – they sometimes talked about the Foreign Office as a natural home for me, even in my teens. When I was at my public school, King's School Canterbury, Sir Michael Palliser came to talk to us. I asked him afterwards if the Foreign Office would be a career open to me, as I had an Italian parent. He said, 'Sadly, not.' He was himself married to the daughter of the Belgian Foreign Minister, Spaak, and his own son, as a result, was not eligible for the Foreign Office as both parents had to be born British. Luckily, the rule changed in the early '70s, so by the time I left Oxford it was possible for me to join.

That's one part of the answer; the other is that when I left the university, I had fifty or so interviews with all sorts of possible careers, merchant banks, diamond trading, you name it, partly because I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and by going through the interview process I discovered a lot more about these jobs and as a result most of them rather lost their appeal. The Foreign Office had a different approach to most which was to say almost nothing about the content of the work. It was left tantalizingly mysterious. That pushed me further in their direction.

CM: You joined in 1973. Was that straight after you came down from Oxford?

RG: Straight after. In retrospect I think that may have been a mistake. I could see, especially on my first posting in Warsaw, that my contemporaries in other embassies were generally

several years older than me. Uwe Schramm in the West German Embassy was in his early thirties and he had done serious stuff: years and years as a law student and probably some real jobs as well. I remember Michael Davenport – this was many years later when I came back to Poland for the second time - he had been working in a bank for several years before joining the Foreign Office. As a result, he brought a breadth of previous experience which stood him in good stead. Being so young and inexperienced – I later discovered the Polish Secret Police gave me the nickname “Chłopiec” (Boy) - I was probably rather less effective than if I had done other things before joining the Foreign Office.

**Desk Officer for Portuguese West & East Africa, Madagascar & SW Africa, FCO, 1973-75**

CM: Your first job was Desk Officer for Portuguese West and East Africa and Madagascar and South-West Africa – it sounds quite a big territory. Did you get any training on entering the Foreign Office or for this particular role?

RG: The short answer is very little indeed. Let me give you a picture of what it felt like to arrive as a new entrant in this grand building. In those days the entrance to Downing Street was not blocked off; you just walked along the left-hand side to a little side door into the FCO. My first impressions of that Palmerstonian edifice were a mixture of awe at the surroundings and dismay at their shabbiness and neglect. As you walked down the tall, mosaic-floored corridors, I noticed some offices had doormats with red edging and some with purple edging. I was told that these were the abodes of god-like beings called Assistant Under Secretaries of State and Deputy Under Secretaries. Central and Southern Africa Department where I was working was in much less grand surroundings, tucked up in the attic space of that corner of Downing Street and Whitehall. On your desk was a carafe of water; I was told that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Parliament had decreed that all Foreign Office clerks should have a daily bun and jug of water supplied to them. After a few years they axed the bun as a cost-saving measure, but the water was still there a hundred and fifty years later. It was all so antiquated. There were open fires with coal scuttles and strange pneumatic tubes, a bit like those department stores where metal lozenges with messages shuttled through a maze of pipes.

The countries I had been given to look after were, very wisely, far from the centre of British priorities. The two main ones, Angola and Mozambique, then called Portuguese West and East Africa, were in a dire state. In Mozambique FRELIMO (Frente de Liberação de

Moçambique) had already overrun most of the territory and the Cabora Bassa Dam, the main source of power on the Zambesi, was surrounded by concentric rings of steel. In Angola the independence movement was more in its infancy and there were 500,000 Portuguese settlers there. The colonial war was bleeding Portugal white; I remember learning from Alison Brimelow, another of my intake now on the Portuguese desk, how Lisbon was full of limbless veterans begging on the street corners. It was clearly unsustainable. Only a year later the Carnation Revolution brought an end to the Portuguese Empire. I was expected to pick up the rudiments of my job by asking lots of questions. I had a very patient First Secretary called Tony Ford who was the South Africa desk officer; he answered my endless, mostly naïve, questions.

It was amazing how much freedom we were given to make mistakes. There was a minor emergency in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo). I was told, ‘Get yourself over to Heathrow as soon as you can; here’s an urgent envelope to give to the pilot of the Portuguese airliner, flying to Lisbon and then on to Lourenço Marques, so get a move on.’ I arrived at Heathrow to be told that the aircraft had been pushed off the stand and was taxiing to take off. I came back with the envelope and said to my boss, ‘Sorry. I arrived too late.’ She was furious: ‘why didn’t you order the aircraft to turn round and come back to the stand?’ I had only been in the job for two weeks. I had no idea I had that sort of power. We made lots of mistakes in these early days. Much emphasis was placed on how to write submissions, minutes and draft telegrams – and on what colour paper! I was expected to absorb the prevailing FCO cultural norms. For example, I wasn’t allowed to address the Consul General in Lourenço Marques as ‘Dear Hugh’ because I was too junior. I had to say ‘Dear Byatt’; and sign off ‘Yours ever, Robert.’ There were certain old-fashioned habits, shall we say. On the other hand, I was pleasantly surprised to see how fluent and modern the language of diplomacy was, and how it was frowned upon to use classical allusions or quotations from Shakespeare; there was quite a push in those days for us to use simple, Anglo-Saxon English, short sentences, avoid the passive, etc, all of which stood me in good stead for later.

Coming back to your question about training, we had a two-week training session. When we arrived, all seventeen of us fast-stream entrants, we found two pieces of paper on our desks. One was a form for a widow’s pension – this at the age of 21. I had no idea of marrying let alone having a widow. The second was a full-colour plate of Sir Paul Gore-Booth, a previous Permanent Under Secretary, resplendent in diplomatic uniform; behind this was a detailed explanation about the inches of Russian lace a counsellor second class was allowed to wear

on his sleeve. I thought, how ridiculous. We knew then that the diplomatic uniform, splendid though it was, was only worn in two countries: Thailand and Iceland – of all places. The basic message was: ‘It’s too complicated to explain what you’re going to do. You’ll learn on the job. Don’t worry; it’ll all become clear.’ And, sure enough, it did, though not without quite a lot of mishaps on the way.

CM: You were in Central and Southern Africa Department for about a year. At the end of that time did you think, ‘This is going to be fun,’ or did you have doubts?

RG: Well, conflicting emotions. I could see that if I persevered, it would become an interesting career. I joined the FCO in 1973, a bleak time in the country’s fortunes. Ted Heath had got us into the Common Market but was now facing serious problems with the miners. We had the three-day week with candles adding to the sense of Victorian gloom in the Foreign Office. My general impression was that the job would entail managing a country into inexorable decline and global irrelevance. I was pleasantly surprised to find later that that was too pessimistic a view and prospects changed for the better. But I nevertheless thought this could be an interesting career. One or two of my colleagues decided against it, like Howard Davies. He then left and later became well known in the City. I and most of the rest of us stuck it out.

CM: Robert, you’re a very good linguist. When you joined the Foreign Office, you spoke Italian and French. Did you speak any other languages?

RG: No, a smattering of German, but nothing to speak of.

CM: Language training was the next step. Did you have any strong views on the language you would like to learn? Did you hope to go to a certain area of the world?

RG: No, is the quick answer. I think I was pretty open-minded. We were all asked to sit MLAT, the modern languages aptitude test, which asked among other things whether you could memorise a string of twenty words. We later discovered they were Kurdish. It was a test to see how sensitive your ear was to pick up fine nuances of tone. If you scored a certain mark, you were able to apply for hard languages like Chinese, Korean, whatever. I rather fancied Pharsi. They said, ‘Sorry, Pharsi’s not available this year so we’re giving you Polish instead.’ I said I wasn’t tremendously keen to go behind the Iron Curtain - in those days one had the impression of an undifferentiated mass of grey, oppressed peoples. They replied,

‘You asked for a language beginning with P and now you’ve got it. Don’t complain; you’ll find the Poles great fun to be with.’ And they were right.

CM: How was your Polish language course structured? Where did you go?

RG: My predecessors had been sent to RAF Luffenham, a rather grim RAF station in Rutland; I think both MOD and FCO people were being trained there. When my turn came, they decided on a change of approach and sent me instead to a private émigré teacher called Madame Anna Bojunga, who lived in a threadbare flat in Baker Street. I was living at that stage in Belsize Park and I would jump on the No. 24 bus and mug up desperately on my Polish vocabulary before a pretty intense three-hour session each morning, initially with a Foreign Office colleague called Geoff Livesey who was going to join the Embassy’s Commercial Section. We did that for three months together and then I carried on for two months alone. She took me remorselessly through Teslar’s Polish Grammar and drilled the complex rules of Polish grammar into me, but she was no good at answering questions about modern Poland. She was violently anti-Communist so the vocabulary tended to be things like ‘the lieutenant instructs his orderly to look for fodder for his horse’ and ‘woe to the hares!’ to test the instrumental plural. Her own father had been military attaché in Paris and they had ended up at the beginning of the War in London. She’d never been back to Poland and hated the thought of ever going back to Communist Poland. She was a part-time actress, looking rather like Anna Chancellor, and used to act the part of female KGB colonels in spy films. A very interesting person, rather formidable as a teacher, but we later became good friends. She was very focused on the grammar but much less on the fluency of the language, so by the time I left for Poland in May 1975, my language was still pretty shaky.

### **Third/Second Secretary Warsaw, 1975-77**

The Polish press was less of a problem than I had expected because the Communists made sure their mouthpieces *Trybuna Ludu* and *Życie Warszawy* were both expressed in clear, simple language. My first linguistic challenge arrived three days after I arrived. My Ambassador Norman Reddaway said, ‘I want you to sit behind my wife at dinner to interpret between her and the Minister for Light Industry.’ I was dreading this and with good reason. Jean Reddaway began: ‘Minister, I have a bone to pick with you. The leaves on our oak trees are turning all mottled and speckled due to the pollution of your factories.’ I thought, ‘Oh, my God, “A bone to pick.” I have no idea what that is. “Oak leaf,” I can manage that, but “speckled and mottled” and all that, certainly not.’ So I said to the Minister, ‘Minister, don’t

you find the weather unusually warm for this time of year?’ He replied with a stream of incomprehensible Polish and I said, ‘We are trying to relocate the factories out of the city.’ It carried on in this way for a couple of hours and luckily neither of them knew enough of one another’s language to realise what was going on. But I could only get away with so much.

CM: Robert, would you say something about the *Polish News Bulletin* which I think you edited. It is a rather interesting phenomenon as an independent organisation set up jointly between the Americans and the Brits to make a daily summary of the Polish press, which was then bought by all the other embassies in Warsaw and sold to universities and academic departments in the West.

RG: Yes, we took it in turns, every alternate week, the Brits and the Americans took turns be the editor. Our day began very early at 6.30 or 7 every morning in the basement of the American Embassy. There were half a dozen or so interpreters. A large great pile of papers and periodicals would be placed on my desk. I had to ring any articles that could be of interest. These would be passed to the translators who would type them up on to roneo sheets. The roneo machine would then be cranked round on poor quality paper and the final product stapled together, typically a dozen pages each day. They would be sold, at quite a reasonable rate, to all those embassies and international organisations in Warsaw who had no Polish speakers. I can’t say it gave me a unique insight into what was happening in Poland. Most of it was crude propaganda. At best you were able to spot something between the lines that the censors might have missed. There was just one Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, in Cracow which pushed the boundaries a little. So you got the version the government wanted you to get of what was happening in Poland, but it was very far from the whole picture. What was much more useful was to go to mass on Sunday and hear the bishops preaching. Not being a Catholic, I did not feel the religious need to do it, but politically it was important as the Church was such a focus for the Poles’ sense of identity and anti-Communism. The Church, led by the universally admired Cardinal Wyszynski, was quite fearless in saying all sorts of things that the regime didn’t like to hear. It was a much more reliable source of information about what was really happening, as well as things we picked up off the streets and talking to students and others.

CM: You went back to Poland in the ‘90s. Have you any remarks about how it was when you knew it in the mid-seventies compared with when you knew it later?

RG: First of all, the physical aspect of Poland in the 1970s looked rather different to today. As you drove around the country, you could see that agriculture was still very primitive; fields had been divided and subdivided through inheritance into narrow strips. While these were hardly efficient, Polish farmers had stubbornly resisted all attempts at collectivization. The fields were typically ploughed by horses, so horses were still in commonly use. The horse-drawn carts all had old WW2 lorry wheels. Harvests were still gathered by hand, each area having its own style of making stooks of corn. It was very old-fashioned, rather charming in many ways, a style of agriculture which had largely disappeared in western Europe.

I was also soon made aware of how viscerally anti-Communist everybody was, and how difficult it was to find any convinced Communists at all. Those few members of the Communist Party I did come across were nearly all opportunists who claimed to see no contradiction between attending the Party meeting on Thursdays and going to mass on Sundays. The role of the church was hugely important then, perhaps a little less so now. I mentioned Cardinal Wyszyński. He had had a hard time in the immediate post-War period. He'd gone to jail for three years and had two of his bishops executed as Western spies and yet the government, or rather their Soviet overlords, had come to realise the pointlessness of trying to tame the church. As Stalin quipped, it was as futile as saddling a cow. Each September we Western diplomats would be invited to the Catholic University of Lublin for the opening of the academic year. Wyszyński would berate the hapless Kazimierz Kakol, the toad-like Minister for Religious Affairs, for all the regime's inadequacies and would speak his mind openly and forcefully. He gave the lead to bishops and priests around Poland to be equally forthright. His fellow Cardinal, Karol Wojtyła of Cracow, was rather more difficult to get hold of, as he spent a lot of time outside Poland, in America and elsewhere. I did have an unusual pretext to write to him once; I had seen in the Wawel Cathedral in Cracow a large memorial brass in front of the high altar, the burial place of a former Cardinal-Archbishop of Cracow, brother of the then King of Poland. It had been carved by Durer, or Durer's workshop, in 1506. I wrote to Wojtyła to ask permission to rub this brass; one of his underlings wrote back saying yes, but please avoid Sundays. With Kevin James, an Embassy colleague, I drove down one Saturday. We unrolled these large sheets of paper and spent four or five hours rubbing this vast brass and answering endless questions from passers-by. We had to flip a coin to see who kept the finished product which I won, so I have still got it. That was my only rather tangential connection with the future Pope.

Coming back to your question about the differences: Poland of the mid-70s was deeply resentful of the way in which the Soviets were keeping them in this stranglehold, but there was a sense of hopelessness about it which manifested itself in tremendous rates of alcoholism. As a result, getting to know the Poles socially was quite a strain because the amount of vodka you were expected to drink. Even when you went to the Foreign Ministry, they would give you *wiśniak* (cherry vodka). In my second tour in the '90s, that had changed.

What else comes to mind about the Poland of those days? I was expecting the Poles to be grateful to the British for having come into the Second World War on their behalf. Not a bit of it. They said we and the French had just sat on our hands while they were pulverised first by the Germans and then by the Soviets; even worse, we betrayed them in 1944, the great Yalta sell-out. I said, 'Be realistic; there was no way we could have stopped the Red Army from occupying Poland.' That didn't cut any ice; Yalta had been mythologized and now was now imprinted in the national psyche. The Poles did have a rather naïve, ill-informed view of what life was like in Britain and the West generally. Because they believed the opposite of what they read in the papers, they thought that our shops were stocked to the gunnels with all sorts of delicacies. I had to tell them that Britain was going through a hard time in the mid-seventies and things were not as rosy as they might think. Yes, a lot of what they read in the press was rubbish, but not everything.

Luckily their hopelessness was sublimated by a wicked sense of humour. They had the most wonderful fund of political jokes, but that had disappeared almost entirely when I went back in the early 1990s. By then Poland had emerged into the new world of capitalism and the market economy. They deliberately chose the "Shock Therapy" model of immediate, wrenching change. As a result, prices skyrocketed and utilities that had been relatively affordable - heating, light, gas - suddenly became really expensive. Most families had to get two or three jobs just to survive. So they didn't have a lot of time to fraternize with us Westerners. Oddly, they were actually more difficult to get to know in those early '90s, which was a disappointment as I had had such a fun time mixing largely with students in my early twenties.

Another difference was encapsulated in the figure of Lech Wałęsa. We had hardly known him in the mid-seventies – his time came a little bit later. He had shown himself to be an amazingly effective mobilizer of opposition to the Communist regime. That was really his

forte; he was much less good as President once the Communist menace was over. He was an infuriating person to have official dealings with. I remember accompanying our Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd to see him when Wałęsa would come out with gnomish utterances like ‘with an old oak tree, who knows where the acorns may land?’ We had no idea what he meant. When we asked the Chancellery afterwards ‘what did the President mean by this?’ they would answer, ‘Oh, we don’t know. He’s always coming up with this sort of thing.’ He was frankly out of his depth in foreign policy. Also on domestic issues, he was too much under the thumb of his Machiavellian former driver Wachowski, frequently hiring and firing prime ministers, one of the few things the president could do, and getting in the way of preparations for NATO membership. By a strange twist, he made common cause with some of the old guard of the Polish Army who resented what they thought to be a surrender of sovereignty to this new organisation. Janusz Onyszkiewicz, whom we got to know well and later became Minister of Defence, told us how unhelpful Wałęsa had been.

The Polish church was still important and retained huge moral authority, because Wałęsa and John Paul II had been the twin architects of Poland’s escape from Communist bonds, but by the early ‘90s attendance at church was declining as Poles no longer needed to assert their identity in the same way. So there were a number of differences, not necessarily all of them for the good.

One thing that was good was Margaret Thatcher’s innovation of the Know-How Fund. Under this mechanism, an army of British accountants, judges, lawyers, journalists, parliamentarians, bankers – every sort of professional – came over to help the Poles adjust to the new world of democracy and the market economy. The ambit of this programme was huge. It varied from turning forty thousand Russian teachers into English teachers, helping design the mass privatisation programme, reforming the Polish judiciary and reintroducing commercial law. It was a very effective way of demonstrating how we were fully behind the Polish thrust to get into the EU and NATO. Poland now had a clear sense of direction, in contrast to the mid-70s when it was stuck in a seemingly hopeless impasse.

CM: Before we leave Poland, do you have any particularly striking personal memory either personal or professional, that seems to you to sum up your time there?

RG: There are many memories, some rather bizarre, so let me just mention a couple. Halfway through my second posting there in the early ‘90s, I was visited by my cousin Andrew Pringle, who then commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> British Armoured Division in Germany.

Andrew complained that his tanks found it very expensive to train in Germany or Canada. With this in mind, we worked together to open Polish ranges in Pomerania to British tanks. This was both a cheaper option for the British taxpayer and strategically welcome to the Poles. So it was satisfying to see British tanks taking part in the Uhlan Eagle exercise in 1996, the year after I left, despite some resistance from FCO colleagues nervous of alienating Russia.

Coming back to my first posting, one memorable trip in, I think, 1976 was to Lwów (Lviv) in what is now western Ukraine, with you, Catherine and David. You may recall that our car was thoroughly searched at the Polish-Soviet border. The guards saw some bananas on our back shelf and decided to confiscate them, obviously intending to eat them. We were told we had an hour and a half to do the 70 kms from the border to Lviv; ‘if you take any longer, we’ll come to look for you.’ We duly drove down this melancholy road, melancholy because so many villages had ruined wooden Uniate churches, Uniates following the Russian Orthodox rite but acknowledging the supremacy of the Pope. In Lviv, our tour round the city’s many cathedrals showed all to be closed except for the Catholic one, with a few elderly women in black whom the Soviets no longer bothered to persecute. An old Dominican church had been turned into a Museum of Atheism; there we saw Man progressing from ape through the superstitious mists of Christianity to emerge into the sunny uplands of socialist reality. One cartoon showed the Pope weeping, with his tears turning into bombs. With us were a flock of little Soviet school children being taught to see religion in this way. That made quite a deep impression on me.

A final memory from this time also involves you, Catherine. I was late for one of your dinners and by mistake rushed up the stairs to the flat above yours. As I burst through the door, I could see a man in headphones hunched over a tape recorder positioned directly above your dining table. We both looked at each other in astonishment. I muttered a hasty apology and made my way down to your flat. It certainly showed what close tabs the Secret Police kept on us in those days.

### **First Secretary/Head of Chancery, Santiago, 1978-83**

CM: You left Poland in 1977 and went to the other side of the world, to Santiago in Chile in 1978. Did you do some language training between the postings?

RG: Yes, and not only language training. I got married. My wife-to-be, also in the Foreign Office, had her first posting in Cuba and was then cross-posted to the UK Representation to

the European Economic Community in Brussels. I linked up with Pam in Brussels at the beginning of 1978 and after two days we got engaged and later that year in July we married. As you say, there was a period of training in Spanish with a delightful chain-smoking flamenco dancer called Carmen. She used our sessions to unload all her psychological problems on me. I couldn't believe how easy Spanish was after the rigours of Polish. What was happening was that my Italian was being converted with minor changes into Spanish, so it all came quickly and easily. I only later discovered the downside: it had done quite a lot of damage to my Italian.

After our wedding in July, we spent our honeymoon in Canada and then I had a month in Cuernavaca, Mexico to learn Latin American Spanish before moving on to Chile. Latin America is a hotch-potch of different accents, and the Chilean accent is quite hard to get your ear round. At least all the written stuff was no problem and after a while of adapting Madrid Spanish to Mexican Spanish to Chilean Spanish, Pam and I were fine linguistically.

What was more alarming was to get off the plane in Santiago's Pudahuel airport to see a large sign: '*Una isla de paz en un mundo de odio*' – 'an island of peace in a world of hatred.' We were arriving in Pinochet's Chile in 1978, just five years after the military coup which had toppled Allende. These first five years had seen the worst excesses of repression and torture, but this had somewhat abated by the time we arrived. Having both come from repressive and unpopular regimes, Pam from Castro's Cuba and I from Communist Poland, we assumed that Pinochet be as reviled in Chile as he was around the rest of the world. We were surprised to learn that this wasn't necessarily the case. Quite a few of the middle class had supported the coup, although some of them had since fallen out of love with Pinochet because of his brutal methods. The Catholic church, once again, played a role in making sure these methods were well documented. Its Primate Cardinal Silva Henríquez was a stout champion of human rights. Pinochet thought he would be welcomed by the Catholic Church for having saved Chile from atheist Marxism; instead he had to listen to weekly sermons from the Cardinal denouncing his abuses of human rights. The Cardinal set up the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*, the Vicariate of Solidarity, as a human rights watchdog. My primary job as Second Secretary was to find out what was happening. The priests there would tell me that X had disappeared or Y was in jail or had been tortured. We certainly had a good handle on what was happening, but it was less severe than it had been in the first five years of the dictatorship.

The nature of the work in Chile changed a year or so later. Under the Labour government, our prime focus was to denounce human rights' abuses. When Margaret Thatcher came into power, we were not exactly told to soft-pedal human rights, but they became part of a wider agenda, sparked by interest in the privatisation policies being trialled by "Los Chicago Boys", a bunch of young Milton Friedman disciples who were running the economy. Pinochet, to give him his due, freely acknowledged that he had little idea how to run an economy and he handed it over to these Chicago Boys. Their innovative monetarist policies turned out to be by and large very effective. True, they didn't have to worry about trades unions, a free press, or other such inconveniences. That said, the press wasn't nearly as muzzled as in Communist Poland. Some centre-left Christian Democrats were allowed to run their own publications. There were limits, self-censorship limits, on what they could print, but there was a limited freedom of expression. Professor Alan Walters, Margaret Thatcher's economic guru, asked the Embassy to get friendly with José Piñera, the 29-yr old Minister of Pensions, (roughly my own age) to find out more about his pension privatisation plans. Piñera was I think flattered by this attention from London and invited me to a pre-Cabinet meeting where Sergio de Castro, the Minister of the Economy and the chief architect of Chile's economic policy, essentially pre-cooked the Cabinet agenda with the other Chicago Boys, all in their late 20s or early 30s. It was an interesting insight into the inner workings of government, watching how single-mindedly they drove their policies forward. Their decisions were then rubber-stamped two days later at the formal Cabinet meeting with Pinochet presiding.

Our widening interests called for a more multi-faceted approach to Chile, further reinforced once the Falklands War broke out. To scroll back a moment, war between Argentina and Chile over the Beagle Channel had only narrowly been averted in early 1979, thanks to a timely exercise of American preventive diplomacy. They had picked up from satellite and other indications that the Argentines were sending a strike force south to invade Chile, tipped off the new Polish Pope, who then sent the "Flying Cardinal" Antonio Samoré to Buenos Aires. He persuaded the Argentine Junta to call off the invasion just nine hours before jump-off. Tensions between the two countries were still running high when the Argentines landed on the Falklands in April 1982. Like everyone else, we were surprised to see scrap metal merchants in South Georgia run up the Argentine flag. We had no advance warning. I had driven across Argentina to attend my brother's wedding on the Falkland Islands in early '79, so I was tipped off when the Argentines landed on the Falklands by a friend of my brother's

who had a Chilean wife. As a result, we were able to tell London about the invasion at more or less at the same time as the Governor in Stanley.

That same day, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, Admiral Marino, the Head of the Chilean Navy, called in our Ambassador and said, ‘You know you’ve just sold us the ex-RN destroyer *HMS Norfolk*. You can have it back; just send a ship’s complement by air and you can sail it around Cape Horn and catch the Argentines in the rear.’ We said, ‘Errm, very kind of you but...’ We were a bit nervous about being seen to accept Chilean help too overtly, because we were conscious that South America was a bit like pre-First World War Europe with its many interlocking alliances. Chile had taken land off Peru and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific in the 1880s and they both were strongly anti-Chilean, as was Argentina who felt that the Beagle Channel belonged to them. Brazil was anti-Argentine, for many reasons; Ecuador was anti-Peruvian, so we worried that things could easily spiral out of control. Though we could see that the Chileans were going to be invaluable behind the scenes, we didn’t want to do anything too overt, so as not to risk sparking a continental war. As a result, we turned the offer down. Despite this, the Chileans were very helpful to us in terms of intelligence where they would monitor the take-off of Super Etendards with their Exocet missiles, and indeed all other planes taking off from Argentine airfields, so then we could tip off the Task Force to send the Harriers up at exactly the right moment. The Argentines were at the limits of their range; they couldn’t stay very long, so this information was a great help in making best use of our rather meagre force of Harriers.

CM: And how were you as a Brit regarded by Latin Americans?

RG: Very positively, certainly in Chile, I can’t really speak for the rest of Latin America. Though relatively few Brits had settled in Chile, we had played an important role in Chile’s development, especially with the navy, ever since Admiral Lord Cochrane helped them win independence in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. They had long looked to the Royal Navy as their role model, and bought many ex-RN ships. In terms of the wider economy, the Brits had been important investors in infrastructure such as railways. In the press, for example, the equivalent to *The Times* was *Il Mercurio*, run by a family of English origin called Edwards, and British banks such as the Bank of London and South America had been important players in the financial sector. All the same, the general impression of Britain was seriously out of date. I would go to the Prince of Wales Country Club and be greeted by an elderly Chilean in a houndstooth jacket, who would slap me on the shoulder and say, ‘How are you, old

chappie?’ I thought, ‘this is pure PG Wodehouse.’ Hemmed in by the Andes, one felt very cut off from the outside world, so it is not surprising that Chilean image of Britain was literally decades out of date. They had an inter-war picture of Britain, which in some respects was to our benefit, because we were considered to be more powerful than we really were, and they were less aware of the many economic problems we had just been through in the ‘70s. Overall, there was a generally warm feeling towards Britain, certainly among the middle classes of the Chileans we mostly mingled among. This was much reinforced during the Falklands War when, if you went to the market, you heard shouts of ‘Viva Thatcher!’ Even though our official attitude towards the Pinochet Government, certainly in the early years, was pretty hostile, ordinary Chileans didn’t seem to hold it against us too much.

One longstanding British resident was an elderly lady called Monica Barnett. She was rather critical of one of my favourite authors, Bruce Chatwin, who had used some of her family material for his book *In Patagonia* without proper attribution. All the same, she introduced me to a book called *The Uttermost Part of the Earth* by Lucas Bridges. This was a gripping account of his missionary father, Thomas Bridges, who set up the first permanent settlement among the Yaghans and Onas in the very far south of Chile in the 1870s and 1880s. Lucas vividly describes the rigours they had to endure and their growing friendship with initially mistrustful natives, whose languages they learnt to speak. Sadly most were to fall victim to European diseases or to later genocidal sweeps by European sheep-farmers. The book gives such a valuable insight into a now vanished world.

Another indigenous group who were rather more accessible to us were the Mapuche. They had been the main tribe populating the central part of Chile, one of the very few peoples to have successfully resisted both the Incas and the Spanish. The Spaniards had to keep their largest standing army in the New World on the Bio Bio River. South of that was the Mapuche heartland which they were not allowed to enter. These Mapuche clung to their own mythologies, religion and customs, and several hundred thousand still lived in what we now call the Lake District. This is a beautiful area of snow-capped volcanos and Araucanian pines (monkey puzzle trees). The once-proud Mapuche were now reduced to a sad remnant of their former glory, in squalid reservations with virtually no income of their own. After backing the wrong side in the Chilean War of Independence, their lands had been gradually overrun by the European settlers. But nowadays they have discovered their voice and have become more vocal, mounting frequent protests in the streets of Santiago. So my acquaintance with the

Mapuches and the peoples of the far south, the Yaghans and Onas, were both powerful experiences, I have to say.

When I first went out to Chile, I was Second (later First) Secretary and also Head of Chancery. There was no ambassador because he had been withdrawn in protest at the torture of Sheila Cassidy, an English doctor (later nun) who had treated a wounded terrorist. A counsellor was sent over from Buenos Aires to mind the shop. He was my first boss. Then after a couple of years an ambassador was finally sent out. John Heath, former Consul General in Chicago, was a lovely man, very easy to work with; we got on really well. He left shortly after the Falklands War and for my last few months I had John Hickman, who was a more complex character. It wasn't a large embassy, but being Head of Chancery, you do all the normal tasks of that role. I was rather conscious that I was a rather young Head of Chancery. For example, Dennis Amy, the First Secretary Commercial, was twenty years my senior. Our cheerful Consul, Tony Abbot, was again ten or fifteen years older than me, yet nominally I was in charge of them. I had to tread carefully in exercising the role. By and large, it worked pretty well, I think. I can't say that it bothered me unduly and things settled down quite quickly.

#### **Desk Officer, Brazil and Venezuela, FCO, 1983-85**

CM: Then you moved back to London in 1983, as Desk Officer for Brazil and Venezuela. Had you visited the countries while you were in South America?

RG: Venezuela not; Brazil I had been to once or twice, briefly, as a tourist. I found both of these countries quite fascinating to track from London, and I did indeed go out on familiarisation visits to them. They were both grappling with severe systemic problems. Brazil was just coming out of a period of military rule and some of the new breed of supposedly democratic politicians were highly corrupt. It was not a straightforward country to monitor. Bill Harding, our former ambassador in Brazil, had come back to London as Deputy Under Secretary; he was an absolute delight to work with. He and I made common cause in persuading the RAF to buy the Brazilian Tucano trainer. It was assembled by Shorts in Northern Ireland. His successor John Ure was a more old-fashioned type. I could envisage his blue-crested despatches which regularly landed on my desk each slipping into some red Morocco folder for his later memoirs. He saw his role as a proconsular round of official visits to the various states. Venezuela had its own problems. It was nominally democratic but, because of easy oil money, the two parties that alternated in power were as

corrupt as each other. They were in a sense laying the ground for the later disasters under Chavez.

What was even more interesting in a sense than either of those two countries was the issue of Latin American debt. I was the department's point man for that. It was a big issue in those days, as the governments of Latin America had taken on such huge amounts of debt. Reagan turned the tap off when he came to power and plunged the whole subcontinent into crisis. They had to go cap in hand to the IMF and many of them hovered on the brink of insolvency and default. Indeed, Argentina did default, not once but several times. The problem was that if they had all defaulted, they might have brought down the whole Western banking system. Mrs Thatcher was adamant that we should do no special favours. So it was a question of judging what degree of pain, in terms of economic adjustment dictated by IMF, they could withstand without tipping them over the edge. On this issue, I was looking at the whole of Latin America, not just Brazil and Venezuela. They were both rich countries in theory, but badly run. Brazil in particular had taken on vastly too much debt. It had deeply entrenched structural inflation; while Venezuela had such easy oil money that they mispent dreadfully. I remember that their Minister for Oil went to Miami where he got hauled over by the Customs. They asked him to open his briefcase and found four million dollars in cash; he couldn't understand the fuss being made over such small change. That was symptomatic. On debt, I was working mostly for Len Appleyard, Head of Economic Relations Department, rather than my own Head of Department.

#### **Desk Officer, ECD(E), FCO, 1985-87**

Half way through my time in London, after two years, I was shifted to an EU job. It was a shock to be suddenly thrown into a completely different world, with its own specialist language, its own way of doing things. I was initially put in charge of the final stages of Spain's accession to the EEC in ECD-E, that is European Community Department (External).

CM: Can I ask about this move? Your career so far was first of all in Eastern Europe, then Latin America, then in London with a Latin American department, although with a technical aspect to it. The next move is to something completely different. Was this at your request, or that of POD (Personnel Operations Department) or was it simply there's a job and somebody's got to do it?

RG: More the latter. In those days POD was very much in charge of your career and your own wishes counted for relatively little. Someone had clearly taken a look at my career and

decided I shouldn't be pigeon-holed too soon into a Latin American niche. So I was given a welcome chance to cut my teeth in a totally different domain, one more central to British interests. The downside was that my immediate predecessor was someone called Glynne Evans to whom I would be working in her new role as Assistant Head of Department. She was a workaholic who had obviously achieved wonders in her former capacity and she was going to be my boss, so there was no way I could ever hope to do the job half as well as she had done it – added to which was the fact that I was a complete Euro-novice. So I did share these concerns with POD and they had a word with Glynne and my new Head of Department, John Shepherd, and said, 'Our prime candidate for this role is getting cold feet'. They impressed on Glynne the need to show how good a manager she could be. After that she treated me with kid gloves and I can't in any way fault the way she handled me for those two years. But it was impossible for her to suppress her naturally combative personality, so I often found myself having to smooth the feathers of Whitehall colleagues who felt ill treated by her.

Every month – I think it was once a month, it might have been more frequently – Sir David Hannay, our Ambassador to the EEC, would come to the Cabinet Office for a meeting to prepare the ground for the next Foreign Affairs Council. We would discuss where we had flexibility to give in certain areas in order to gain other higher priority objectives. Then we, the Foreign Office, Glynne in other words, would have to go to the DTI, the Home Office, and other home departments to persuade them, or in Glynne's case to browbeat them, into writing their briefs in such a way as to meet our overall objectives. As I say, my role was to prevent our relationships from being too badly damaged because of course we would have to come back to them a month or two later, and if they were uncooperative, it would be more difficult next time round. The whole process gave me a salutary insight into the way European policy was made.

I found the change very difficult. There was a lot to learn and it took me quite a few months to become comfortable in the role. In a sense I was both lucky and unlucky that in that most of heavy lifting on Spanish accession had already been done. There were just a few outstanding issues. Towards the end, my role focused on shepherding the Treaty on Spanish Accession through Parliament. There I was fortunate that the junior Foreign Office Minister, Malcolm Rifkind, was a lawyer by training; his forensic skills were most impressive. We would serve up these huge briefs, covering every aspect of this complex treaty, and although he would study these carefully before the debates, he would never once refer to them in his

hours in Parliament. He did the whole thing by memory. It was really a bravura performance. There were sensitive issues for us – Spanish fish, some agricultural issues. Funnily enough, when it came to writing speeches for the more ceremonial part of the treaty, I found it quite difficult to find periods of our history when we'd been on the same side as the Spanish; whereas Giles Paxman, who was doing Portugal on the next-door desk, had an easier ride.

After Spain had joined the EEC in '86, I was transferred to the Eastern European side of things. I was there for the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Rain had brought down radioactive material on to certain areas of Europe, including Cumbria and North Wales. We needed to keep sheep grazing there out of the national food chain. I remember being astonished when Margaret Atwood, Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, suggested that we paint these sheep blue. I had this vision of bright blue sheep wandering the fells, but in fact I think she just meant a blue streak or mark. We then started a rather intense debate at the European level about the safe amount of becquerels of caesium per kilogram in food. We and the French said, 'We know all about nuclear matters; we think 2000 becquerels/kg is quite OK.' The Germans and Italians said, 'Oh no, that's far too high. We should set it at 500 or 600.' These were important decisions as too low a threshold would mean ploughing up large areas of spinach and other crops. In the end we got them to accept 1250 bq/kg, a typical EEC splitting of the difference. A year later, our scientists came to us to say, 'sorry, we got our sums wrong. In fact, even the German and Italian figure was too high.' Thank goodness I was leaving the department before I had to go back to Brussels to come clean but it taught me to be careful about trusting scientific advice too uncritically. The other thing that that astonished me was that the French were anxious to ensure that the same threshold should be set for food for animal consumption as for human consumption. The rest of us said, 'surely for animals we can be a bit laxer.' It later turned out that quite a few old people in France ate dog food because they couldn't afford anything else. It was quite an eye opener.

CM: Did you feel any difference in the style of work between the two departments that you worked in during this time in London?

RG: Yes, Glynne was keen to stress we were in a premier department that set the standard, if you like, for the rest of the Office. The EEC cadre – that is the two departments, ourselves and European Community Department (Internal), saw themselves as a cut above traditional

geographical department. In a sense she was right. The speed, the turn-around, the quality of the briefs, the access to ministers and to No 10, they were of a different order.

There was certainly a sense of *primus inter pares* among the cadre of European specialists in the Foreign Office. It was a different style of diplomacy from traditional relations between countries, not helped by the arcane language, specialist terms and the plethora of initials. Not enough effort was made, I think, to make EEC matters more accessible and understandable to the non-specialist. A case in point is the Queen. When I went to “kiss hands” before going to Burma, her equerry told us, ‘Actually, the Queen enjoys reading the despatches from Burma so much more than the fisheries stuff from Brussels.’

That said, we all believed at the time that this was a one-way street, that this was the harbinger of the way things were going to be done in future. The Foreign Office was going to have to get used to a different role, where nation states would have a less independent voice. Individual ministries would start to contact counterpart ministries directly and the Foreign Office would find it harder to justify its role. In some ways, there was already a degree of tension in that UKREP Brussels insisted that only the Foreign Office could speak at EEC meetings, even though DTI or MAFF officials might be present. It was a point of principle that the Foreign Office was uniquely qualified to present a collective UK view. There were tensions and trends one could already see developing.

Another interesting aspect was the range of languages used at these meetings. When I was going to Brussels in the mid-80s, there were many different languages in play, even though there were only ten member states. It needed a huge bank of interpreters. When I went back again in the early 2000s, all that had been stripped away: only two working languages were permitted, English (75%) and French (25%); nothing else. We were then twenty-four member states. What was even more interesting was that the Italians and the Spanish were speaking English, not French as they would have been done earlier, or their own languages.

CM: It is noticeable that in your generation of diplomats, there have been some who have had some experience of the European departments and have turned away from them, saying it is not what they wanted to do as diplomats.

RG: It’s certainly not for everybody. We’ll get on to my posting in Paris in a moment, where at the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) I found the subject matter quite difficult to master because it was all so dry, whereas classic diplomacy has a lot of human interaction, which I personally rather prefer. Brussels is a mixture of the two. The

subject matter is often dense and tricky to get into, but there's a lot of haggling and personal diplomacy in trying to achieve your objectives which requires you to understand the psychology and character of the interlocutor - that was the fun part.

### **First Secretary UKDel OECD Paris, 1987-92**

CM: Perhaps this is the moment to move on to OECD. In 1987 you became First Secretary in OECD in Paris. What was your role there?

RG: OECD, the so-called Rich Man's Club, is a think-tank, bringing together specialists to set the agenda for the future in a number of key areas. Aid was one of these: a committee looked into the effectiveness of aid, how we could do more to untie aid to make it less of a tool of commercial diplomacy and more geared to the poverty needs of the recipient. My area was trade; there the main driver of change had been successive rounds of multilateral liberalisation. The latest was called the Uruguay Round. These were large gatherings of trade specialists whose aim was remove more and more barriers to trade. Classically, these would be tariff barriers, but as more of those were dismantled, we began to move into non-tariff barriers. Phytosanitary requirements were a case in point: for perfectly legitimate reasons, countries might say, 'We don't like importing beef from you as you have lower standards of animal welfare than we do'. But sometimes countries used these as pretexts to stop perfectly good beef being imported so to not undercut their domestic suppliers. OECD's task was to help GATT (General Agreement for Tariffs and Trade) – now the World Trade Organisation - set the agenda for the next multilateral Round. It was serviced by a secretariat which would produce lengthy papers on these specialist issues. I would be the UK representative on the working group that met every week or so to discuss these papers and report back to London, mainly to the DTI in my case, rather than the Foreign Office. About once a month Tony Hutton, an Under Secretary from the DTI, would come for the main committee which would take a number of decisions to move the discussion to the next level.

One of my areas was tax evasion and avoidance which required me to brief our Crown Dependencies. I had to address the House of Keys on the Isle of Man and the Estates General in Jersey about certain initiatives underway to bear down on these tax havens. It's a long process and only recently has agreement been reached on a minimum level of withholding tax for certain jurisdictions, which is quite a big step forward. So we were grappling with some potentially important issues, in terms of real world impact. The Secretariat's economists

were a competent but humourless lot, who wrote in a particularly turgid prose and I missed the human cut and thrust of more classic diplomacy.

CM: Did you have any preparation in trade economics before you went to Paris or was this the generalist theory in action, you can do everything and you just jumped straight in?

RG: Very much the latter. I think I may have made a few calls on people in the DTI and UKREP Brussels, but basically you were told to get on with it. Although couched in pretty leaden prose, the concepts themselves were not impossible for a generalist to get his head around.

To lighten the mood a bit, let me tell you about Alan Clark. Once a year the OECD held a big ministerial meeting where in my case the Trade Minister, Alan Clark, came over to put his stamp on some new initiative. At the end of these meetings, President Mitterrand would hold a big reception at the Elysée Palace. Clark said, 'I don't want to be bothered with that. I just want to get back to Kent.' We knew that this would cause offence and got No. 10 to lean on him to agree. So off we trot to the Elysée at the end of the meeting and he tells my Private Secretary and me: 'you wait at the front of the Elysée; I won't be long and then we'll jump in the car and scoot off to the airport.' Rather unwisely in retrospect, I persuaded the Private Secretary to pop round the corner for a quick drink. We came back ten minutes later and waited for Clark to come out. No Clark. Another ten minutes went by and we thought, 'he's obviously having a good time.' Finally, we saw someone storming up the Rue du Faubourg St Honoré, puce in the face. It was Clark. He was incandescent with rage. He had gone in, shaken Mitterrand's hand and gone straight round and out again, all in the space of about three or four minutes. Finding us gone, he marched in fury down to the Embassy, thinking for some reason that we might be there, only to be greeted by some surly guard. We rushed to the car which was parked on a side street and jumped in. He kept saying, 'Your career's finished! Finished!' Then the car went straight into a huge traffic jam, which was all too typical at the time and I thought, 'Well, it really is finished because we're going to miss the plane now.' By some miracle the traffic eased and we sped off to the airport. By the time he got on the plane, he had simmered down and become quite affable. It was just one of those *mauvais quarts d'heure*. But one needed the odd moment of light relief, because otherwise it was fairly stodgy stuff.

I was nearly five years there. As my time drew to an end, Pam said, ‘Can’t you transfer from the Foreign Office to the OECD Secretariat?’ I said, ‘It would be like living death.’ I had just been promoted to go to Poland as counsellor, so I’m afraid I said no.

CM: Can you look back on your five years at the OECD and feel that you achieved something professionally or do you see it as complete drudgery and boredom?

RG: Rather more the latter than the former. The liberalisation agenda was moved forward a few notches in a direction the UK wanted and that was probably as a result partly of my efforts (as I became chairman of the working group), but mostly those of Tony Hutton from the DTI. But there was no stand out achievement I can recall. The OECD came into its own between the big GATT Rounds because we were doing the spade work that would inform the next big push. It was mostly drudgery, I have to say. It wasn’t as if I felt I was in a non-job, of no interest to UK plc. It was just not quite as exciting, rewarding and interesting as I would have liked.

CM: Robert, just to wrap up this session, how do you feel when you think about what you were doing in those two jobs, desk officer in ECDE and in OECD, trying to build the EEC and trying to remove trade barriers for all the countries of the world, when you look at the world now? We are out of the EU and barriers are being raised to make trade harder rather than easier. Do you just shrug your shoulders or do you have a sense that things you worked for have been thrown over and your life’s work has been turned upside down in the last few years?

RG: I am deeply disappointed that we seem to be going in the opposite direction, but I am not convinced that this is necessarily the last word. Yes, we made many mistakes and in retrospect we should have tried harder – by we I mean the global community and our political leaders at the time, not just in Britain - to look after those segments of society disadvantaged by globalisation. But do I believe even now that globalisation was the wrong course? No, I still think it is the right way to go: it helps countries play to their strengths. Not every country is good at doing everything, so I think it is a rational division of resources and talents. Perhaps next time round, when we have got through this nationalistic phase – let’s hope it doesn’t last too long – we will have learned our lessons and be more mindful of the losers as well as the winners. Was Thatcherism in the 1980s a bad thing? It was doubtless necessary to cure the deep structural ills of the economy, but it was done in a pretty brutal

way. Sensibly, Tony Blair drew the right lessons; he continued many of the same policies but in a more humane way.

Was my whole diplomatic career a waste? No, I feel that we collectively contributed to the end of the Cold War. By standing firm against Soviet aggression, we managed to face down that existential threat to our values and release a swathe of countries from their malign influence. I take some pride looking back on my second stint in Poland, and what we achieved with the Know How Fund. If I'd only achieved that in my diplomatic career, that would have been enough.

### **Counsellor/Head of Chancery, Warsaw, 1992-95**

NB. This period is discussed in tandem with first posting to Poland. See page 5.

*Today is Thursday 17 February 2022 and this is the second interview with Robert Gordon for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording.*

CM: Robert, we are going to start this interview today in 1995. It is the very exciting moment when you go to be Ambassador in Burma. You hadn't, until this time, had anything, I think, to do with south-east Asia, so can you explain to us how this posting came about?

### **Ambassador to Burma, 1995-99**

RG: Yes, it came about in a typically Foreign Office fashion. My predecessor had left rather suddenly. Personnel started a frantic search around for someone – anyone - they could send out to Burma. As I was coming to the end of my time in Poland, I got a phone call from POD when we were in Bieszczady, down in the south-east corner of the country. 'How do you fancy being ambassador to Burma?' I thought: I have absolutely no qualifications for it; I've never had any experience of that part of the world. I was however lucky because just at that time the Foreign Office were changing their policy and allowing younger diplomats to become ambassadors, as we were opening up many new mini-embassies following the break-up of the Soviet Union. It would be a great opportunity for me to run my own post but was likely to be a tough assignment so I wasn't sure how Pam would react. She said, 'Go for it! It will be just like Singapore in the sixties when I was a teenager there.' She wasn't wrong; in many ways it was rather similar. So I said yes.

Although the Office wanted me to go out as soon as possible, I had to wait six weeks for *agrément* to be granted as we were in such bad odour with the military junta. This gave me a chance to pick the brains of some old Burma hands, both in the Office and outside. Finally, in September 1995, *agrément* came through and I left.

We didn't actually have sanctions on Burma at that moment; it was just a frosty relationship after the junta had seized power in 1989, held elections in 1990 and then failed to respect the results. Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest in '89. She had just been released from house arrest in July '95, so there was a slight thaw at that point. Many thought this heralded a rapprochement between her and the Generals. I went out there with instructions to support "The Lady" and to have as little as possible to do with the junta. This was unusual. In most postings we try to remain objective in our reporting of our host country, but in Burma's case our ministers said, 'We're not impartial. We're completely behind the democratic standard bearer, Aung San Suu Kyi, and not in favour of the government.'

CM: How did you meet Aung San Suu Kyi? What was your introduction to her?

RG: Funnily enough, Pam and the family met her before me. Soon after her release Aung San Suu Kyi took to giving weekly homilies standing on a soap box behind the gate of her house and addressing the people gathered in the street, at first a few dozen, then several hundreds, including Pam and the family, sitting on the pavement. She would give little educational talks about what democracy and human rights meant – mostly in Burmese. When she saw Pam there, she beckoned her in and they started their friendship more or less straight away. Pam initially stumbled over her long name and she said, 'Don't worry. Just call me Suu.' They immediately bonded. My first encounter a few days later was necessarily more professional and formal. Suu later confessed to Pam that she had used her to get close to me. Not that I put up very much resistance, I have to say.

CM: Maybe this is a good moment to talk about your relationship with Suu through the whole posting. You were there for four years and it was a very important relationship.

RG: She had won the Nobel Peace Prize a few years earlier, in 1991, but she was under house arrest then. In retrospect, the four years we were together in Burma were exceptional, because she was more or less at liberty throughout that time, whereas before and after she was mostly under house arrest of varying degrees of severity. We got to know her well. She would come round to our house quite often – she lived about a fifteen or twenty-minute drive away. She visibly relaxed in our company. She has many connections with Britain: her

husband, who was still alive then, was a British academic, the delightful Michael Aris, an Oxford don. He would often write to her (via us) and occasionally to me. Michael and I thought very similarly, whereas Suu would say, 'You and Michael don't truly understand the Burmese mindset; if you give an inch, they'll take a mile.' Although she was nearly alone in standing up to this ruthless dictatorship, she was steely in her determination. A few months after our arrival, after it had become clear the regime was not interested in engaging with her, she pulled her NLD (National League for Democracy) deputies out of the National Convention which was writing a new constitution. That started a downward spiral in her relationship with the Generals. After that, EU policy started to harden as well. She called for trade and investment embargoes, a tourist embargo etc. which infuriated the junta, so the relationship worsened as our posting progressed. She was such an inspirational figure, so graceful, poised and witty. She had a lovely sense of humour and impeccable English, of a rather Victorian correctness. She encapsulated so many admirable qualities. Facing her were these remote, thuggish Generals who routinely perpetrated the most appalling abuses of human rights, using villagers as human shields to cross minefields, indulging in systematic abuses of basic freedoms. Despite the constitution guaranteeing freedom of worship, in the remoter parts of the country, Christian crosses were being thrown down and Buddhist pagodas put up. Their attitude to the ethnic minorities scattered across the outer edges of Burma was one of disdain or just brutality, whereas Suu stood for everything that was different.

I quickly fell under her spell, I have to admit, but in doing so I was perhaps not fully reading her complex personality. Although she espoused human rights and Western-style democracy and sincerely believed in these principles, the longer she stayed in Burma, the more she was exposed to a rather different, Burmese, cultural mindset. One could already see how intolerant she was of dissent within her own party. She was pretty ruthless, I have to say, in getting rid of people who stepped out of line, including friends, former friends. She was always polite when talking to me, but even there, if I put forward an idea, she would never dream of agreeing to it. It was only later, a few weeks later, you might find she had acted on it. Even in those early days one could see how she stood in awe of her father, Aung San, the father of Burma's independence, and his concept of Burmese nationalism. In time, this began to take more and more hold of her and started to overlay some of her feelings about Western democracy. That became clearer many years later in her reaction to the Rohingya tragedy. I think she genuinely felt sorry for them, but felt she had to keep the bigger picture in mind: do

I go out on a limb here and risk a coup by denouncing the Army for their heinous behavior or do I soft-pedal my approach in order to safeguard the bigger objective, bringing the rule of law and democracy to the whole of Burma? Many people, myself included, felt that she was underestimating her freedom of manoeuvre in 2017/18 when this all blew up, but her fears may have been justified, because the Army did indeed seize back power in February 2021.

CM: One could look at it from the other way round, that she lost out anyway and she was ejected from power. Maybe it would have been better to speak out on a point of principle.

RG: Precisely, and then she would avoided much of the international vilification that followed. There, I think she misread her own personality. I have always thought she would have been better as a Vaclav Havel-type figure, the mother of the nation, the nation's conscience, leaving the messy business of day-to-day governance to some newly democratic ex-general, of which there were a few, in the years around 2013/14. But when I suggested this to her, she was very sharp with me and said, 'No, you've got it wrong. Unless I actually run the country myself, I am not confident that the people with me will deliver the goals I hold dear.' That doesn't speak very highly of her faith in her lieutenants, still less the reformist generals. It's such a shame. Had she carved out that sort of role for herself, it might have been more acceptable to the Army and it would have safeguarded her longer-term reputation, which has now been irretrievably damaged.

CM: You were the Ambassador; you would have seen her from time to time for official things. Did you have a social relationship which went on apart from that?

RG: We were certainly close. She came round for Christmas. Even though she was a staunch Buddhist, she had been in Britain long enough to know the social importance of Christmas, so she would always bring little gifts for our children. She had a special bond with our older son, Adam, who was roughly the same age that her son, Kim, had been at the time that they had been wrenched apart in 1989. She used to write to Adam in his prep school. He would tell her how unhappy he was there. She would reply, 'Adam, when you think you may be unhappy, just think: What is worse, your headmaster or the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council)? Let's keep a sense of proportion here.' In his letters, ten-year-old Adam would threaten dire retribution on anybody who would harm a hair of Suu's head. In the Embassy, our local staff told us that the military intelligence would ring them up to say, 'We can't make head or tail of this telex that's come in to the Embassy.'

What are they talking about here?’ If they’d seen Adam’s letters, they wouldn’t have been very pleased.

CM: Was it while you were there that her husband died?

RG: Yes. Our eldest daughter Francesca was by then at St Anne’s College, Oxford, close to Park Town where Michael was living. They saw a fair bit of each other. Tragically, Michael developed prostate cancer at the age of 54 in early 1999 and gave a letter to Francesca to bring out to Suu on her university holiday. We tried very hard to get a visa for him, but the regime saw this a pretext for turning the psychological screws on Suu. They had cut off her telephone and she would come to our house every day to ring Michael in the Radcliffe Infirmary. She would be pretty upset after that and Pam would need to comfort her. Michael died towards the end of March 1999. Robin Christopher was our Ambassador in Jakarta and had been among the coterie of young British diplomats who had befriended Suu in the UN many years earlier. I managed to get him up to Rangoon to give some solace to Suu who was very grateful and appreciative.

My posting was supposed to last three years, but Suu said, ‘please tell London I want you to stay on for a fourth year.’ On one of my leaves back in London I asked to see the new Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, to explain the background. The Diary Secretary in his outer office said, ‘He doesn’t even see important ambassadors!’ As head of a tiny post, there was no way he would bother with me. He couldn’t even find the time to see his junior ministers, let alone junior heads of post. But the Foreign Office took Suu’s request on board and agreed I could stay on.

Towards the end of my posting, especially as it coincided with this rather grim period of Michael’s illness and death, I could no longer bear to shake the Foreign Minister’s hand. He had earlier been Ambassador in London and I’d got to know him quite well but when he came back as Foreign Minister, he became just a toady of the military junta. There was a farcical element to my interactions with the Foreign Ministry. On my many visits to protest about the regime’s latest atrocity, the Deputy Foreign Minister U Khin Maung Win - a nice chap at heart - would nod gravely and say, ‘Your concerns will be passed to higher authority.’ He made no attempt to justify it, or deny it even, but made clear that the MFA’s role was little more than a post box. For their part, the top generals would have as little as possible to do with diplomats. Only one of the ruling Triumvirate, General Khin Nyunt, Head of Military Intelligence, did we occasionally see at the odd social function. At one of these,

Ollie, our youngest, then aged six, got into trouble. He was taken with the rest of us to the junta's official stand at the Water Festival to wish Khin Nyunt Happy New Year. Ollie used his water pistol to shoot Khin Nyunt in the eye, which was pushing local tradition a little bit too far. I was ticked off about that, quite rightly.

Professionally speaking, my relationship with Suu was a central aspect of my work there, alongside monitoring the whole range of human rights abuses. Although there was no formal embargo on inward investment, EU policy did harden half way through our posting. Our little foursome of EU ambassadors, Britain, Germany, France and Italy came up with the idea of targeted sanctions; instead of doing as Suu asked, slapping undifferentiated trade and investment embargoes on Burma, we thought it would be less damaging to the lives of ordinary Burmese if we just targeted those individuals primarily responsible for Burma's plight, the military and their cronies - put them and their relatives on visa ban lists and make sure that they couldn't invest their ill-gotten gains in Europe. This idea was dreamed up by my French colleague and, as far as I am aware, this was the first time it was tried out at an EU level. It soon became a mainstream tool of EU diplomacy, being later applied to Zimbabwe and other miscreants. In Burma's case, as ASEAN, their neighbours in south-east Asia, didn't apply any of these sanctions, let alone China, the effect was rather limited, but it certainly had a psychological impact, judging by the venom with which we were attacked in the official media. The Burmese were far too polite to say anything nasty to me in person, but the press regularly carried cartoons attacking Britain and America. We were the 'axe handles', a uniquely Burmese metaphor, the ones wielding the handle while the axe head - 'democracy stunt actress Suu Kyi and her clique' - bit into the tree of state.

With such an emphasis on the monitoring of human rights, there was virtually no commercial work and obviously no military contact. All the other important elements of a classic diplomatic posting were missing.

That said, the teaching of English under the auspices of the British Council did play a significant role. The large Embassy building had originally housed fifty UK-based staff; it now had five. Half of it was given over to the British Council which ran very popular day and evening courses to meet the enormous pent-up demand for English. We five diplomats rattled around in the other half, and whole floors were left empty.

Coming back to recent Burmese history, in 1962 a left-leaning military dictator Ne Win seized power, ushering in the "Burmese Way to Socialism". He expelled all remaining

foreigners, nationalised everything in sight, switched traffic from left to right, proscribed English and insisted that everything be done in Burmese. This wrought havoc on the country's levels of English. By the time we arrived, only a few elderly Burmese still had good English while the younger generation had virtually none. Yet young people were desperate to study it. Towards the end of his twenty-five-year tenure, Ne Win realized his mistake when his daughter failed her medical exams because she didn't have enough English. Before he fell in '88, he announced that English was acceptable again and the British Council was allowed back in to start teaching English. Pam, my wife, was an English language teacher and gave free courses at a monastery for classes of up to three hundred. She also worked at the British Council and became a Cambridge IELTS examiner. By the time we were there, the Burmese had started making university courses compulsorily taught in English, with mixed results. Youngsters who had come up through the secondary system with virtually no English were suddenly presented with a textbook in complex, technical English for say their chemistry course. They would have to memorise by rote each page of this text book with minimal understanding of the content and regurgitate it to get their degree. This came home to me when a friend of ours opened a law office in Rangoon many years later, around 2015, and hired a law graduate from Rangoon University. She asked him to prepare a précis of a new law. He said, 'What's a précis?' and she had to explain: a summary. Had he ever done one before? No, never. Just take this law and look at it. Have you ever seen a Burmese law? No, never. So she said, 'What have you been doing for your law course in the University?' 'I just memorized an English language text book.' She really had to start from ground zero.

Despite our unpopularity with the regime, we were able to travel around Burma, partly for professional reasons - I would go on UN agency or INGO trips up to Rakhine State and other remoter parts to see what was happening in some of the worst affected areas - partly for personal interest to get to know different parts of this large and ethnically diverse country. It was an arduous experience because of the primitive state of the infrastructure. When I arrived at the magnificent residence we were lucky enough to live in, I discovered in a remote drawer a memo that must have been prepared by the military attaché in the 1950s, giving estimated lengths of time of travel between various cities. In fact, it bore very little relation to what we experienced in the 1990s; journeys now took twice as long. It brought home how far Burma had slipped backwards.

In my very early months, before Suu realized that the Army were not interested in talking to her, there was one British trade delegation that came first to Hanoi and then to Rangoon. Its members saw opportunities in Burma as much more promising than in Vietnam, because of Burma's not-so distant memory of commercial law and English, whereas Vietnam, northern Vietnam, didn't have that. Yet when I went to Vietnam not many years later, it was chalk from cheese. By then, the Vietnamese were miles ahead of the Burmese. It was so sad; so many wasted opportunities.

CM: When you were travelling around the country as the representative of the old colonial power, did you find that ordinary Burmese harboured resentment or welcomed you and other westerners, in spite of the colonial inheritance?

RG: Very much the latter. We were warmly welcomed everywhere. This wasn't necessarily just because we were British. I think the Burmese were genuinely keen to see foreigners and westerners in particular. Some of the more politically aware did occasionally whisper to us, 'Thank you for what you are doing for the Lady.' But that was quite rare. I remember a predecessor of mine, Sir Nicholas Fenn, telling me how his car had driven into some small village with the Union Jack fluttering; children came round the car and started pointing at this strange flag, 'What's that?' An old man came up and said, 'Children, don't you realise that's the Union Jack. It means the British are back and everything is going to be alright again.' Actually, when you think dispassionately about British rule in Burma, whilst we achieved many good things, Pax Britannica, the English language, hospitals, railways, steamers and all that, there was a darker side too, all too vividly painted in *Burmese Days* by George Orwell: condescension, racist attitudes towards the Burmese. The Buddhist, Burman majority could never get accustomed to British rule. We brought a lot of Indians in to do menial jobs who later became a source of many problems. We encouraged the growing of opium which was a great scourge, so it was a pretty mixed picture.

CM: Indeed, and what we think of now as important in development, education and health, were barely touched upon by the Raj.

RG: In fact, the opposite. By decapitating the monarchy, we had a disastrous impact on the monastic system which was dependent on the king. Burma up till that point had quite high levels of literacy thanks to monastic schools dotted all over the country, even in the tiniest villages, and that was undermined by the British decision. We did set up Methodist schools for the proto-middle class in the cities and many of them were appreciative of the quality of

the teaching and the English they learnt there. Even in our day there were people who valued that. But the overall attitude towards our colonial inheritance had been softened as a result of the later mismanagement of successive Burman regimes, particularly the military rule of Ne Win and then the SLORC. As a result, the Burmese tended to look back on the positive aspects of British administration and lay less stress on the negative.

CM: Robert, I heard that in Burma under the military regime the old custom of the whole diplomatic corps turning out at the airport whenever the head of state left or returned to the country was still in force. That was a traditional diplomatic function in the '30s when rulers didn't really move around that much. I think it appears in Laurence Durrell. But I have never heard of anywhere else where it still happened in the 1990s. Is it true?

RG: It certainly is true. I didn't realise it was so unusual. We had to line up, not in diplomatic uniform, just ordinary suits, in strict protocol order, which meant that I was always flanked by the same people, the Egyptian on one side, the Bangladeshi on the other. The Egyptian was an endless source of witty asides and rather irreverent comments as the rather podgy Than Shwe mounted the steps of his plane, with his little grandson always in tow. Mercifully, there were rather few of these occasions because the regime was so reviled around the world. They were very nationalistic and autarkic in their attitude and didn't particularly enjoy going abroad. Khin Nyunt was the only one who had a more international outlook and was slightly more broad-minded, but Than Shwe, the head of the armed forces and Maung Aye, the head of the Army were completely focused on Burma. I was reminded of an anecdote about the last King of Burma, Thibaw, whom the British expelled in 1885. He apparently called for a world map. He was shown this globe and one of his ministers pointed out the speck that was northern or Royal Burma. He said, 'That can't be right. Go away do me a proper map.' They duly came a few days later and unfurled a huge parchment. There in the centre was Mandalay with its seven-tiered ziggurat above the royal palace and in the distance were some mountains with India on one side and Siam on the other. 'Yes, that's a proper map.'

CM: This was obviously the Burmese version of the famous cover of the New Yorker with Manhattan as the centre of the world.

RG: So they were not unique. You might ask why did this tiny pinprick of a place matter to the UK. I think it was because Suu Kyi's courage, personality and grace had really caught the British public's imagination. As a result people put pressure on their MPs, who in turn

urged the government to take a close interest in her fate and in Burma, far more than the country deserved in strategic terms. Many far-flung posts languish under the radar, because they are often given less importance in London than they deserve. It was rather the other way round in Burma, we were very much in the public eye for ministers. It was gratifying to know that my assessments of what was truly happening in Burma were of genuine interest to our ministers and even the Queen, who took a personal interest in Suu Kyi and her British family.

I might add a personal postscript here. Although I said at the beginning that I had no qualifications to go to Burma, having got there, I remembered the stories my father had told me about the XIV Army and his own involvement in the Second Chindit Expedition of 1944. This long-range penetration group had been flown in by glider and Dakota to jungle airstrips in northern Burma, hundreds of miles behind Japanese lines, to sow mayhem. I managed to get him up to his old battlefield in White City, thanks to the Burmese Army's help. They were ready to put aside our political differences and help me get up there. My brother and his family, my father and I inspected the fortified position the British had created astride the railway line supplying Japanese forces further north. To our astonishment we found the trenches and bunkers still in serviceable condition. They hadn't been invaded by the jungle, as the Burmese Army had used them themselves in their decades-long struggle against the Kachin Independence Army, the local ethnic minority militia. It was a moving experience, an important trip down memory lane for my father. During my posting, I hosted receptions for a number of Royal British Legion (RBL) pilgrimages of relatives visiting their loved ones' graves. On the basis of a report my father did of his visit to White City, the following year the RBL brought out "Mad Mike" Calvert who had been my father's Brigadier at White City. He was now 86, in a wheel chair, but still lucid. He died a year later. On one occasion, the Japanese Ambassador and I did a joint reception for British and Japanese veterans. One of the Japanese saw a picture of my father in the Residence and said, 'Oh, a Chindit! Chindits were very bad news for us.'

### **Head of South East Asia Department, FCO, 1999-2003**

CM: Now, four years in Burma; you did that extra year requested by Suu. Then you went back to London to become Head of South-East Asia Department. What was it like taking over at the bureaucratic end, rather than the action end of relations with the region? Were

there any special issues that were exercising the British government during the period 1999-2003?

RG: My return to London did not go quite as planned. I had been told I would going to be Head of Human Rights Department, which had become an area of specialization. As I arrived at the Foreign Office, I bumped into Robert Cooper, another of Suu's cavaliers with Robin Christopher. Robert was then Director Asia. He said, 'You don't want to be doing that. Human Rights – important, but of diminishing importance in our overall priorities. You want to come and work for me in South-East Asia Department.' He hijacked me. I thought it would be a more interesting job in many ways. I had done a lot of work on human rights and thought it was time to broaden my horizons to the other nine members of ASEAN as well as Burma. Having had experience of Burma, with a fair amount of contact with Thailand and other ASEAN countries, I had some acquaintance with the region.

I started work there in August 1999 and was almost immediately sucked into the East Timor crisis. That happened towards the end of August when the pro-Indonesian militia went on the rampage against FRETILIN (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente - Revolutionary Front for Independent East Timor), the independence movement trying to wrest East Timor away from Indonesia, which had annexed it after the Portuguese left in 1975. The Indonesians had recently kicked out Suharto and were beginning a messy transition to democracy. They wanted Xanana Gusmão, leader of the East Timorese, then under arrest in Jakarta, to be sent back to Dili, capital of East Timor, to calm things down. He feared he would be killed by these out-of-control militia, so he took refuge with Robin Christopher (British Ambassador to Indonesia in Jakarta). His two-week stay allowed the situation to stabilise; when he did come back, Gusmão was able to exercise his calming influence.

In the meantime, I was summoned to Carlton House Gardens, the Foreign Secretary's London residence, for a meeting with Robin Cook and his junior ministers that was supposed to look at the next ten years of challenges for British diplomacy. It ended up looking at what to tell the press in the next ten minutes about East Timor. It taught me two useful lessons: one, the extreme neuralgia of Robin Cook to what was written in the press and the way this unhelpfully influenced British foreign policy; and secondly, the knee-jerk reaction of British ministers to do something, to be seen to be doing something, regardless of whether we really had much stake in that particular part of the world. In East Timor, we had no stake, or

virtually no stake; admittedly if it were to boomerang back on Indonesia's transition towards democracy, that would have had serious implications. It might have triggered a coup against Habibie, the new President of Indonesia. So one had to guide ministers' interventionist instinct into a productive direction. In the end it was channelled towards the UN who in turn authorised the Australians to take the lead in re-establishing order in East Timor under UN auspices. That, on the whole, worked pretty well and East Timor eventually declared itself independent. For two or three weeks, just after I started the new job, it was a manic time. I was in the Crisis Management Unit working eighteen hours a day. Pam was having to deal with the mountain of luggage that had arrived at our house in Coombe Bissett near Salisbury, not an easy task. The Political Director Emyr Jones Parry, a wise and considerate colleague, lent me his deputy, Peter Ricketts, to help me. He and I manned the London end, Cook having in the meanwhile disappeared off to Japan. Anyway, it simmered down towards the end of September and then I was able to start on the job proper.

I spent about sixty per cent of my time on Burma and Indonesia. Burma for the wrong reasons: it still occupied a lot of attention for our ministers, but there was little ground for optimism. Indonesia was more promising, as the country was emerging from a thirty-year period of military rule. We had to devise mechanisms to encourage the Indonesian military to put aside their political role and focus on their military function, dealing with a serious secessionist threat in Aceh in north Sumatra - East Timor we've talked about - as well as interracial or interethnic flare ups between Christians and Muslims in Sulawesi and Maluku. It was a complex country with lots of different challenges. In time, the Foreign Office, MOD and DfID came up with some imaginative joint programmes to help the Indonesians down this path. Habibie didn't last very much longer after East Timor became independent. He was succeeded by Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur, a blind cleric. He came over to London for an official visit and tickled his British counterparts with scabrous stories about Winston Churchill in very good English. He was pushed out after a short while and his number two, Vice President Megawati, took over. She was the daughter of the former strongman of Indonesia. She also proved unequal to the task. After a couple of years, I remember going out to Jakarta and meeting the impressive Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He was just what Indonesia needed: a general with true democratic instincts. Just as General Ramos had helped the democratic transition in the Philippines, a senior military figure under Marcos, but then a true democrat when he came into power, Bambang Yudhoyono did the same in Indonesia when he became President, a little after I had left my job. He was there for ten

years and really anchored democracy in Indonesia, seeing off the dangerous threat of Muslim extremism, which was a worrying new development after 9/11.

Indonesia, rightly, occupied a good chunk of my time, as well as region-wide issues such as China's growing assertiveness. This didn't leave much space for the other eight members of ASEAN. Of those eight, the smallest, oil-rich Brunei, took up a disproportionate share. Brunei had been a British protectorate up to 1984. The Sultan, its absolute ruler, used to enjoy coming to London where he could become relatively anonymous in his vast house in Kensington Palace Gardens. Admittedly, his private visits to London still involved three jumbo jets, one for him and one for each of his two queens, landing in strict protocol order at Heathrow. He enjoyed dispensing with the formality of his court in Bandar Seri Bagawan. His main preoccupation was to undo the financial damage of his playboy brother, Prince Jefri, who had squandered billions on fripperies such as his megayacht *Tits* with its two tenders, *Nipple 1* and *Nipple 2*. One could see why Jefri had been the darling of the British red tops. The Sultan was now trying to claw back some of these misspent assets. We had the idea of getting Charles Powell, the former private secretary to Maggie Thatcher, to be our personal representative to the Sultan. His reports were great reads and I enjoyed working with him. The Sultan's representative in London used to present the department with a large Fortnum & Mason wicker hamper each Christmas worth hundreds of pounds, far more than we were allowed to keep. My department of eighteen would suddenly be joined by colleagues from Research Department, Press Section or other agencies who appeared out of the woodwork to claim a share of the booty. It would all be distributed by lot amongst us, hence each present was under the £30 limit. I would find out who had won the Stilton cheese and say, 'Isn't your report coming up soon? Perhaps you'd like to swap your prize with mine.' Each year I would bring back this Stilton to the family Christmas where it became known as the Stilton of Brunei.

One gratifying aspect of the job was that I was able to get out to the region about once a year to visit our posts. I'd also needed to go to Brussels once every two or three months for the Asia Working Group, which was the EU configuration that looked at EU policy towards south-east Asia. On Burma we were seen to be the lead country and what we said normally set policy for the whole of the EU.

CM: Were there any crux issues where it was difficult to get agreement?

RG: Well, having said that rather glibly, I should qualify it. The Germans were always unhappy with the concept of sanctions. These had to be renewed every six months, so we had to argue our case repeatedly. The French were also lukewarm about sanctions, as they had commercial interests in the oil and gas sector, so it wasn't always straightforward to get sanctions renewed or modified. At one point there was a mini-opening in Burma; to reward the government for having allowed Suu Kyi to move around the country, we put forward a package softening the sanctions. But then they attacked Suu Kyi's convoy in northern Burma and locked her up, so we had to toughen our stance again. On other countries, especially Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the French would normally set the agenda as the EU partner with most knowledge. On the whole it worked pretty well. I don't think there were any truly intractable differences among us that prevented us coming to a common position.

I had to go to the UN from time to time, because there too there was keen interest in Burma. On one occasion in 2001 my plane was sitting on the tarmac at Heathrow when the pilot said, 'Sorry, there's a problem in New York; we won't be taking off after all.' This was 9/11. As a major investor in the country, the Japanese kept a close eye on Burma as well, so I would go to Tokyo to compare notes; on one of these visits, I continued over the hump to Washington to give a lecture at Georgetown University and talk to Americans who shared our general stance on Burma.

CM: A diplomat's working life is split in two: life on the front line representing the country abroad and then life as a bureaucrat at home in Whitehall. In that balance of your life, did you appreciate and enjoy both types of diplomacy, or did you much prefer one or the other?

RG: I much preferred being abroad and didn't so much enjoy being back in London. Looking back, I have worked out I was abroad for two and a half years for every year I was in London. I was in London three times, for a total of nine and a half years, and abroad for the rest of my thirty-five years, so twenty-five years or so. Being abroad was more to my taste. You need a special set of skills to flourish in the Whitehall jungle. Although there were some gifted colleagues who seemed equally at ease in London as abroad, I think the majority probably shared my preference for the greater freedom that a foreign posting afforded. Until recently the Dutch used to have two separate cadres, Foreign Office officials who never went abroad and the Diplomatic Service who never served at home. Indeed, we had a similar system before the war. The danger is that diplomats start to lose touch with developments at home. I think the Labour Government were right to introduce various

innovations after 1997. Before I was sent to Vietnam, which we'll come on to in a moment, I joined a small group of ambassadors-designate who were sent to Birmingham for four or five days to find out what life was like outside the Home Counties. It was an instructive experience. I had been continuously abroad for twelve years from 1987-1999 – France, Poland and Burma – and Britain had changed a great deal during that time. It was sensible that we should be made better aware of the country we were supposed to be representing, One final thought. My rude introduction to work back at the centre with the East Timor crisis, although rather painful at the time, was in retrospect a good way of getting stuck into Whitehall realities. After that, things settled to a more regular rhythm. There were dramatic incidents, like the Bali bomb in 2002 which were a severe test, but more so for the people on the ground than for us in London. It was an area of the world I got to know pretty well and that I enjoyed dealing with. There were aspects of classic diplomacy at the London end, like dealing with the ambassadors of those countries which provided some satisfaction. I felt more comfortable in that role than I had, for example, in the EU department that we talked about last time, or even in a functional job like OECD.

### **Ambassador to Vietnam, 2003-2007**

CM: Your next job was as Ambassador to Vietnam. The Foreign Office had started by that stage to make careers much more self-directed, so did you see from your vantage point of Head of Department that the job was coming up in Vietnam and decide that this is where you would like to go for your final posting?

RG: I was pretty flexible. As you say, in those days posts were advertised well in advance and you were allowed to bid for them; there was more self-direction of your own career. I had bid for a South American post, so I would have been happy to go back there. You had to put together a credible enough case for your name to be considered. Gone were the days when POD would pack you off to a place like Burma with no experience. No, this time, you had to make sure you were a plausible fit for the places you bid for. I didn't get this particular South American post, so I looked in my own bailiwick and thought, 'Vietnam is a country that's going places and would make for an interesting job.' So I put my name forward for it and was lucky enough to get it. I didn't know at that point it was going to be my last posting, because at this stage we are talking about 2003 and I was fifty-one. I did a little over four years in Vietnam and retired at the age of fifty-six. I'll come on to that in a moment.

Arriving in Vietnam was a rather surreal experience. You find yourself surrounded by hammer-and-sickle emblems and think, ‘How quaint!’ These same emblems, which would have struck dread into you in Cold War times, had become a historical anomaly, Vietnam being one of only five countries left in the world still to pay lip service to Communism - with Laos, China, North Korea and Cuba. This was a weird form of Communism: market capitalism in all but name. Admittedly, in political terms, it was still a one-party state; not a lot of freedom of expression; elections that were little more than a coronation of candidates handpicked by the Communist Party; some abuse of human rights – but fairly minor, I have to say.

I would sometimes ask myself, ‘Aren’t we applying double-standards here? We are so critical of the Burmese military regime for denying democracy to their people and yet in Vietnam we don’t make so much fuss.’ Then I would reflect: Well, actually the two countries are very different. In Burma’s case they had – even in the colonial period – quite a high measure of democracy and local government and then a genuine period of democracy after Independence in ’48 until ’62. Since 1988, every time they’ve been asked in elections, they have voted overwhelmingly for democracy. In Vietnam by contrast, the north had never known democracy and the south only a kleptocratic, tainted version in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Secondly, the two regimes were very different in their social priorities, with the military regime running the country largely for the Army’s benefit with scant regard for Burma’s poor. In Vietnam they did seem to care for the poor. The country’s Communist rulers were making serious efforts to improve the lot of their ethnic minorities, building schools, roads, bridges and electric substations in the most deprived areas. They were demonstrably improving the lot of the average Vietnamese year by year with successful economic policies making everybody better off. After a grim period of failed doctrinaire policies following the end of the Vietnam War, they had brought about an agricultural “green revolution”. From being a rice-deficit country, Vietnam was now the world’s second largest rice exporter. Though there was a good deal of grumbling about worsening corruption, most Vietnamese were not disposed to make trouble as long as their Communist bosses allowed them to get on with life, make money and better their lot.

The other big difference was that the Burmese were courteous, gentle Theravada Buddhists, while the Vietnamese shared with the Chinese a more hardnosed, energetic approach to life. Passing through an average Burmese village, one might see a swaying hammock in one corner, a few people quietly chatting in a tea shop in another corner, a row of monks silently

padding down the dirt street. Things could not be more different in a Vietnamese village: a cacophony of noise, metal sheets being bashed, motor bikes roaring up and down; people constructing, shouting, hawking, ant-like activity on all sides. That's because Vietnam has had such a tragic history of wars. Interludes of peace tend to be rather short. There is a frenzy of activity as peace might not last long. Most Burmese are fatalistic, hoping to earn a better life in their next incarnation. The majority of Vietnamese are nominally Buddhist, but religion is not nearly as central to their lives as it is in Burma. Most simply restrict their religious observance to a little shrine in a corner honouring their ancestors. There are still some eight million Catholics as well as a smattering of other religions, some rather bizarre like Cao Dai, two of whose saints are Sun Yat Sen and Victor Hugo.

CM: Were economic relations the most important element in our relationship during your time as Ambassador?

RG: Certainly, they were important. There was a large trade imbalance in Vietnam's favour, but we weren't too bothered by that. Clark's, for example, were sending five hundred million pounds worth of shoes to the UK each year. Rolls Royce would come out from time to time to try to sell aero engines to Vietnam Airlines. Up and down the country, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, the commercial capital, there were brisk commercial interchanges, as well as strong interest from British investors.

Aid was another important strand: DFID had a large office in Hanoi and ran a programme worth a hundred million dollars a year. Vietnam was the darling of the aid community. Donors always found it a challenge to spend aid effectively. In Vietnam, aid wasn't a large proportion of the domestic budget, so you had to persuade the Vietnamese that they really wanted to do a particular project and get proper buy-in. Once you'd got that, they'd be efficient in delivering it. The bridge, school or clinic would actually be built. Many an aid agency was gratified to see that their money resulted in demonstrable improvements in the quality of life of the poor. The Vietnamese were shooting up the table from a dirt-poor country earning less than a thousand dollars a year per head. By the end of our time they had already graduated into the middle-income tier and therefore become less aid-worthy.

Education was a third area of focus. Dozens of British universities came out to peddle their wares at huge fairs, hoping to attract Vietnamese students to come to study in the UK. Some would be paid for by the state, but in the north many top Communist officials would pay themselves to send their children – don't ask me where they got the money from. In the

south, they preferred to send their kids to America or Australia. There was a very wide appreciation in Vietnam of the quality of British education, so the British Council was highly active in this area, as well as in their traditional domain of teaching English, bolstered by many private schools like Apollo.

One other area that became more important as my posting progressed involved working closely with the Ministry of Public Security, hitherto an untouchable part of the apparatus. We needed to persuade them to help us return failed asylum seekers. Hundreds of Vietnamese were making the long and dangerous journey through China, Russia, Europe to the UK, where all too many became sucked into end-of-terrace cannabis factories - there were seventy in London alone - growing cannabis plants in hydroponic trays. They would often use young teenagers to tend these. Most Vietnamese were being denied asylum because Vietnam was a successful country that was not persecuting people. We needed to persuade the Ministry of Public Security not to take retribution on returned asylum-seekers. The Vietnamese lived up to their commitments, but the Home Office often did not. This was not always their fault. There would be some last-minute judicial review or human rights lawyer who would intervene before these people could be put on planes to be sent back.

There were also the beginnings of military co-operation as the Vietnamese were getting more worried about China, so they were starting to reach out to Western countries for help on the military side. We were helping them too to prepare for UN Security Council membership, in the hope of getting them to participate in peace-keeping operations around the world, thereby lessening the burden on us and others.

In short there was a wide variety of elements to our work in Vietnam and that made for a satisfying mix of responsibilities for me.

CM: Your account of the Burmese is of a charming and beautiful people. What about the Vietnamese? Did you find your contacts within the Vietnamese elites, civil servants and Communist Party members, sympathetic?

RG: They were much less easy to get to know. Officials invariably greeted you in dark suits, white shirts, unsmiling visage, no English. Trying to learn Vietnamese was a nightmare. It's much more difficult than Burmese as it has seven rather than three tones. The Vietnamese are very tone-intolerant; unless you get the tone absolutely right, they simply look blankly at you. Where they scored over the Burmese was once you got past their rather unsmiling façade, they were very worthwhile partners because they did what they said they were going

to do. The Burmese were more charming, but often had little intention of matching fine words with action.

As there were over fifty diplomatic missions in Hanoi, unlike twenty in Rangoon, there were frequent national days with endless boring self-congratulatory speeches which I unsuccessfully tried to curtail. The only positive was that they gave you a chance to get to know a few of the Vietnamese top brass. There was an elderly Deputy Prime Minister called Vũ Khoan, who was delightful to talk to in either French or English – very few spoke French, incidentally. I said to him, ‘I gather you’ve just been to Cuba. Were they interested to hear about market socialism?’ He gave me long look and said, ‘the Cubans are very proud people.’ In other words, he’d got nowhere. Apparently, they got the brush off from the North Koreans as well. The Minister of Industry had been to Dublin University and spoke good English; I was glad to discover he kept in touch with of his former classmates by email. There were signs that among the seemingly impenetrable phalanx at the top of the party there were a few people with international backgrounds. The Foreign Ministry had a talented Political Director with whom I used to cross swords on human rights; he was clearly going places and has since become their Foreign Minister and is now in the Politburo. One could already see the face of the Vietnamese political elite starting to change.

CM: And the legacy of the Vietnam war, was it noticeable or had it disappeared into the rear-view mirror and they were looking forward?

RG: Largely the latter. Vietnam has a young population; seventy per cent had been born since the end of the war. And because they were the victors, they could afford to be magnanimous, even towards Americans. American visitors were always astonished at how warmly they were received. It had been a brutal affair at the time; you have to remember that 50,000 Americans died, but over 2 million Vietnamese. Much later I was on a cruise down the Mekong with some Australians and we were invited into a Vietnamese village house. The elderly headman showed us two big pictures, ‘This is my brother who was killed in the French war and this is my brother killed in the American war. If you have any American friends, tell them: “We know you were asked to do terrible things when you were here, but please come back to Vietnam and see what has become of this country since you left. You’ll be surprised by the way you are treated here.”’ Yes, the odd issue like Agent Orange still rumbled on, but most Vietnamese were ready to turn the page.

There was this exhibition in Ho Chi Minh City originally called the Museum of American War Atrocities but its name was later changed to the less emotive War Remnants Museum. It was very graphic, largely pictures taken by American war reporters, so there were reminders, but most people were ready to move on. There were very few physical signs of the war. Now and again, you'd come across manholes in the pavements, where people had to jump in when the bombers came. There was a downed plane in one of Hanoi's lakes and a plaque on one of the schools hit by an American bomb, but it was pretty rare to come across these reminders.

CM: After your four years in Vietnam, you were looking for another posting.

RG: Yes, I was and indeed I put my name forward for Warsaw. Unfortunately, that didn't work because of Warsaw's relatively greater importance after the end of the Cold War. Most of its neighbours had collapsed into smaller units hence its grading was higher than the one I was leaving in Vietnam, and would have involved promotion. In practice it was quite often given as a consolatory prize to someone who felt themselves deserving of a higher post. Quite a few appointments had no Polish and no particular experience of the country and I was the victim of that. It was a disappointment.

There were two other factors: both my mother and Pam's mother were getting very elderly and were going to need much closer attention. So we really needed to be closer to home. In a worldwide regrading of posts, many European heads of mission slots were now really quite junior. Taking one of these would have meant going down the ladder which was bad news for my pension, let alone my pride. To stay at the same level, I would probably have to go to South America or elsewhere in Asia, i.e. far from home. The other factor was that Pam had rejoined the Foreign Office in 2000. Once again she had had to take unpaid leave and do other things in Vietnam, but she was interested in carrying on with her career, so we decided to switch horses and let Pam take the lead. She got a post in Strasbourg and I took advantage of the generous early retirement package being offered at the time, allowing me to take my pension early. That was effectively the end of my diplomatic career and I then became the "trailing spouse".

CM: You had three years as a spouse in Strasbourg. Did you settle there or did you just go to visit?

RG: I had our two mothers to look after as well as some of our four children. Even though they had all finished their university or equivalent education, they still needed support, particularly

our second daughter Alix. They were based in Salisbury and so I found myself torn between supporting Pam in Strasbourg for about fifty per cent of the time and supporting our children and my mother and here. For the first two years I was shuttling backwards and forwards about twenty times a year, a month here and a week there, block bookings on Eurotunnel. Then an event happened that caused that to change; Pam had a minor stroke in 2009 which made me realise I must focus on her. After that, I spent easily three quarters of the time with her until the end of her posting in 2010.

CM: Robert, is there anything you'd like to add?

RG: Thinking back to our first interview, when we were talking about my work in the OECD, we discussed the more recent retreat from globalisation and the return of trade barriers, and you asked if I felt that all I had worked for had been wasted.

CM: I don't think I used the word 'wasted'! I meant to ask about a sense of sadness or frustration that things that you had worked for were no longer policy objectives.

RG: If you look at the bigger sweep of history, I'd say two things. First, I joined the Foreign Office at a time of severe economic and societal problems in Britain, in the expectation that the country was headed for a greatly reduced global role. I was gratified to find at the end of my career, thirty-five years later, that hadn't happened, that things had turned around in the '80s, initially through Mrs Thatcher's harsh medicine and then through Tony Blair and his continuation of broadly the same policies but with greater humanity. We had remained a global player and were still an important force, largely for the good, in world affairs. So I could take some satisfaction in having played a small role in that overall dynamic. My experience in the Falklands War and my time in Burma were probably the two moments when I felt closest to events of genuine world interest. Yes, it is hugely sad to see what has happened in Burma since, but there was a period of hope from 2011 to 2021 where things did seem finally to be going in the right direction. Who knows how long this current period will last?

Though I was not to know it at the time, retiring in 2008 was fortuitous. Since then, the Foreign Office has undergone a drastic cut in funding. With that in mind, I think ours was the ideal time to have been in the foreign service. On a practical level, one innovation that made a big difference to us as a family was the Hornby travel package. This allowed our large family to arrange our travel in a way to maximise the interesting times we could spend

with our children. I now feel sympathy for those colleagues I occasionally meet for the tougher conditions of service they have to put up with.