

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Christopher John Rome MEYER (born 22 February 1944, died 27 July 2022)

KCMG 1995; CMG 1983; LVO 1972.

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Sir Christopher (John Rome) Meyer, KCMG, of the Press Complaints Commission, interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Thursday, 17 June 2004 in London for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.

Educational background

MM: Let's begin by asking you, Sir Christopher, where you were educated, because I see that's not included in your CV.

CM: I was at Lancing from 1957 - 1961, went up to Peterhouse, Cambridge in 1962, graduated with a history degree in '65. While I was at Lancing, I spent a term at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris in 1960. After Cambridge I spent a year at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna and, when I returned from there, I joined the Foreign Office in September 1966, having deferred that appointment for a year to go to Italy, to Bologna.

Joining the Foreign Office in 1966 and posting to Moscow in 1967

MM: So you joined the Foreign Office as a Third Secretary in 1966. And where did you go, and in which Department?

CM: After spending a couple of weeks on some kind of basic induction course, I was sent to the West and Central African Department at a time when the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices had not been united. The job I was given was to be desk officer for French-speaking African countries with the exception of Zaire, which at that time may not have been called Zaire - it may just have been called Congo then. Whether this was because it was relatively big and relatively important, and a new entrant wasn't judged capable of dealing with a country that large.....

MM: But anyhow later in 1966 you went to Moscow as a Third Secretary and later Second Secretary.

CM: Ah, but that was preceded by a full year in the West and Central African Department....

MM: What did you do?

CM: I was then given a hard language aptitude test, and then asked whether I would like to do Russian, Arabic or it may have been Farsi and, for reasons I cannot remember, I said I would do Russian. And therefore, in '67, I was sent to the Army School of Education in Beaconsfield and, with a motley group of diplomats, sailors and soldiers, learned a kind of militarised Russian from a group of teachers, none of whom was a native. I then went to Moscow in September '68, having just spent two months in Paris living with a family of so-called White Russians, Russian émigrés.

MM: Well that wasn't a bad introduction to Moscow.

CM: No, it was good.

MM: How about the situation in the Embassy itself?

CM: The Embassy was in turmoil when I arrived - in fact I flew on the 'plane with the new Ambassador, Sir Duncan Wilson, because the previous Ambassador, Sir Geoffrey Harrison, had been caught *in flagrante delicto* with a Russian chambermaid, even to the extent, I'm told, of going off to Leningrad in the depths of the Cold War with her. Another myth around was - and I'm not quite sure what the reality was - in any event, he fell into a KGB honeytrap and was discovered, obliged to resign, and Duncan Wilson was the new broom brought in to retrieve the situation.

MM: Was Geoffrey Harrison the Harrison who was kidnapped in Latin America?

CM: No, no; this was somebody different.

MM: Oh, Jackson!

CM: That was Geoffrey Jackson, that's right.

MM: So a new Embassy, newly alerted to the dangers of the honeytrap and our relations with Russia.

CM: Well this was at one of the coldest points of the Cold War because the invasion of Czechoslovakia had taken place just before I arrived in Moscow and things could not have been chillier. So, at an official level, it was a very very tough time but, if you were a relatively young member of the Service who had just learned Russian, it was extremely exciting.

MM: Did you get around Russia at all?

CM: Yes, I got around quite a lot because one of my tasks as the Ambassador's Private Secretary was to organise his travel around the Soviet Union and to accompany him and his wife, Betty Wilson, as and when she went with him. So between us we - I was trying to remember - we went several times up to Leningrad; I went with them on a grand tour of the Black Sea, Crimea, Georgia, points in between. We went out into the Moscow hinterland, if you like. And on my own, I went with - I don't mean on my own but I went with somebody else in the Embassy, not the Ambassador - we were the first British visitors to Kazakhstan and Kirgizia for a long time as it was then called, which we visited in 1969.

MM: Interesting. Did you get the impression that the Soviet Union was a cohesive whole?

CM: Oh at the time yes. Pretty cohesive. I mean, if you mean did one smell the sense of disintegration brewing beneath the surface, I have to say absolutely not. You were struck in travelling by the extraordinary ethnic diversity and, whenever you went to a place like Kazakhstan or Kirgizia, you had to observe the fraudulent façade that they were independent republics, and you had to go and visit the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs and pay respects

there, as a token of - well, a symbol of token sovereignty. But I didn't get any sense that the place was coming apart; certainly not in the late '60s.

Posting to Madrid in 1970

MM: So I think we can move on from there to your next posting, which was Madrid. You went there as a Second Secretary having been blooded in Moscow.

CM: Yes.

MM: And, well, a relatively free society.

CM: Relatively. I hadn't wanted to go to Spain; I'd wanted to go to Italy because, having had this time in Bologna and speaking fairly fluent Italian, and I'd asked the Personnel Department to send me to Rome, and they'd replied saying that that wasn't possible but how about Madrid, as if it were a sort of

MM: Italian-speaking.....

CM: Sort of Latin-based language; "You'll soon pick it up, old chap!" sort of thing, and so I was flown straight from Moscow to Madrid with very little time in between, certainly not enough to learn Spanish. But I arrived in a country that was in the last throes of the Franco dictatorship, which was exceptionally interesting. It was a wonderful posting because I had an Ambassador, in Sir John Russell, who wanted the Embassy to keep tabs on the various political groups who were either semi in opposition to Franco or wholly in opposition to Franco. But he didn't want to do that himself; he was more interested in the aristocracy and the former crowned heads of Europe that lived in Madrid. So, with my Head of Chancery, Nicholas Gordon-Lennox, I spent most of those three years on the political front going round the country, talking to people who were preparing themselves for the day when Franco died. Likewise, in Madrid, I suppose the game was to spot among the dissident politicians who were going to rise to the surface when

Franco went. And it was a great job for somebody who was young and unmarried, very few ties, and it was one of the best postings I had in the Service.

MM: Did you find the Spaniards agreeable people to.....

CM: Yes, I did. I mean I found them - I mean things have changed a lot. There was a side to Madrid, which I think still persists to a degree, which is very closed, very conservative, and you can detect a very strong Moorish influence. And when I arrived in Madrid, not being able to speak Spanish very well, I found it very difficult to work my way into Spanish society. I was really saved by Latin-American friends whom I made much more quickly, and they taught me Spanish. I never learned it formally; I just moved among them and it was thanks to Chileans, Venezuelans and Argentines that I picked up Spanish very fast. And then, on the back of that, there was my willingness to go round Spain and talk to people.

MM: And they spoke to you?

CM: Oh yes!

MM: Freely?

CM: Freely! Because you see you had different factions of Socialist parties, you had so-called Christian Democrats, um, you even had people in the regime who wished to survive after Franco went - and he was by this time senile - and so everybody was manoeuvring with foreign embassies to fall into their favour. So we, the Germans, the Dutch, the French, and the Americans in particular, and the Holy See, were heavily pursued by these politicians. We just had to decide who was worth something and who wasn't. And in the end that's how I met Felipe Gonzales. There was a group of Spanish Socialists and leftwing Christian Democrats, who were probably the most credible of all these opposition groups and who, after Franco went, most of them rose to the surface and became Cabinet Ministers - and in Gonzales's case, Prime Minister of Spain. I remember very well sitting in a restaurant in Madrid with these people and they said to me, "We want to introduce to you a new *compañero* who's just arrived from Seville," and this

was Felipe Gonzales, who looked about sixteen years old, and who I remember through the lunch never stopped talking! He just talked, incessantly, as if he had been burdened with a load while sitting down in Sevilla. He came to Madrid and at last he had an audience.

MM: It must have been totally fascinating!

CM: Every day and every week we were waiting for Franco to die. I left Spain in '73 and I think Franco died in '75; I think that's right.

MM: Yes, it seems about right.

CM: As his designated successor, an admiral called Carrero Blanco, was blown up by ETA in an attack in Madrid just after I left, and so the whole succession plan which Franco had devised collapsed. Great period.

MM: Wonderful interlude, and what a good preparation for your later career! Back from there to the FCO, anyway, in 1973, now as a First Secretary. What did you do then?

Return to the Foreign Office in London in 1973

CM: I was made Head of the Soviet Section in the old Eastern European and Soviet Department. The Head of the Department was a great man. I had two Heads, totally great in very different ways; one was Julian Bullard, whom I found when I arrived, and I then worked for Bryan Cartledge - but again this was the depths of the Cold War time and we had just expelled from London one hundred and five Soviet spies of one kind and another and the Russians had retaliated, so it was a very fraught time with Russia. Then there was a general election in Britain, and Heath was swept out and Harold Wilson came in, and Wilson who'd had a long tradition of quite good relations with Soviet Russia, decided that he would try and mend at least some fences. And one of my great experiences in that Department was to go, if you like, as a fifth wheel in an enormous delegation when Wilson and Callaghan visited Moscow in February of 1975. This cannot of course be shown on the transcription, but there you are - you see?

(Indicates framed copy of newspaper on office wall in Press Complaints Commission office).

I'll put my glasses on! There is Pravda of 18 February 1975 with a picture of Harold Wilson and Leonid Brezhnev signing one of God knows how many totally useless agreements, and there's me with big hair at the back there, and a whole mass of Russian and British *apparatchiki*.

MM: A memento!

CM: But I mean, you know, it probably achieved absolutely nothing. But it was an interesting experience; taught me a lot about Russia and the Soviet Union.

MM: Part of a total difficulty, I suppose, of achieving any sort of agreement with them.

CM: Ugh! It was a waste of time really; we just, we just trod water with them really. Their only interest - they were only interested in the Americans and the French and the Germans, who were both more - France and Germany were in different ways bag carriers for the Soviet Union in the Western world. We were considered to be extremely awkward and difficult, and so most of the big contracts went to the French and the Germans and we didn't get much.

MM: We did get a bit, though, didn't we!

CM: We got a bit, yeah; we got a bit, but it was hard work and.....

MM: Were we perceived as being agents of the Americans?

CM: To a degree - to a degree we were always being told ... they would try and patronise us by saying the time had come to have an independent foreign policy. They would say things like that to us. And then of course, when Labour was swept out of office and Thatcher came in, this was an even more terrifying experience for the Russians when they had to face the Iron Lady.

MM: Yes, yes indeed - but of course that was not until 1979.

CM: Not until 1979, exactly.

MM: In the meantime, of course, you'd gone over to UKREP Brussels.

Speech writer for the Foreign Secretary

CM: I'd gone to the Planning Staff first. Because in '75 - I think it was '75; it must have been. It was - late '75? It might have been '76 actually. I was summoned to the presence of Jim Callaghan and asked whether I wanted to be his speech-writer. It stunned me, and so I said yes but I was quite unclear what I was letting myself in for. And this was a new post, and apparently had arisen from a conversation between Callaghan and Kissinger in which Callaghan had said to Kissinger, "Tell me, Henry. How do you publicise, popularise foreign policy?" and Kissinger had said, "I give lots of speeches." And Callaghan said, "Well, who have you got as speech-writer?" And he said, "I have a team of about twenty-five", or fifteen or whatever it was. So Callaghan came back to the Foreign Office and said he'd like a team of speech-writers and was told that he could have one First Secretary! Which was me! And then they had a great debate about where I should be placed - and in the end the decision was taken to put me in the Planning Staff under Brian Crowe. And no sooner had this appointment been made than Callaghan crossed the road to Downing Street because Wilson went and, in the end, I was briefly Antony Crosland's speech-writer but he, poor man, died and I spent most of my time with David Owen, which was not, at least at the beginning, a very easy task.

MM: Not an easy task!

CM: Not an easy task!

MM: Because um.....? For what reason?

CM: Well he was awkward and demanding, and not particularly gracious to people who worked for him, but I think that - but he sort of mellowed as time went by and initially I think it came as a great surprise to him that he made Foreign Secretary because no-one expected

Crosland to die. He was very young - whatever he was, thirty-eight or something like that - and I think he felt that he had to make his mark in the Foreign Office and not be dominated by the 'mandarins' as he saw us, and he made a distinction, I think, between people who were older than him and people who were younger than him. If you were younger than him, he wasn't too bad; if you were older than him, like Michael Palliser or Johnnie Graham, he beat the shit out of you in one office meeting after another. And I think the first speech I ever did for him he sort of held the piece of paper up by the corner and said, "This is about as useful to me as a dead fish. I'm going to have to re-write the whole thing." Then he gave the speech, and it was almost identical to what I had drafted, and I saw him the next day and he said, "Actually, that speech went quite well - but I had to rewrite it completely!" And that's where I learned that you just had to put up with this. And then, at the end, he was very nice. When I left he was very complimentary. But it was tough in the beginning getting used to him - he was so abrasive.

MM: He was getting the confidence too, I suppose.

CM: I think that's right - I think that's right. I liked him.

MM: How about James Callaghan. Callaghan could also be rather difficult with officials.

CM: No, I..... He was much respected, I thought, and I only had one week with him. Actually, when he interviewed me, he said, "I can be pretty rough." But, he said, "One thing you've got to know about me is that my bark is worse than my bite." "Right!" I thought. I mean I knew him slightly already from the Soviet side, but I never - I was never able to test that proposition.

MM: So, you were sitting in Planning Staff, among Planning Staff, and being a speech-writer.

CM: I hated it. It was the only job in the Foreign Office I hated.

MM: Because you were having to, what? Cobble together platitudes or.....?

CM: It was having to cobble together a mixture of platitudes and quite serious arguments and, unlike any other job I have had, I couldn't forget about it when I walked out of the office. Until I felt I'd cracked the speech - and by that I mean being clear in my own mind about the sequence of the argument, the order of the argument - once you've cracked that, then the writing of it became perfectly straightforward. But if I went home at night and had a speech pending and I hadn't cracked it, I could not shake it off.

MM: Were you given any kind of guidance?

CM: Oh no!

MM: You just decided what the speech would be?

CM: Oh, absolutely! But... Let's, let's consider this a moment. Crosland was quite methodical actually. To be honest, I'd forgotten that. He used to demand the structure first. But Owen and the others..... I used to write speeches for other Foreign Office Ministers. Owen and the other Foreign Office Ministers would say, "Now, I want to do a speech on arms control," and they would sing out a couple of sentences and that was it. I have to say that a lot of them didn't want just a speech; they wanted to be told what to think.

MM: Yes. (Laugh) Well they were busy men!

CM: Well I mean I think the whole characteristic of my career, when I look back on it all, was that I have very rarely been given guidance or instruction by anybody. It's most weird actually.

MM: Yes.

CM: It's extremely strange.....

MM: It's part of the fascination of the Service, I think, that you are given these fantastic opportunities.....

CM: Yes. Yes. No, it's quite true.

MM: to influence the course of events on the basis of your own knowledge and experience and so on.

Posting to UKREP Brussels in 1978

MM: So, yes, from that background, you went to UKREP in Brussels in 1978. What did you do there?

CM: I went there with some trepidation because people had said to me it was a ghastly treadmill and 'you're going to hate it'. And I was one of the poor bloody infantry there doing trade policy with particular focus on EC relations with the Communist countries. Commodity agreements and association, ... um, co-operation agreements with third world countries in a real mish-mash of stuff. And I used to sit on one of the, sit on the various committees as the UK representative. But once I got into it, I rather liked it, and I had - I mean I was married by then and I had very young children - and the four years we spent there were actually - it was quite satisfying. But you could see how seductive the European Community, as it was then called, is because it was a club. And you walked into the club and the doors closed behind you, and the outside world really had very little bearing on what you were doing. It was very seductive in that way.

MM: But what you were doing was actually of enormous importance.

CM: Yeah..... I wouldn't.....

MM: I mean trade agreements and all that.

CM: I wouldn't exaggerate that.

MM: You wouldn't?

CM: You see, trade agreements with Romania and Bulgaria and Russia were basically endless arguments about quotas for the importation of shoes, or cotton goods. I mean they were important, you know.....

MM: But they were jolly important to the leather manufacturers.....

CM: Yes, yes, yes - I know. But you didn't actually feel that you were at the cutting edge of international relations. But it was interesting - and also it was a terrible EC racket in which one took part because these co-operation agreements with the Philippines, Sri Lanka, China, India, where else? Brazil - I think I've forgotten somewhere - all required a meeting once a year of a joint commission, and these meetings alternated between Brussels and the capital of the country concerned. And when we met in the country concerned, an enormous EC delegation went out there, including one representative from Brussels for each of the member states. And we travelled first class and I remember flying into Delhi and Colombo, Peking, Manila and Brasilia, and we had a meeting which at best would last a morning, sometimes less than that, and that was it! And then you had enormous tours and banquets, wander all over the country, all at the tax payers' expense. I think they've stopped that now.

MM: Yes. Not surprising really. But on the whole, you thought it was a worthwhile.....

CM: Yeah, I did. Yes.

MM: Somebody's told me that the real sinews of the European Commission are exercised at First Secretary level.

CM: Yeah, it is. It works. I mean I always say that, you know, this is the infantry, the foot soldiers, but they do the basic, most of the basic work - assuming it continues this way - most of the basic work which then filters, is submitted upwards to the Ambassador and, if necessary, to the relevant Ministers. But you do the basic clearing of the undergrowth.

MM: Right. So if you're negotiating, for example, the importation of shoes from Romania at the time when Romania was outside the EC, were there differences of opinion between yourself and the French and the German delegates?

CM: Oh yeah! I mean at least negotiations always took place at two levels, because you had to reach agreement among the members states on what, as I say, on what the quotas were, and different member states had very different interests; and that took a long time, working out a common position. And then you went in to negotiate with, say, the Romanians - I just remember that quite clearly - and then you had to break at some stage and the Commission would come back to member states and say, "We're not going to do this, unless you and you and you are prepared to give some ground." And so it was very complex. These things go on for ever. And then one member state could, in those days, hold up the whole damned thing. If they wanted to.

MM: Yes. No doubt that happened often enough because it was a genuine club, so that you had got together with the others and worked out something that would be agreeable as far as possible to everyone concerned.

CM: Quite. Quite.

MM: Sounds like a good idea to me.

CM: Well, it, I mean, we were then a community of

MM: Six?

CM: No, we were up to nine, or may have been ten by the time I left because Portugal, and Spain had joined - that was nine - then the Greeks came in just before I left, I think. But even with those numbers it was difficult enough to reach agreement and I really wonder - it always makes me wonder if the Community or Union of twenty-five is going to be able to function.

MM: Very difficult.

CM: With difficulty. Quite.

Posting to Moscow as Counsellor in 1982

MM: So, from there in 1982, to Moscow - Counsellor and Head of Chancery.

CM: Back to Moscow - um, not exactly the depths of Cold War. Officially it is détente, very stagnant, Brezhnev in his dotage, Margaret Thatcher at that moment had no interest in the Soviet Union whatsoever. I get to Moscow and it's really a bit of a backwater, rather calm, everyone a bit frustrated because London doesn't really have an interest in the Soviet Union any more. And then I can't quite remember the sequence - in fact I think it was when Brezhnev dies in '82, or was it '83? I think it was '82.

MM: Let's relate it to the Falklands War, which was 1982.

CM: Oh yes, of course! The Falklands War. That hit just after I arrived. And the Russians formally, although in practice moderated their enthusiasm, supported the Argentines because it was a member of the non-aligned movement. And you realised - the first sign you knew that this was the case was in reading the Russian reports in Pravda. At first they'd refer to 'the Falkland Islands, open brackets Malvinas close brackets'. And then one day we saw it called the 'Malvinas Islands open brackets Falklands close brackets'. That was an outward sign that was how they saw it and then, when we set up the exclusion zones round the Falkland Islands and then Georgia, or whatever it was called, there were Russian espionage trawlers constantly trying to get into the exclusion zones. We kept chasing them out. And the Ambassador and I were summoned to the Foreign Ministry, God knows how many times; Curtis Keeble was the Ambassador - very good Ambassador, very tough. What the Russians would do - they had a Head of their Second European Department, which looked after Britain; the Head was called Suzlov - was it Vladimir Suzlov? It was a 'V' - Vladimir I think; doesn't sound quite right to me. Suzlov was an old-style Communist and he would read us the riot act about the exclusion

zones and then, when we were off the record and were heading off to the lifts, he would say to me, say to the Ambassador, “When are you going to drive those bastards into the sea?” And then, the younger members of the Second European Department told us later that, when we defeated the Argentines, they got out some Soviet Champagne and drank a toast to our victory. And it was quite clear where the sympathy of ordinary Russians lay. They regarded the Argentines as sort of beyond-the-pale, dark-skinned natives - the Russians are very racist. I remember being in a taxi in Leningrad and the taxi driver turned round and said to me, “Marrgerret Thatcher! *Molodets!*” (*Molodets*’ means, er, it’s a male thing; it means literally young man, someone who does something well - *Molodets!*). And then somebody more seriously said to somebody in our Embassy, “We would never, ever, have taken you seriously again as a nation if you hadn’t defeated Argentina.” Interesting point!

MM: Yeah, yeah! It was a revelation - I mean, it was a real awakening to the value of this country!

CM: Yes, it was. And then Thatcher suddenly got interested in the Soviet Union, summoned God knows how many academics to Chequers and had an enormous teach-in seminar, suddenly became violently interested in Russia and the Russians. Brezhnev dies. She comes to the funeral, all fired up about what’s going on in Russia. Meets George Bush, who is Vice-President, and from then on she plays an increasingly active role in dealing with the Soviet Union. So I was there for the death of Brezhnev, death of Andropov in ’84, February ’84, if I remember rightly, so she came over for two funerals, and I left for London just before Gorbachev paid his first visit as a member of the Politburo before the death of, what’s his name, Chernyenko.

Return to London as Head of News Department 1984

MM: So you came back to London again, of course, as a Counsellor in the FCO in 1984.

CM: Yes.

MM: And what was your job then?

CM: Well, I was Head of News Department, which was again a seminal, huge moment in my life. It was all rather strange because I'd been....., while I was Head of Chancery in Moscow, Geoffrey Howe, who by then was Foreign Secretary, came and paid an official visit and asked me if I would be his Press Secretary in the News Department. And I was completely flabbergasted and I think I said, "Well, I don't know what it entails." And he said something like, "You'll find out soon enough!" And I was summoned back to London in September of '84 to do that job. I had always liked dealing with journalists; I'd always enjoyed it, and came back and did that for four years. And this really was the start of my repeated association with journalism.

MM: How did he pick you out?

CM: Oh God! I don't know. I think his Private Secretary, who then was Len Appleyard, I think Len was responsible for this, giving my name to Geoffrey.

MM: Had Appleyard known you in Moscow?

CM: Yes. Well, we hadn't been in Moscow at the same time but he had done - he'd been on the Commercial side - he'd had a posting to Moscow, so we sort of knew each other. I can't tell you how important that appointment was because it led to things - my going to the United States, and it also led to my subsequent engagements with the Press. So I had four years, as it were, lashed to Geoffrey Howe's mast. It was great fun and it meant really learning an entirely new set of skills, and you soon discover that, if you are in the Press Department, you become semi-detached from the very bureaucracy from which you spring, because the mainstream regards you with suspicion because you are known to have daily contacts with the 'vile hacks'.

MM: So you're going to spoil their secrets!

CM: You inhabit a no-man's land between journalists on the one hand and bureaucrats on the other. But at the same time, if you have the confidence of the Secretary of State, you become very - you become effectively - you're effectively part of his private office, I suppose when it comes down to it.

MM: That's how it was in Callaghan's day in the FCO. Well, I think James Callaghan was probably one of the first Ministers ever to insist on having his own private press man,

CM: Mmmm.

MM: And I think in Callaghan's case it sprang from the fact that he didn't fully trust the Civil Service.

CM: No! No! And there had been a massive - now I'm very confused and I can argue this wrong. He didn't. He brought in Tom McCaffrey who, I think, had been with him in the Home Office,

MM: Yes. And went with him to 10 Downing Street.

CM: And went with him to Downing Street, you're absolutely right about that. And when David Owen came in, he almost dismantled News Department because there was a massive cock-up there - of monstrous proportions, when two stories on the same day were given to journalists, a huge embarrassment to the Government, through sheer ineptitude. And the official papers recording this grisly episode were in the cupboard in my office when I arrived, as a kind of warning to all Press Secretaries.

MM: Who was Head at the News Department before you - was it Ham Whyte (Sir Hamilton Whyte)?

CM: No it wasn't. It was John Goulden. Ham was before John Goulden and John replaced Ham, and then it was me.

MM: So that is very interesting and, by the time you left in 1988, had differences with Margaret Thatcher begun to emerge?

CM: Oh yes, they had. I mean the way I observed - I mean I saw that a lot when I was travelling with Geoffrey, because I was always ... one saw two instances of it really. One was... one of the big issues of international relations at the time was apartheid in South Africa and what should we be doing about it, and we were considered by a lot of people to be in the brake van of the European Community trying to put a brake on the desire of a number of these countries to be more draconian than simply putting sanctions on the Botha regime. And this was a problem in the EC, it was a problem in G7 and, above all, it was a problem in the Commonwealth as well. And poor old Geoffrey Howe was sort of pushed out in the front as the lightning conductor. And with him I went round Africa God knows how many times. I think the city I visited most frequently in my time with him was Lusaka. We were for ever going there. And he took a terrific hammering, and he was trying to plot a course between all these conflicting interests and, every time he thought he'd got a position, Margaret would say something or some thunderbolt would emerge from Downing Street, and the whole thing would blow up in our faces. And I think Geoffrey thought after a while that she was - that it was almost being taken to the point of disloyalty. Once he was out of the country and his back was turned, she just blew him out of the water. And the other thing you noticed too was that, when we went to these big international conferences with the Downing Street team, when there the briefing meetings before she went into battle, the number of people who were allowed into these meetings became fewer and fewer. And when I started with Geoffrey Howe and he was at one of these meetings, I would be allowed in. I would go in hiding behind Bernard Ingham, who was then the Downing Street Press Secretary, and Bernard would say, "Come on, lad!" and I'd follow him. I'd formed a good relationship with Bernard; he was a great mentor. But as time went by, I did this creeping in behind Bernard act and Charles Powell, who was then Thatcher's Foreign Policy Adviser, would spot me and say, "Out you go!" In the end, Charles was a very good friend and also another mentor. And after a while it became more and more difficult for Geoffrey to make his voice heard in these meetings. And it reached a pitch in the end when even he was excluded. So you could see her drawing in and drawing in, and, when you're riding the crest of a wave, you can

get away with that. But, when things start to move against you, that becomes a problem. So I did see this quite clearly.

MM: Yes, South Africa was an immensely difficult problem.

CM: It was very very difficult. Very difficult. But she was implacable in what she thought was the right thing to do, and Geoffrey was much more tortured by it.

Sabbatical year at Harvard University 1988

MM: Yes - a tremendous problem. Anyhow, from there you went to Harvard in '88.

CM: That was another turning point. I was so exhausted after four years of being Press Secretary, I thought I needed a year to decompress. And there was some talk of sending me to one of the smaller Embassies in Eastern Europe as Ambassador. My wife, my then wife, was really against that, so I thought, "What else?" And then, I suddenly thought I'd been on all these 24-hour visits - 36-hour visits - with Howe to the United States. I didn't know the US at all. I really ought to know more about the US. Well, I hadn't crossed the Atlantic until 1985, so it was really late - I was over forty by then. And I knew they had this course at Harvard to which one Foreign Office person was sent every year, so I said to Geoffrey, I said, "Would you back me to go on the '88/'89 Harvard course?" And he said, "Well, yes! What do you want to do?" And I said, "I'd like to do that. And then think about what I do afterwards." And so thankfully his intervention, and David Gilmore's by that time PUS. Was he PUS?

MM: He must have been.

CM: I went to Harvard. Took the family.

MM: What was the course?

CM: It was called the Centre for International Affairs, part of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. It's now called the Weatherhead Centre for International Affairs after a benefactor. And it was a thing called the Fellows' Programme (we were given the grand title of 'Visiting Fellows') - the Fellows' Programme which had been set up by Henry Kissinger and somebody else whose name I've forgotten, back in the late '60s, to bring together so-called practitioners and academics, so about twenty/twenty-five of us sort of diplomats like me, businessmen, 'resting' politicians, military men, you name it ... And off I went to Harvard.

MM: What a wonderful opportunity!

Appointment as Minister in the Embassy at Washington and the making of an American specialist

CM: Great! And that was a big turning point because, after the first semester, I got a call from the Foreign Office saying, "Well, now you're on that side of the Atlantic, do you want to stay there?" And I said, "What have you got in mind?" At the time, they wanted to send me to New York to the UN, and then it switched and became the Embassy in Washington. And so, after Harvard, I went down to Washington to be what was then called the Minister Commercial, which was number three in the hierarchy, but it wasn't 'commercial' - it was basically trade policy and EU/US, I suppose.

MM: Was it in fact a continuation of your spell in UKREP Brussels?

CM: Helpful to have been in UKREP but very different, actually. Helpful to have been there but it wasn't a linear development, if you like.

MM: No. But you did a full tour?

CM: I did more, because at first the Ambassador was Antony Acland and he retired in whenever it was, after the Queen's visit which was in '91. Antony Acland retired and Robin Renwick came in as Ambassador and he'd been with me in the old West and Central African

Department back in '66. So Renwick said, "I need a new deputy. I need a new minister," and he asked me to stay on and do it. So I moved sideways and up and became Deputy Head of Mission at the beginning of '92. Yes, that's right - I have to think about that. That's right. And ended up staying in America, to include Harvard, for five and a half years, until the end of '93. That transformed me in the Foreign Office's eyes from being a specialist on Russia to becoming one on America. Rather important, that.

MM: Indeed! A fascinating position to be in! What were our major problems with the Americans in that period?

CM: Well, when I was doing the Minister Commercial job, the issue then was ... several things, but the issue then was the creation of a single market and would it create a Fortress Europe. The Americans were extremely worried that they would be shut out of European markets or would at least have to pay a significant price in order to get in. This was wrong, this was erroneous, but they really believed it. And that was a huge issue which I found myself addressing, with all kinds of meetings and seminars, because Margaret Thatcher had signed up to the Single Market back in 1985 and so this was the fruit of all that. That was a huge issue. Air services were a massive issue - still are. You can never make them go away. But on the political side, in those early years, the big issue was German unification and we were on the wrong side of the argument, with the French.

MM: Yes. Thatcher and Mitterrand ...

CM: Thatcher and Mitterrand tried to stop it and slow it down and George Bush Sr, who didn't get on terribly well with Margaret Thatcher, in contrast to Reagan, pressed for early German unification and withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany, and proved to be entirely right. That rift wasn't really repaired until the Gulf War came along.

MM: Also in 1992! Or '91.

CM: '91. The crisis blew up in the summer of '90 and the war was fought in '91. She was defenestrated and John Major came in and finished the war off, if you like, with Bush. And then I found myself Minister at the beginning of '92. By which time, we had a new President in the shape of Bill Clinton and the issue in '92 was getting alongside the new administration, which made a huge number of mistakes in his first year or so. And we found ourselves at odds with them over Bosnia. That was the big issue then.

MM: What was the problem with Bosnia?

CM: Well, early on you may remember that the Americans - the Americans were basically backseat driving. They didn't want - they were sort of prepared to fly over Bosnia; they weren't prepared to put in ground troops, and initially we had a UN force there, which included British and French troops among others, and the command and control of this operation was a catastrophe - it was appallingly bad. Just didn't work and it led to a massacre of God knows how many Muslims in Srebrenica. The UN forces were incapable of defending, doing what they were sent to do. The Americans were shouting and screaming at us from the sidelines, but didn't actually get stuck in. They were very very much sold on support for the Muslims, and their then Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, went on a catastrophically disastrous tour of Europe in '92, and was shafted left, right and centre, including by us in the British press. It was a bad period, it really was. A very bad period. And in the end, of course, the Americans came on board and they changed the course of the UN and NATO. You know, it wasn't easy.

MM: Have you read a book by Richard Holbrooke about Kosovo?

CM: Yes.

MM: What did you think of it?

CM: Well, I mean Holbrooke's book - I mean he's one of the world's great egocentrics. He's very capable and I rather like him, but a massive ego trip, and those who had to work with him

found it extremely difficult, like Pauline Neville-Jones. But I mean, he drove an agreement through. It needed somebody ruthless.

MM: It certainly appears from his book as if he was the driving force.

CM: He probably was.

MM: Banged people's heads together.

CM: Probably was.

MM: Which seems very convincing, from his account of it.

CM: No, he was - he was - this is what he's very good at. Seize an issue, drive it.

MM: And the Europeans unfortunately were not convinced. Pathetic! I mean - where was the Union?

CM: Nowhere at all. I mean it was the feebleness of the EU over Kosovo a few years later that drove Tony Blair to deal with the French to try and beef up the EU's military capacity - which has come to nothing, to be perfectly frank.

MM: It was a very sad business altogether.

CM: Yes. So those are the main issues really.

MM: Did you have much to do with President Clinton in his early years?

CM: No. In the role I was in then, the answer is no. That was strictly speaking the Ambassador's problem then.

MM: And he kept that closely to his chest. I suppose that was inevitable.

CM: It was inevitable. In Washington, which is a very hierarchical society, where access to people is worth its weight in gold, it was the Embassy effort which counts. The metaphor I always use is that it was like a club sandwich - everybody operates at their level. So the Ambassador expects to deal with Members of the Cabinet, the President occasionally, the most senior people in the White House, Senators and the senior Members of the House of Representatives, and top businessmen. The Ambassador has to be active at the absolute top echelon. And then Minister at his level, Counsellor at his or her level, desk officers. These are, if you like, impermeable guiding lines. That's the way the Americans do it. So, if you are a Minister or Counsellor and you try and go to see the White House Chief of Staff or the National Security man, you will not get in. You simply won't get in. It's as simple as that. So when you're Chargé, which is usually in the hot summer months, this is when you manage to rise above your station just for a little while. Which is fun.

MM: Is there anything further that you would like to say about that American - that particular American period?

CM: Yes. When I became addicted to American politics, that was the Harvard period which coincided with the Dukakis/Bush election, and being in Harvard was a wonderful observation post because Dukakis was, of course, Governor of Massachusetts. There was a whole bunch of people in Harvard who thought they were going to get jobs in the Dukakis Administration. And, when I arrived in Cambridge Massachusetts with my family in August '88, Dukakis was way ahead in the polls; by eighteen points. And the lesson I learned from that - which was a very useful lesson - is don't pay a lot of attention to American opinion polls until the last stretch, which begins sometime in September. I found that American elections and American politics really gripped me at Harvard. And so then I was there for the Bush/Clinton election, and I got to know a lot of people, pundits and pollsters and talking heads, who just loved American politics. I used to watch all the political shows, read books about it, and this interest has never left me. So then one of the glories of being Ambassador later on was to have been there at a time of not only intense political interest but, by virtue of being Ambassador, getting access to people, events ...

MM: The actors!

CM: The actors! Get on the stage, almost, in a bit part. I think that's the only other thing I would say. It stood me in enormously good stead when we came to the great Bush/Gore election of 2000.

Press Secretary to Prime Minister John Major in 1994

MM: Well OK. So we shall have to leave that. You came back and became Press Secretary to the Prime Minister in 1994.

CM: Yes. That was a case of ambition and vanity overcoming commonsense because, when my time in America was coming to an end, I expected to go back into a mainstream job. I think I was going to be made Chairman of the JIC or something like that - whatever that job used to be in the old days. And then Sarah Hogg - who was at the time in 10 Downing Street, Head of John Major's Policy Planning Unit in Downing Street - I knew her quite well from a previous incarnation - said, "John Major's looking for a new Press Secretary. Are you interested?" She called me on a Friday and my immediate reaction was, "No. I just can't face going through all that again." And as I worried about it over the weekend, my wife said, "You want to do it, don't you, really?" And, come Monday or Tuesday, I rang Sarah Hogg up and said, "Well, I'm not sure about it but I'll throw my hat in the ring." I was ...

MM: You were there.

CM: I was summoned to London and dragged into an interview ...

MM: I see - it was a 'phone call from London to Washington.

CM: Oh yes. Oh yes. So I went back to London from Washington in October, I think it was, in November '93, was interviewed by the Prime Minister and, before I could change my mind, I

mean it went ctchhhh ... like that, they announced it; and I discovered that I was the only candidate. And I got back to Washington and I said to my wife, "Well, the die is cast!" And we both looked at each other and said, "Jesus!" you know. "Was this the right thing to have done?" But there we were! There we were! And of course John Major was very embattled - already very embattled. Somebody said to me, who must remain nameless, who got it entirely wrong - he said to me, "It's a very good time to join John Major's staff because it cannot get any worse. It can only get better, and you will rise with the rising tide." Well, it got worse and worse and worse and worse, and I sank with the tide as it went out! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! But it was quite fun, while it lasted.

MM: How did you find John Major?

CM: Difficult.

MM: Oh really!

CM: Oh yes. I mean, we stayed pretty good friends - in fact I think I'm having lunch with him next week. But he was under terrible stress - the pressures on him were huge.

MM: From within the Conservative Party.

CM: From everywhere. The worst enemy for him was probably from inside his own party. People were knifing him in the back. And this included Members of the Cabinet, it included back benchers, the 1922 Committee and, every now and again, Margaret Thatcher, leave aside a resurgent Labour Party after John Smith's unfortunate death and Tony Blair's taking over. So he was surrounded by enemies. And I took much of the - I was sort of the point man out there in front, and so I would get an enormous amount of the flak, but there was still plenty to go round to hit him as well, and so the effect this had on him was to make him extremely tense and very mercurial; up and down, up and down, up and down during the day, which made it difficult apart from anything else.

MM: So these attacks really depressed him.

CM: His skin was never thick enough to handle it. But I have to say that I'm not quite clear whether any mortal could have had skin thick enough to handle it. And the complaints that you get from New Labour or from Downing Street now about the ferocity and partisanship of newspapers, are relatively mild compared with what John Major had to put up with.

MM: Did you form the impression that the attacks on him were more severe than those endured by the American President?

CM: Oh yes! There's a huge cultural difference - massive cultural difference. What you have in Washington, what you have in America I think, compared with the UK, is there's still much more significant deference to the institutions of office; and also more deference to individuals in these offices. And it's partly just deference, and it's also partly because a good White House knows how to trade access. Whereas, in London, first of all this deference thing is not there and, secondly, you see the Prime Minister personally being ferociously attacked in Question Time, it sort of changes the nature of the beast. The Americans have nothing like that at all.

MM: No, that's true.

CM: And thirdly, and politicians hate me saying this to them, the politicians in London chase after newspapers far more than Americans, comparable Americans, would do in Washington. So, the terms of trade are different, familiarity breeds contempt.

MM: Indeed, yes.

CM: And politicians make themselves too familiar to journalists, including Prime Ministers. You watch - Bush keeps his distance. I mean, he's quite affable to journalists but on the whole he puts distance between himself and them. Whereas Blair and Straw and all that gang, it's all trying to co-opt them.

MM: I'm sure that's a mistake.

CM: It is a mistake.

MM: So you paint a rather depressing picture of the John Major years.

CM: It was tough. I mean there one or two moments of light and things looked like they were stabilising.

MM: But there was the constant nagging problem of Europe and their attitude to the EU.

CM: Yes, as the problem is now.

MM: Yes. Exactly. It's never gone away.

CM: There was the huge battle of the Maastricht Treaty, which really really dug in the Euro-sceptics, led by people like Ian Duncan-Smith, who caused fractures inside the Cabinet - Portillo and Redwood were really very hostile to name but two - whereas Clarke and Heseltine were polar opposites. My own view is that I think the party would have unseated John Major in '94/'95 if there had been an obvious successor but, because the ranks were so evenly matched, the sceptic/Europhile, there was no way in which the Party could agree on who the successor should be - neither one nor the other. So I think that was the ... there were moments, particularly in '94, and then of course he put himself up for re-election in '95, I think he would have been removed at one of those events if there had been a clear figure around him the Party could rally behind. But that didn't exist.

Posting to Bonn in 1996

MM: Sad business. Anyhow, after that period, language training in 1996.

CM: Yes. This is all very odd, actually, because I had never served in Germany. I had a German 'O' level but I had abandoned German at the age of sixteen. I had agreed with John Major that I really didn't want to do more than two years as his Press Secretary so, as we were coming near to the end of that in 1995, I thought, "What the hell am I going to do?" and again I felt I needed a bit of a rest after this so I tried to persuade the Foreign Office to send me to Rome. John Coles, who was the PUS, said he actually would like me to do a job of work, and I said, "Well, where?" and he said, "Well, I don't know!" And, in the meantime Pauline Neville-Jones, who was probably the Foreign Office's greatest expert on Germany, refused to go to Germany as Ambassador. She wanted to go to Paris. And John Major wasn't going to have that. And she waged a mighty campaign to be sent to Paris.

MM: In the press?

CM: Everywhere. And failed. So suddenly the Foreign Office had a problem as to who was going to go to Bonn, and Major said to me, "Do you want to go to Bonn?" And the Foreign Office said, "Do you want to go to Bonn?" I thought, "Why not!"

MM: Pretty important post.

CM: Why not! So I said, "OK, but I'm not going to Bonn unless you let me learn German." So I spent ages in the language school in London in '96 and then went *incognito* both to Hamburg and to just outside Munich, elaborate preparations, for seven months as Ambassador. Not much value for money there.

MM: No. An extraordinarily short period. How much German did you learn?

CM: I was pretty good! I could do a speech. I could do an off-the-cuff speech. Oh no no! By the time I got there ...

MM: So that worked all right.

Appointment as ambassador to Washington in 1997

CM: And I arrived in March in '97 and I was just starting to get comfortable in dealing with German officials in German when I got this 'phone call saying, "Hold onto your chair. We're thinking of transferring you to Washington." This was after the general election in '97 and the Blair people - I'd met Blair in America; I'd never met him in London but I met him in America when he came over to find out how Bill Clinton was winning elections. And I knew Jonathan Powell because he'd worked for me in the Embassy in Washington, and Campbell, Alastair Campbell, I'd known him as a journalist - and they had decided that I was the man for Washington. The Foreign Office had put a name forward and they didn't want him. And there we were, so I thought, just as my German was getting into its stride - just at that moment ... And John Kerr, the PUS, was very keen for me to go to Washington. It was one of these deeply laid conspiracies because I had run into him, even before going to Germany, I'd run into him in the Office.

MM: John Kerr?

CM: Yes. Kerr said to me, "Do you want to go to Washington?" and I said, "Well, hold on - I haven't arrived in Bonn yet." And he said, "I think I may be going to come out of Washington early, come back and be Permanent Under Secretary, and make a run at becoming Cabinet Secretary. So there would then be an opening in Washington. Do you want it?" And I said again, "John, I've just finished months of German language training. This is mad!" He said, "Are you telling me you're going to turn down Washington because of German language training?" And I said, "No no no! I'm not saying that. I'm just saying I just don't believe you, that's all." He said, "Don't worry!" And he went off and I think he claims to have cooked this up with Robin Cook whereas the Downing Street people said, "No no no. It was our idea!" Anyway, there I was, a helpless pawn of events and, when Tony Blair first came to Bonn, which was a month after I arrived there, I was standing in the receiving line with - again it was Powell, Jonathan Powell - who whispered in my ear, waiting for Kohl to come down the line, "Who should we send to Washington." And I said, "I don't know!" and he said, "Well, we would have sent you had you not just arrived here. "Ah!" I said. "Well, there you are!"

MM: Yes!

CM: So I think I must have been the shortest-serving British Ambassador to Germany ever.

Comments on German economy

MM: Yes! How did the Germans take that?

CM: Badly!

MM: Yes. They wouldn't like that ...

CM: They didn't like it at all. On the other hand they were swapping Ambassadors in London about once every eighteen months.

MM: Yes, that's true.

CM: So they had part of a leg to stand on, I suppose.

MM: Yes. But we've still got forces in Germany so I mean our contribution there was very important.

CM: Very. I mean the only thing I missed about leaving Germany so precipitously was I would like to have been the first Ambassador to move back to Berlin in 1999. But that was not to be.

MM: Had you got any sense of the way Germany was recovering from reunification by the time you left?

CM: Yes. I mean, you could see that the great economic miracle was really running into very serious difficulties, and there were plenty of people who, in private, would acknowledge this but would never say so in public. And I was - it occurred to me that Kohl - for political reasons Kohl had no choice but to give the old East German currency parity with the Deutschmark. It was politically necessary and economically crazy, because in a stroke East Germany was priced out of every market you can think of, and became a burden on the German state. And I was given some hair-raising figure while I was there that Germany, the Federal Republic, had transferred to the old Eastern part, one trillion Deutschmark since reunification, of which only one third had been spent on infrastructure and two thirds had gone on various types of welfare payment and social security.

MM: I suppose it really ought to have been - what's that word? - a multiplier in the old Keynesian sense? It didn't seem to be.

CM: No, I mean all kinds of things were starting to go wrong. The other thing you notice living in Germany is that people wouldn't work. In fact Britain in the '50s/'60s, whatever it was, wouldn't work. You saw it in the Embassy among the German staff, just wouldn't - clockwatching, you know, took their statutory sick-pay without being sick, couldn't get rid of them. There was a lot of dead wood around. You summoned plumbers and artisans to do this job and that job - didn't turn up, did it badly. Very very curious, and it ran entirely counter to my image of German efficiency.

MM: Yes, yes.

CM: But the real problem we could see - we also had discussions with Germans about this - was that nevertheless the German economy was still providing a very high standard of living for the people both in and out of work. Unemployment pay was massive. It was still delivering a very very high level of prosperity and this was why it was impossible to reform it, because you were trying to reform what most people thought was success; whereas, in our case, when we peered over the abyss, it concentrated the mind.

MM: Indeed!

CM: And I remember having a conversation with a chap called Jürgen Starck, who I think is now - he was then Deputy Finance Minister under Weigel. Starck is a really good man and he works at the Bundesbank now - what is left of the Bundesbank. And, in our farewell call - I mean there'd been a bit of debate in Germany about the Euro, should they postpone it or just go for it, and in the end they decided to go for it. And I said to Starck, "Well, tell me about the Euro, are you on or off; good thing, bad thing?" And he said, "I think it's a good thing, but we're doing it entirely the wrong way round." He said, "We should have reformed the economy, liberalised the labour market, deregulated, done all those things - and then joined the Euro." He said, "What we're doing is the wrong way round, going into the Euro in a political leap of faith, and we're hoping that the Euro will provide us with the alibi to force us to do the things that politically we know we can't do." And they still haven't done it.

MM: No. Still as difficult as ever.

CM: Yes.

MM: Very sad.

CM: So all that was becoming, you know, very apparent.

Arrival as ambassador in Washington

MM: Yes. So off you go to Washington!

CM: So I go to Washington. I had two weeks between coming back from Bonn and going to Washington, in the middle of which I get married, just to add to the tension. I had no briefing whatsoever from anybody on what to do there.

MM: You knew already!

CM: Yes, but I mean I didn't have time to go round visiting any companies. I cannot remember a single conversation I had with the Foreign Office of any substance at all. I went to see the Prime Minister briefly. I saw the Downing Street people and the only instruction I ever got from Downing Street was, "Get up the arse of the White House and stay there!" Those were my marching orders.

MM: That's not an easy task!

CM: That, basically, was the only personal instruction I ever received, as opposed to institutional instructions that come to the Embassy as a whole. "Get up the arse of the White House and stay there!"

MM: What do you suppose the Americans instruct their Ambassador to London to do. It wouldn't be anything like that!

CM: No, I think the honest answer to that is the instructions given to the US Ambassador to London is "Kindly keep out of the way. Be a good representative of the US in London, but just don't even try to do policy because you'll just get in the way." They have rather a contemptuous view of Ambassadors abroad. So that was it, really. And it was non-stop action almost from the moment we arrived. Saddam was already brewing up; Lewinski exploded everywhere; failed impeachment; Kosovo war; Northern Ireland peace process - that loomed very large in the first two years or so.

MM: Enormously important for us.

CM: Enormously important for us. Enormously important for us. A couple of Blair visits while Clinton was President. There was the contested election with Al Gore; running in a new administration, as it were. Missile defences were a big issue at one stage; European defence was another big issue at one stage. Then 9/11 and everything that flowed from there. So it was an extraordinary period. Plus, we also visited forty-four states in five and a half years, visited I

think a hundred and nineteen cities; had approximately twelve thousand people a year coming through the Residence, which adds up to quite a big town. And I think I must have delivered between a hundred and fifty to two hundred formal speeches while I was there.

MM: Did you do those off the cuff?

CM: No, but I did them myself; I didn't employ a speech-writer. As time went by, you did more and more of them off the cuff, but you started off with a stock, with two stock speeches from which you could move parts around, you know? Depending on the event. And about once a year they needed completely refreshing. As time went by and you got more practiced, you got up on your hind legs and just ...

MM: Talked.

CM: Talked.

MM: And did you do much on television?

CM: Only towards the end. In the run-up to - post 9/11 and in the run-up to Iraq. Quite a bit. Yes.

MM: So did you find that you were playing a role within the American political establishment?

CM: Yes.

MM: And being used by one group to convey something to another, a sort of internal flow, as it were.

CM: The big issue there was who/whom because, one of the occupational hazards, you wormed your way in as best you could into the upper echelons of the Administration so that you had, as near as damn it, instant access as and when you wanted it. But there was a price to be

paid for that, and the price that you had to pay up to a point was, as you've just said, to find yourself being an actor almost in the inter-agency game; and particularly when things started to get fraught. And you had to watch out for that and aim off for that. And particularly when things started really to brew up on Iraq, which was really throughout 2002, you discovered that the State Department wanted to know what you knew was going on in the White House, and what was being said by Tony Blair and George Bush to each other, because the records of conversations in the American system go round much more slowly, if they go round at all; likewise in the Pentagon. In the meantime I wanted to know, in the case of the State Department, what they thought was happening in the inter-agency process, and where the point of gravity was. So we were using each other, and I would go and see the Deputy Secretary of State, Rich Armitage - great man - and his words to me always, when I came in, were, "Feed the beast! Feed the beast!" which meant, "Give him raw, warm, red-blooded intelligence." I'd tell him what was going on in London and what I'd picked up in the White House. In return, I expected high-grade stuff, and he always delivered.

MM: He may have been just amazingly open.

CM: You know, he had his slant on it.

MM: Yes. Oh sure, yes.

CM: The White House is more Soviet in some ways.

MM: Did you find that it had changed from the Clinton days to George Bush?

CM: Oh yes, very very deeply. The balance of power totally different. George Bush, very very strong Vice President, very very powerful staff. Al Gore less strong, less powerful staff. Clinton, very strong National Security Advisor.

MM: You mean George Bush Senior?

CM: No no. I mean, under George W Bush, the current President, you have a very, an exceptionally strong Vice President with a very powerful staff. When Clinton was President, Al Gore was a relatively weak Vice President, with a relatively limited sphere of influence. Berger, who was Clinton's National Security Advisor, was very very powerful and could bang heads together. Condoleezza Rice doesn't perform that role for George W. At least not a lot. So the way in which the big beasts of George W Bush's Foreign Security Policy apparatus function is very different from the dynamics of Clinton's team. Big differences. Big differences. But the biggest difference to me though was that, whereas Clinton and most of his people were very familiar to Blair and his people, by the time I arrived in Washington, Bush and his people were complete unknowns to Downing Street and the Foreign Office, so this is why I had to play a role of - what's the word? - handmaiden, midwife to the relationship.

MM: But it seemed to work pretty well.

CM: Yes, it did. It worked all right. Whether you agree with the outcome is another matter, but it worked.

MM: Did you, in the course of your visits, get down to Austin and Houston and places like that?

CM: Yes. When Bush was Governor. As soon as I got to Washington, I started to hear rumours that Bush was likely to be the Republican candidate, and so my wife and I went down to Austin early 1998, paid our first visit there, and then went to see him again a year later, by which time he was on the verge of declaring his candidacy. And really got to know him and his wife much better than we ever knew the Clintons.

MM: Really!

CM: Just the way it panned out really.

MM: Well, I suppose Clinton felt less need to ...

CM: Well it was different. It was really a chapter of accidents. I mean, by going down to see Bush when he was Governor, I feel I was sort of spotting him early on, and getting to know some of his Texan advisors, particularly Karl Rove, his political guru; all that sort of created an ambience. In the meantime, we'd also seen quite a lot of his parents. Whenever we went to Houston, we always used to go and see George and Barbara Bush.

MM: Did the Consul General in Houston ever play any role in ...

CM: He was very important. We had an exceptionally good Consul General there at the time, Peter Bacon. Peter Bacon was a very good, very canny political operator and for the fact that we were going down to Austin and Houston to make these political contacts credit is due to Peter who had ploughed the ground very well beforehand. It was he, Peter, who said to me, "You've got to go and see this chap Karl Rove who at the time was a consultant sitting in a small and crowded office in Austin. So Peter should take a lot of the credit for that. He was very good.

MM: So that was a great success, then, getting on terms. What's your feeling about George Bush? Do you think that he's a reasonable man?

CM: My first impression of him, which I think became my enduring impression of him, was that there was a man who was not, if you like, a great intellectual in the way that Clinton is (Clinton devours books by the thousand; that is not George Bush's style), but I also thought George Bush was extremely smart with very good instincts about people. Who was good and who wasn't. And he was a very very good politician. In fact the highest accolade paid to George Bush's qualities as a politician came from Clinton himself, who warned his people in the Democratic Party never never to underestimate George W because, said Clinton, "It takes a pol' to recognize a pol'." Now Bush in private was very self-effacing, amusing, articulate, open, in a way that doesn't come over in public. He gets tied up in his words. So on a personal level both my wife and I really liked him and really liked his wife, Laura, who is a most sensible, sound woman.

MM: Typical Texas lady!

CM: Yes, yes. Well they're very much that. There is the low church fundamentalism - he is a reformed alcoholic, which he basically admits, doesn't try to hide it. He was pretty wild, I think, as a younger man but has found redemption.

MM: Do you think the religious aspect is over-important in his psychological make-up?

CM: This is such a hard thing to measure. I mean they are, people like him are very devout, saying grace at every meal, that sort of thing. And I think he does, hard to generalize here, but I think he does seem to tend to see the world in very stark terms; not in different shades of grey. You're either an evil-doer or you're not; either you're wrong or you're not; either you're a terrorist or you aren't; either you're with us or you're against us. I think that's - I don't think that's exaggerated. But I don't know how many times journalists have asked me whether Blair's alleged neo-Catholicism and religiosity has enabled him to tie a tighter link with Bush than would otherwise have been the case. I haven't any idea; I've no idea. And I never saw it.

MM: That's a good sign, I would have thought.

CM: Bush supporters - Bush politicians being - I think the vision amongst some of his advisers, the ones that truly deserve the title of 'neo-con', which is this is kind of Messianic view of the world, enables you to bring peace and democracy to the Middle East, and I think he really bought into that vision.

MM: And yet you could see that, as an oil man and someone within that industry, they would have a fairly good knowledge of what was going on in the Middle East and what it was all about.

CM: No, I know, and the whole phalanx of his father's advisers had said to him, "For God's sake tread carefully here." I think what was very hard to know was to what extent he wanted to make a break with his father because, to a degree, his father was a failed President and he wasn't re-elected. There was that, and one of the things also that we cannot measure properly was the

personal impact on him of being President at 9/11. That's the great unknown. It must have been - I mean he's a much ...

MM: It must have been shattering!

CM: Shattering and traumatic. And I suspect reinforcing any propensity to see the world in terms of good and evil. So it must have made him very susceptible to the notion that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were creatures cut from the same piece of cloth. So I think the shattering impact of this personally on George W explains why he has become so Manichean - features there already and which you find very widely in the US of A the further south you go really - and secondly why he was vulnerable to the argument pressed on him in dealing with Iraq and dealing with al Qaeda were all part of the same challenge. Axis of evil and all that stuff. Then, of course, I think he believes, as Blair believes, that history will vindicate him. Or even that, in a year from now ...

MM: It'll look very different.

CM: It may look very different and may look better. They're going to say, "Well, there you are!"

MM: Well, one hopes it does in a way. I think people over here completely neglect to take into the account the shattering effect of what might have happened had that fourth 'plane gone into the White House.

CM: I know. I know.

MM: Still, there it is! Anyway, that was a truly exciting ...

CM: It was a terrific period to be there. I mean, it was fairly tense and quite emotional at times. I'll not forget in a hurry the first ten days after the attack.

MM: Empty skies ...

CM: Wonderful. I mean ...

MM: No 'planes!

CM: No 'planes! I remember I went up to New York with my wife on the following Monday, six days after the events, because our Consulate General in New York was taking the strain of trying to deal with the hundreds of British parents, relatives and friends who wanted to know whether their loved ones had - what had happened to them in the Twin Towers. And the New York City authorities were preparing for a huge inrush of people, setting up DNA centers, really quite grisly. And a lot of British police were coming over to help handle the people. So we went up to New York on the following Monday to give moral support to our people in New York and to check on all these arrangements, and also to prepare for the Prime Minister's coming a few days later. And we travelled on the subway together, and everywhere was silent; because nobody was talking. Nobody was talking. The city was just silent. It was extraordinary.

Retirement, the Press Complaints Commission job and reflections on the FCO

MM: Can I just ask you about your job as Chairman of the Press Complaints Commission which you took up almost immediately after coming home.

CM: A month after coming back, yes.

MM: How was that appointment made?

CM: Well, the Press Complaints Commission and all the costs associated with it are paid for by a levy on the newspaper and magazine industry. So this has got nothing to do with the Government or the Civil Service or anything like that at all. And my, I can't remember when it was exactly, I think it was the summer of 2002, I was asked by the - there's a body called the Press Standards Board of Finance, which is basically the newspaper industry's committee that

deals with the financial side of running the Commission, and somebody asked me if I wanted to put my name forward. I said, "Yes, why not!" And you get a head hunter on the line as well, that sort of stuff. And they asked me to come for interview and I was the chosen one. So, in time honoured fashion, I had to get - in the first two years after retirement, you had to get permission from the Secretary of State, the Committee of this and that. So I did that and authorisation duly came through. They had been without a Chairman here for a long time because John Wakeham, who was my substantive predecessor, had had to resign because of the Enron scandal, because he'd been on the Board of Directors there. In fact he'd been Chairman of the Audit Committee. So that's what happened. So I came back ... Actually, it was all very very fraught because, in that year and a half before I'd left, I'd been diagnosed with a heart murmur and was told that I needed an operation, and the Americans wanted to do it immediately, and the Foreign Office said, "No, you don't need to do it immediately," and so you didn't know who to believe. And they said ...

MM: Doctors!

CM: So the American doctors were saying, "Hey! You need it now!" And the Foreign Office saying, "No no no! My dear chap! It's perfectly all right. The Americans are always rushing into these things - come back and be tested when you retire." So I returned and took up this job and, at the same time, prepared for this operation. So, in the end, I was operated on and the surgeon said to me, "Hmm! Good thing you came in when you did." I had a valve replacement. And he said, "The condition was much worse than we realised." So I said, "The Americans were right then!" He said, "Yes, they were!" It's an unworthy thought, but it needs to be recorded for posterity, I've always harboured the unworthy suspicion that the Foreign Office did not want to pay.

MM: Great!

CM: Probably it would have been about \$100,000. And in the end they didn't have to pay for anything - I paid for it. I just put that point down. All this was coming together when I took over the PCC.

MM: They are really a dreadful lot in some ways the Foreign Office!

CM: They get no better! No better! They re-organise the deckchairs time after time after time, and it never gets any better.

MM: Well, thank you very much indeed. That was absolutely splendid.

CM: Not at all.