

## BDOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details

### **Sir Bryan George CARTLEDGE**

(Born 10 June 1931; son of Eric Montague George Cartledge and Phyllis (née Shaw); married (1<sup>st</sup>) 1960, Ruth Hylton Gass (marriage dissolved 1994); one son one daughter; (2<sup>nd</sup>), 1994, Dr Freda Gladys Newcombe).

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**Sir Bryan (George) Cartledge KCMG**

**interviewed by Jimmy Jamieson**

**on 14 November 2007**

**Entry to the Diplomatic Service in 1960**

JJ You joined the Foreign Office rather later than most people at the age of thirty in 1960. Can you tell us something of about what you did after leaving Cambridge? I know you went to Stanford University and St Antony's College, Oxford. What is the background?

BC My ambition from my time as an undergraduate in Cambridge had been to have an academic career and I started doing research into Russian history. I learned Russian, and then because it was impossible for a number of reasons to research the topic I wanted to research in Cambridge, I had to move to Oxford, to St Antony's, which was a very young college then. It was only about four or five years old. I settled in there very happily and eventually became a research fellow there, so that was the sort of first rung on the academic ladder. Two things happened – the first was that I wasn't sure I wanted to spend the rest of my life in the same place with probably mostly the same colleagues and working in the same field, and the second thing that happened was that I was given the chance to join Anthony Eden working on his memoirs. That was in 1958. I spent eighteen months doing that, which effectively put paid to the DPhil thesis on which I was then working. It was a long break away from it. And the other thing was that I was working mostly from Foreign Office documents in the Foreign Office Library. These were quite recent documents. – I was given a special dispensation by the Cabinet Office to use any file which Anthony Eden could be presumed to have read himself, or seen himself, which of course was everything, because the Secretary of State could see anything he wanted. So effectively I had a free run of all Foreign Office documents up to 1956. Except that I wasn't working on that period, which I will explain. In the process of working on these files I got very interested in the process by which policy was made, and one of the things which struck me – and increasingly inclined me towards getting into the Foreign Office – was the fact that responsibility began very low down. I think even lower down than it does now, probably. I was struck by the fact that very often the recommendation made by the third or second secretary in what was called the third room, went right up to the top and actually became Government policy, because it was probably mostly right, and in any case the people higher up didn't have the time to kind of invent any

alternatives. Obviously in really major issues that wouldn't be the case, but on a lot of really quite significant issues, it was the case. The thought that one could start making a difference at a very early stage of one's career really appealed to me. So by the time I had finished with Anthony Eden, or almost finished, I decided to take the exam. They had then a special exam for late entrants. I actually came into the Service in January 1960 when I was still twenty nine, and I took the exam under Method II – mainly interviews and psychological tests, that kind of thing – chairing a committee. I enjoyed it and I passed that, and started work in January 1960. If I hadn't got the Eden job I'm not sure what I would have done. I don't think I'd have stayed in academic life, but whether I'd have joined the Foreign Office, I don't know. I might have tried journalism as an alternative to academe, but anyway it turned out to be the Foreign Office and I never regretted that.

### **Working with Sir Anthony Eden**

JJ Perhaps before we move on to your first job in the Office, perhaps you could tell us a bit about Sir Anthony Eden whom you met after he retired and was doing his memoirs?

BC He was still quite ill. He had periodic relapses which were really quite debilitating and kept him in bed for some days at a time, and he was far from strong. I think that contributed to his rather uneven disposition. He always had a short fuse, even when he was well, and lost his temper quite easily. I think his illness made that more pronounced, and one had to tread warily, but even so, he was apt to explode for no very good reason. His saving grace was that when he did that, he always, on the following day, or later in the day, made such a handsome apology for going off the rails, that one couldn't do other than forgive him, so things carried on. But it was not an even passage by any manner of means. I thoroughly enjoyed doing it, and as I say, it gave me access to documents which I would otherwise have had to wait thirty years to see.

JJ It was a very exciting period – if that's the right adjective – with Suez and all that?

BC Well, he was exhausted by Suez. I got to know his wife, Clarissa, very well and she is still a very good friend. I see her quite often. She was amazing in the way she looked after him; stood up for him; guarded him against intruders and the press and others. I have great admiration for her and that was another factor which kept me going in the job even when it got very difficult.

JJ What he did with the French and the Israelis over Suez reminds me a bit of what Blair did over Iraq, without really discussing it with his Cabinet colleagues and so on. Isn't that the case?

BC Well it is. I hate to say it, but what he did was even worse – and I only became aware of this much later – when I was interviewed by Robert Rhodes James when he was writing his biography, and we had a couple of quite long talks. It was only during the course of those talks, that I became aware of the fact the Eden had deliberately and blatantly lied to the House of Commons about collusion. I still find that shocking, because he had built his reputation on being a man of honour who resigned over Munich. I think it was worse than Blair. Blair misled and there was the dodgy dossier and all that, but I think what Eden did, in at least as serious an issue, was straightforward lying.

JJ In those days that really was a resigning issue.

BC Absolutely. And if it had come out he would have been finished. I don't think it preyed on his conscience. I don't think it did. I think he regarded the lie as essential in the national interest. But it really shouldn't be an excuse.

JJ Thank you for that. That's quite an interesting issue. So you did indeed pass the exams and get into what was then the Foreign Office, before it merged with the Commonwealth Office. Which Department were you placed in?

### **First employment in Northern Department of the Foreign Office, 1960**

BC I was put in the Northern Department, which at that time dealt with all the Communist countries – the Soviet Union plus all the satellites as we used to call them. But we also dealt with Scandinavia and Iceland and it was very ironic that one had this huge Department (actually it wasn't very big. I suppose it was in all not more than about a dozen people) covering this huge area – the Communist empire – but practically all the Department's time, or at least the head of Department's time, was spent on the Icelandic fish war – the 'cod war'.

JJ Not the most important matter in one sense. It was an immediately political matter. Although you were a newcomer, you must have known a lot more about Russia, or the Soviet Union, than some of your colleagues.

BC Well, I didn't really because the Russia I was studying was the Russia of 1916-1917, and I hadn't read very widely on later Soviet affairs. I did know Russian. In any case I was allocated to the East European section of the Department to look after Czechoslovakia and Poland, and I remember when I was first ushered in to see the Assistant Head of Department, Christopher McAlpine, he told me that I was going to be doing Poland and Czechoslovakia. I wasn't worried about Poland, but I had one of those awful moments where I knew roughly where Czechoslovakia was, but I couldn't be absolutely certain. If I had been asked then who were Czechoslovakia's neighbours I couldn't really have answered. I remember Christopher had a large map of Europe behind him, over his desk, and I cast a covert glance to find Czechoslovakia on the map before the conversation went any further.

JJ So you were the Desk Officer for Czechoslovakia and Poland?

BC And I also looked after CMEA – the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – known to the Americans as COMECON.

JJ So how did you get on with all that?

BC I completely floundered. I had the most rudimentary knowledge of Czechoslovak history and a little more on Poland, but not very much, and there should have been, if there had been time for it, a great deal of reading up to do. But, as I'm sure you remember yourself, the be all and end all for newcomers to the Office was procedure, and I had to spend the first week of my time in the Department learning things like how to stick a pin in papers so that it didn't prick the Minister's finger and what kind of tape to use and how to tie the bow at the back and all that; and the hierarchy – what to do with the paper or minute, who signed it, where it went – all that kind of thing. I had a charming mentor for that. A chap called Arthur Turner who sat opposite me in this little room in Northern Department and he guided me through that very well, and I always remember he had three trays – an in tray and an out tray, and what he called his compost heap. I asked him what went into the compost and he said: "Anything too difficult to solve today".

JJ That sounds like the Foreign Office. Who was the Head of Department?

BC To begin with it was Tom Brimelow. And after it was Keith Mason – a Kiwi. They were both nice men – but totally different.

JJ Did you get any further formal training apart from knowing how to put minutes together with the right coloured tags and so on?

BC Not really. One just picked it up as one went along. I absorbed the telegrams and despatches that came in from Prague and Warsaw particularly, and of course, also from Moscow, but the East European section of Northern Department was a bit of a backwater then; not quite a backwater, but all the action was taking place either in the Scandinavian section because of Iceland, or in the Soviet section, because something was always happening on that front. Julian Bullard was one of the Desk Officers on the Soviet Union then, and he, as you know, also went on to great things. It was a good Department. Nico Henderson was the other Assistant, alongside Christopher McAlpine.

JJ Was Sir Con O'Neill there at that time?

BC No. I think he was already working on Europe then and what became the Community or had become the Community. But it was tremendous fun. I enjoyed it enormously. It had so many quaint aspects to it like that fact that there were real fires in all the rooms. Little men in frock coats came along with coal scuttles.

JJ Those were the days.

BC Magic tube by which one sent papers.

### **Posting to Stockholm, Second Secretary, 1961**

JJ So an enjoyable and obviously very interesting start to your career. Although you weren't dealing with Scandinavia in Northern Department, you were subsequently posted to

Stockholm in 1961, so you were able to get to grips with Scandinavia at first hand. So what was your role there?

BC I was the junior secretary in Chancery – Second Secretary – and there was only me and the Head of Chancery on the political side. The Head of Chancery was Sidney Hebblethwaite – Mickey Joy after him. It was really a very easy life. Sweden was very boring and very placid. It had had a Social Democratic Government for some thirty years and Swedish foreign policy was dominated by the Foreign Minister who had been in that job for almost as long as that.

JJ Who was that?

BC It was Undén – can't remember his first name. It was a good first post to have because there weren't any crises so one could learn the job of being a diplomat overseas without any distractions.

JJ And language wasn't a problem?

BC No, language wasn't a problem. I did learn Swedish because one was expected to, but it wasn't really very necessary because most Swedes spoke excellent English. Certainly the ones one dealt with did. The Swedes then were quite formal and at dinner parties there was always a speech of welcome from the host and then at the end a speech of thanks by the chief guest, and one was expected to do that if one could, at least partially in Swedish, and it was one of the main reasons why I learnt. But it was also good practice, although useless now. Another aspect of formality I suppose, was the fact that it was a monarchy; on court occasions one had to dress up; white tie, sometimes morning dress. I remember I was presented with a list by the Embassy – these are the clothes which a Second Secretary had to have. It was absolutely mind boggling.

JJ And expensive.

BC Exactly.

JJ Did the Office pay for your uniforms?

BC No. One got allowances of £50 to buy the clothes one needed. I trotted along to Simpsons in the Strand and ordered tails; dinner jacket – none of these things I had - morning dress with grey waistcoat; morning dress with black waistcoat – the whole panoply of formal gear but it was good to go at the beginning to a post where protocol was important, because it came in useful later. Not so much in Moscow, but in places like Teheran.

JJ Yes, I can imagine.

BC I had a really benevolent Ambassador, John Coulson.

JJ So our relations were quite placid and good with Sweden at that time.

BC The only contention was over Rhodesia because the Swedes were, as always, on the side of the underdog. We were the wicked imperialists and they used to take us to task from time to time. One even saw demonstrations outside the Embassy which in Sweden at that time were quite rare. It was the time of Lumumba's death or assassination, and the Swedes were very worked up about African issues. I think because of their neutrality they felt the need to get worked up about something, so they had a tendency to meddle in other people's business quite a lot.

JJ *De haut en bas* – they say in French don't they? Handing out advice.

BC Yes, they did. I had nearly two years there, which were very happy.

JJ Why did Sweden remain neutral in the two World Wars? Was it basically an economic thing – they didn't want to have their country occupied; standard of living dropping down and all that? Or were there other principles involved?

BC Well they elevated neutrality into a principle. Undén himself created a kind of ideology of neutrality. In fact, to while away the time when I was there, I wrote a memorandum, which John Coulson very kindly sent to London under a covering despatch. In it I came to the conclusion that the Swedes were pursuing self interest. They did much better playing both ends to the middle than they would have done if they had backed either side in the Cold War



and also in the Second World War as well. This is really slightly off the point but many years later when I left the Service and was running a college in Oxford I had a visit from two Swedes who turned up more or less out of the blue. They were on a Government Commission. When for the first time Sweden had a Conservative Government; or at least a centre-right Government, they set up a Commission to look into the foreign policy of the former Social Democratic Government and in particular the issue of neutrality. During their researches they had turned up the memorandum I had written, which was not at all complimentary. I was really very embarrassed. It had never occurred to me that things like that got into the public domain. Of course they do and I should have known that.

JJ How did they receive it?

BC They took it on the chin. They were translating it into Swedish. What happened to it after that I don't know. It was a reminder – really the first reminder I had – that things you write as a civil servant aren't forgotten as soon as the ink is dry. They do have an afterlife which could sometimes be quite embarrassing internationally – if one made a wrong recommendation, or got an issue wrong.

JJ There you are. These things happen. EFTA had been formed by then. Did that have repercussions on the Embassy's activities? Because we were in EFTA, of course.

BC Our Ambassador, John Coulson, had himself played a key role in setting EFTA up. He had been chief negotiator. Apart from that I don't think it really impinged on our work at all. I don't think it impinged on anything very much.

JJ I suppose the Ambassador would go to EFTA meetings if they were held in Stockholm or elsewhere?

BC No, I think there was a separate delegate sent out from London. I don't think as Ambassador in Sweden it was part of his job to go to meetings. As he was a great expert on EFTA, he might have been consulted from time to time.

JJ Not in the way that with the EU, or even the EEC, Ambassadors in foreign parts would get together from time to time?

BC No, it wasn't like that at all.

JJ No formal arrangements.

BC No, it was more commercial than political.

JJ And trying to persuade the EEC countries that they should join EFTA, rather than the other way round.

BC That was a forlorn hope.

### **Posting to Moscow as First Secretary, 1963**

JJ So after Stockholm you went to Moscow in 1963, a country which from your studies at least, you knew the history? So tell us about that. Also Khrushchev was in charge at this time, wasn't he? It would be interesting to have your views about Mr Khrushchev, a very colourful figure.

BC My posting to Moscow was really very sudden because one of our people had to be withdrawn, not for security reasons, but for personal reasons. They needed a replacement who could speak Russian and I was the nearest geographically, but John Coulson insisted on delaying our departure by a few weeks, because we were just about to have a visit by Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister, and I had done all the preparatory work for that and was indeed still doing it. So he got the Office to agree that I could stay until after the Macmillan visit was over. They agreed to that, but as soon as it was over, we were off to Moscow on a funny little ship – one of the German Kaiser's ex-yachts – rather like the Britannia – converted into a small passenger liner. In those days you had to take, as far possible, everything you were likely to need for two years. Diplomats' supplies were rationed. In our Embassy, and I suppose in some others, every diplomatic officer's coupons were pooled and used to supply the Embassy shop, so that all staff could benefit from diplomatic supplies – obviously a very fair system. It meant that diplomats who were allowed to take in as much as they wanted on their first arrival, but not afterwards, were encouraged to take literally everything. We had a small baby at the time and we had to take a year's supply of nappies –

that kind of thing. Two years' supply of drink, and so our luggage was absolutely enormous, and took up most of the foredeck of this little ship, much to the irritation of the other passengers who wanted to sun themselves.

JJ What you're saying is there was nothing in the shops in Moscow?

BC Virtually nothing at all. It was a very tough time for the Russians and it was quite an experience to be there then.

JJ What was actually happening at that time in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s when you were there? Internally?

BC Internally. We didn't know of course that Khrushchev's colleagues were getting increasingly fed up and we didn't know that until he was ousted. The main thing that the Embassy was concerned with was the Test Ban Treaty which had just been signed before I arrived, so I wasn't there for the run up to that. Of course, all the negotiations were done elsewhere in any case but the formal signing was in Moscow. Your question is really on internal politics?

JJ But we can move on to the external.

BC Internally really nothing much was happening. But the Russians were having a really tough time under Khrushchev's virgin land scheme. That had failed by then, and ...

JJ Can you just say a bit more about that?

BC His idea had been to plough up vast virgin areas of the eastern Soviet Union, in Siberia, and to plant corn. He was a great believer in corn rather than wheat as he thought it was hardier and had the chance of a better yield.

JJ He did have a farming background himself, I think?

BC No, he was a self-styled expert. But the virgin lands scheme was a disaster because it was all done far too quickly and the irrigation – there wasn't any water – was a strain. Strong winds blew the top soil off. There were hundreds of square miles of withering maize.

JJ Was the system of farming then cooperative as opposed to each farmer having his own land?

BC Oh yes, state farms rather than co-operatives.

JJ That was one of the difficulties?

BC Yes it was. State farms were huge, and then the collective farms were usually smaller individually, but there were more of them, but at that time the farm workers only had a tiny plot on which they relied to grow their own vegetables. That improved later on, but in the 1960s every farm labourer led a very tough life indeed. So did the urban proletariat, come to that – to use their terminology. It was in general a very tough time. While we were there, there was an acute bread crisis – shortage of bread – shortage of grain had them bringing grain from Canada, and the import level grew as the years went by. I remember for a period we had to buy loaves which had been made very largely from turnips; chopped up turnip, and tasted absolutely disgusting. Russian bread is usually very good, so this had a very bad effect on public morale in Russia. Bread is for them the be all and end all; so one could depend on it and they made it very well. Turnip bread was very unwelcome and did the regime's popularity no good.

So far as external affairs were concerned, one of my main jobs in the Embassy – I'd become First Secretary by then – was looking after our co-chairmanship with the Russians of the Geneva Accords on Vietnam, which was the last thing I supposed I would do when I went to Moscow. The Geneva Accords, which Anthony Eden had played a leading role in bringing about, had set up a mechanism for settling problems of peace-keeping in Indo-China under the co-chairmanship of three neutral powers. We and the Russians were responsible for making sure that Geneva agreements were adhered to, and if they weren't, and they weren't, deciding whose fault it was and trying to do something about it. Of course, all that really meant was going to the Russians to complain about the behaviour of the Communist Vietnamese, who were of course directed very largely from Moscow. We had this sterile

dialogue, but it had to be done and it took up an amazing amount of time, because it meant that we had to study all the telegrams from missions in Vietnam, India, Poland and Canada and had to become experts on South-East Asia. Humphrey Trevelyan, our Ambassador, was very good on this – he made quite a study of it, and he really knew his stuff, so I was on a learning curve. He'd already arrived. That took up a great deal of my time. I was also responsible for east-west relations, broadly defined – the general state of the relationship between us and the Soviet Union and between the Soviet Union and the United States. So I had quite a large portfolio. I enjoyed doing that very much.

JJ What did that involve? Writing despatches on state of play from time to time?

BC A great deal of study of the Soviet press which was the main, but not the only, source we had, enabling us to decide what we thought the Russians were really up to, and what issues they were giving priority to, whether they were being more belligerent, or less belligerent. One supplemented that as far as one could by conversations with officials. We had absolutely no contact at that time with civilian Russians at all. It was forbidden for two reasons. One was security. Any contact could be exploited by the KGB to get us into trouble, but also because any overtures we might choose to make towards Russians would have got them into trouble. It was dangerous for them to be seen to associate with us. So it was from that point of view a very sterile diplomatic environment.

JJ Were you and your colleagues and, presumably the Ambassador, able to meet senior officials and ministers and Khrushchev? At parties or dinners?

BC The Ambassador, I think, met Khrushchev a few times at national day receptions or at our Queen's Birthday Party. I think he came once. But the contacts were few and far between. Very few. I think Humphrey Trevelyan had more contact with Gromyko, the Foreign Minister, than most of his colleagues, simply because of the Co-Chairmanship of the Geneva Accords. That brought us into contact with senior officials in the Foreign Ministry quite a lot, but you couldn't really chew the fat with any of them. They simply weren't authorised to discuss anything except the matter in hand, whatever that was. So we were very heavily dependent on the press. You could get quite a lot out of the press by reading between the lines.

JJ What was cultural life like in Moscow?

BC It was very active. It was very orthodox. There were marvellous concerts. Ballet of course was fantastically good. Concerts were amazing. The theatre was extremely good, but with a very orthodox repertoire – no experimentation; an awful lot of authors were banned. In general the visual arts were fairly unrewarding, apart from the great collections, for example, in the Hermitage or private collections of French Impressionists which the State had appropriated. The musical cultural life was by far the best. Rostropovich was still there, and that was a great compensation. We used to go to the ballet.

JJ Were members of the Embassy allowed to travel at all?

BC Yes, but under very strict conditions. We had to get permission from the Foreign Ministry to go anywhere outside a 40 kilometre limit round Moscow and you went in the full knowledge that you were going to be trailed the whole time and be under surveillance. It was wonderful to get out of Moscow. I remember going on a wonderful tour of central Asia – which was purely tourist travel really – I had no official business to transact. That was a great experience, but in general travel was so difficult and permission was very often withheld at the last minute. The system was that you could go unless they told you that you couldn't go, and very often the message that you couldn't go came just as you were getting into the car on your way to the railway station or the airport. It was common to have to make several attempts to get to where you wanted to get to, and sometimes one didn't succeed at all.

JJ I noted in my reading that the Politburo had been re-established under Brezhnev. Presumably it had been cancelled for internal reasons. What were the implications of that?

BC This was in the wake of Khrushchev's ouster. I think the Politburo always existed. It was just that it might have changed its name, but it was still called the Politburo. There was a Politburo throughout Khrushchev's time.

JJ It was just something I noted in Pears Encyclopaedia.

BC I'm not sure it's correct, actually.

JJ Well it might not be. There were one or two things I thought seemed odd in Pears.

BC It was subject to a possible change of name – that was always there. But what happened after Khrushchev's ouster, which was in the autumn of '64 – just at the time of our General Election here in Britain. This was getting close to the annual November 7<sup>th</sup> celebrations – anniversary of the Revolution in 1917 – it was always the occasion of big parades in Red Square. One of the things which happened was that what we called the icons – enormous portraits of the Soviet leadership – were stuck all over the walls in Moscow, and we were tipped off that all portraits of Khrushchev were being removed, and that's the first indication we had that something was brewing. And sure enough, he just disappeared and nobody knew whether he was dead, or ill. And then eventually they came clean and said he had been relieved of his duties for this and that reason - he had been responsible for some "harebrained schemes." We entered what was in theory a period of collective leadership, by Brezhnev, Kosygin and Podgorny – the three of them. And they were in theory meant to be equals, but in fact as things emerged, Brezhnev came to the top as General Secretary of the Party. Podgorny had the largely ceremonial post of President of the Soviet Union, and Kosygin was the Prime Minister, so they split the three offices in that way. The General Secretaryship of the Party was much the most important, so Brezhnev was dominant and collective leadership never came to very much.

JJ Khrushchev never played any other political role after that?

BC No.

JJ What was family life for you all in the Embassy at that time? It must have been difficult?

BC It was difficult, yes – very difficult. Our wives and children had the worst of the bargain, since we had our work to keep us busy, and they had to struggle with normal day to day involvement in domestic life in the Soviet Union, which was not at all easy. We had a very serious fire in the Embassy while I was there. This was a very dramatic occasion and almost certainly it was started by the Russians for various reasons which I can't go into. It burnt down most of one of the wings of the Embassy and the Soviet fire services took good advantage of the opportunity to have a good look at whatever was going on in the Embassy.

JJ Were your papers safe?

BC The papers were safe. They were much more interested in the communications equipment – that sort of thing.

JJ So you went out in a blaze of something or other? And came back to dear old London.

### **Return to the Foreign Office, 1966**

BC I was in Personnel Operations Department.

JJ What did that involve for you?

BC I was what was known as the Home Area Officer . They'd split up the world into five areas, of which the home area was one, and each area officer was responsible for postings within his geographical area, and for any other problems that arose of a personnel nature. My area was London – the Foreign Office itself. One of the things I was very much involved with was the merger between the Commonwealth Office and the Foreign Office. That fell within my area. Mostly what I did was dealing with new entrants and telling them where they were going to start, and what courses they were going to go on, if any. I also dealt with people coming back from abroad on a home posting, deciding which department to put them into, and breaking the news and then taking cover. I didn't enjoy it.

JJ Why was that?

BC I think it was mainly because people never came to see you unless it was bad news. Apart from the ordinary postings mechanisms, which were quite straightforward, if somebody said they wanted to come to see you, it was because they had a problem.

JJ They didn't want to go where you wanted them to go or something like that?

BC Or they wanted to go somewhere where they couldn't go, or they had marital problems, or educational problems for their children, and some of the problems were really very genuine



and serious, and it was the only job since leaving college at Oxford which kept me awake at night.

JJ It shows you had a conscience.

BC Personal problems are much more intractable and much more direct in the sense that one plays a role. I think there is a higher incidence of family problems in the Diplomatic Service than there are in most walks of life for obvious reasons – constant upheaval, constant strain on wives particularly, and even then the ratio of difficult posts as opposed to easy posts was changing in favour of the difficult posts, and so the extent to which people could just rely on sticking to what was called the inner circle of Paris, Bonn, Rome, Washington – that was diminishing because there were lots of other posts – especially after the merger with the Commonwealth Relations Office – which had to be manned.

JJ Of course after our Commonwealth countries, Colonial countries, became independent and wanted a British Embassy – or we wanted to go there, so there were more embassies in more difficult places than hitherto.

Presumably you went to these monthly meetings where the files were passed around, where people's careers were discussed and so on?

BC Yes.

JJ I used to go to those occasionally when I was in Personnel Training Department. I found them fascinating. It is always a risky business controlling another person's career.

BC One felt that responsibility very keenly. We all did. And planning somebody's career was just beginning then to be systematised, so that everybody did have something called a career plan in front of their file, to which they contributed. They could say what they wanted to do and what they didn't want to do, and we processed that and tried to meet their preferences and I think most of the time we succeeded. Certainly much less was left to chance than had been five years before.

JJ Why was that? What had happened? Perhaps because, with the merger of the two Offices, they brought in new ideas and new systems along business lines in a sense?

BC We had a very good Chief Clerk in Colin Crowe, and I think he and David Muirhead played an important personal part in this success. I think they all played quite an important part in making the process more rational than it had been; less haphazard.

JJ And there was more training possibly?

BC Yes, much more attention was being paid to training, including language training, and commercial courses and that sort of thing. We were slowly and painfully dragging ourselves into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

JJ I do remember a senior colleague in Personnel and Training Department who spoke in a small morning meeting one day saying we don't want any more women in the Service, that they were just a nuisance; they were always disappearing to have babies; getting married and so on. But that changed enormously. I think there are more women now coming in than men.

BC Oh yes.

JJ At that time in general the Foreign Office – was it still largely independent of the rest of Whitehall, apart from the money that we had to accept from the Treasury?

BC Much more than is the case now. Obviously we had dealings with other Departments, including the Treasury, and not just about our budget, but economic relations in general. This obviously involved the Treasury and the Board of Trade, as it then was, to a great extent. So yes, we weren't an island sufficient to ourselves. It was much more autonomous than it has since become. It was élitist. There is no question of that. We regarded ourselves, and I think it's fair to say we were regarded as being, with the Treasury, the cream of Whitehall, and that was very good for morale. People were very proud to belong to the Foreign Office. I suppose along with that went a certain degree of arrogance which made us unpopular with other Departments. But by and large I think it was much more – how can I put it – of an institution one was proud to belong to, to a greater extent I would guess than it is now.

JJ I always felt that, regardless of rank, everybody was able to talk easily to other people in the Office. “My door is always open” was true in those days. I don’t know whether it’s changed.

BC Well, now they just send each other emails.

### **First Secretary (Commercial) Tehran 1968**

JJ Well that’s true. Tends to clog the system I’ve been hearing. After London you were off on your travels again, to Tehran in 1968, while the Shah Pahlavi was in power, on the throne. Tell us about that?

BC Well I went there because, in those days, the rule was that everybody had to do one commercial posting; one commercial posting as a First Secretary or Counsellor, and of the ones which were becoming vacant at the time when I was coming to the end of my two years in Personnel Department, which was the norm, Tehran was far and away the most attractive. It was also an Embassy which enjoyed a very high reputation, partly because of Dennis Wright, who was the Ambassador and had been for several years already. He was a recognised expert on the country and he had a reputation for only picking the best people. It sounds immodest to say that, but it was an Embassy which everyone wanted to get to, and it also provided in many ways a very nice environment. Tehran in those days was not an unpleasant city. It had its drawbacks. The Embassy of course was quite lavish with the amount of land it occupied and the building itself was striking. The office building was pretty awful – 1960s egg box - but the Residence and some of the staff accommodation was really quite nice, and we had this enormous compound – the main compound. The Chancery was in the middle of the city; right in the very centre, and then we had this other compound up in north Tehran which was much more healthy. During summer it was much nicer altogether. We had a number of houses in the compound. We’d been given the land by the then Shah sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was an outbreak of plague in Tehran and the then British Ambassador allowed the Shah to bring all his entourage – and all his family and his wives and so on, into the downtown compound, and they were accommodated there in marquees until the outbreak was over. As a mark of gratitude the Shah presented the Embassy with this large plot of land up in north Tehran for the Ambassador to build a summer residence, which he did

– it's still there. But also we built a lot of other houses and bungalows for staff in that compound. There was a swimming pool, tennis courts, and all that.

JJ Was it a big Embassy?

BC Yes. It was quite large. I couldn't put a figure on it. There was a large commercial department – there must have been about ten or twelve.

JJ So that was a very important activity?

BC It was then, because the Iranians were spending a lot of money.

JJ Their oil revenues, I suppose.

BC Yes. And they were spending not only on infrastructure and industry, they also spent a lot on defence – that was the time when we were selling them the Chieftain Tank, for example. That, funnily enough, came under the commercial department. We had to handle this as well as ordinary trade.

JJ You didn't have a Defence Attaché?

BC Yes we did and they were involved of course on the actual arrangements. So it was a very active department and a very good introduction to commercial work, which is what I hoped it would be. The internal situation seemed to be very stable, because Khomeini was in exile, of course, in Iraq, and ...

JJ The Ayatollah?

BC Yes. The Shah's secret police, Savak, were numerous and effective, and they kept the lid on everything very successfully, at least for a few more years. I can't say it was my favourite post because Tehran was environmentally pretty unpleasant. The drainage system; the sewage system; the air quality - were pretty awful – it's got much worse since, of course. But once one had escaped to one's compound in the north it was fine.

JJ What were our relations like in general with the Shah?

BC They were good - largely due to Dennis Wright, who most mornings went riding with the Minister of Court, who was one of the most influential Ministers because he had the Shah's ear.

JJ But at the end we didn't foresee the Revolution? What happened?

BC Anthony Parsons wrote a very good book on that. Really saying "yes - it's all our fault, and we should have seen it coming". I think he's too hard on himself in that book, and it's a long time since I read it. I remember thinking at the end that he took too much blame on himself. It was very difficult.

JJ But it didn't happen suddenly, did it? When you went Khomeini was still actively stirring people up?

BC But outside - he and his supporters were all in exile.

JJ I hadn't realised - when you arrived he'd already gone?

BC Yes, he'd been in exile for some time. Although as we subsequently discovered, he did have a hard core of support in the bazaar and among the mullahs, that was a part of Iranian society that really was closed not only to us but to all foreigners. It was really deep Iran if you like, and foreigners in general had very little contact, so there was very little way of knowing what was going on. All our contacts were with the more westernised commercial world and the bazaar being a little tight knit unit which we obviously didn't go to - we didn't buy things there.

JJ Market gossip?

BC But it was a political entity and religious entity which was closed to us. I don't think any other country saw any more than we did what was coming. Certainly the Shah didn't see it coming, despite having Savak, and so I don't think Anthony Parsons can really take too much of the blame, but, yes ideally, we shouldn't have been as complacent as we were, and we

thought it was going to go on like that for ever. There was no obvious sign of popular unrest – the Shah had done a lot of good, which tends to be forgotten now.

JJ He developed the country into a more western style.

BC He brought clean water and electricity to the villages. He founded an education system, so there was really no obvious reason to expect an explosion. There was no obvious evidence of mass injustice or repression, except that the secret police were a very nasty lot, no doubt about that.

JJ So when the revolution came it was a step backwards into the old ways?

BC It was. The position of women changed overnight. Another good thing the Shah had done with a lot of encouragement from his third wife, Farah, who was a great women's rights person, was to change the status of women out of all recognition. This had taken fifteen years and was definitely good work. Now it's all gone right back. Sad.

JJ But during your stay there we were welcomed and did good trade with the Iran – in both directions I suppose?

BC Yes. I think the Iranians, from the Shah downwards, were wary of us to some extent. They always assumed the cunning British must be up to something. If anything went wrong, we were the first people they looked at. But it was not our fault. We had long ceased to have anything like the influence which the Iranians attributed to us. But for purely historical reasons I think they tended to regard us with slight suspicion. I think they admired and respected Britain in many ways, but they were also very wary of us and suspicious.

JJ How did they view the Americans?

BC The Americans were, at that time, popular. They had most of the things the Iranians wanted. They didn't always buy from the Americans. They tried to play us and the Americans off each other. The French as well. But the Americans weren't the Great Satan which they subsequently became.

### **Sabbatical year at Harvard University, 1971**

JJ Let's move on. Where did you go next – oh, you went for a sabbatical year at Harvard?

BC Yes. My wife had been very unwell and the Office very generously decided that I should only do one tour in Tehran. So instead of four years I only did two. They didn't quite know what to do with me, so they put me for a time in Rhodesia Department, working on various contingency plans – work that needed to be done, but wasn't terribly urgent. Then when the possibility arose of sending me to Harvard - because we had an annual allocation which allowed us to send one person every year - they slotted me in there which was very nice for me and very good of them. So I had a year at what was then called the Institute of International Affairs in Harvard, and did some work on Russian history again.

JJ The Office didn't demand anything in particular that you should study this or that?

BC They wanted me to do something which would hopefully be useful to them and so I did mostly study Soviet foreign policy, knowing that I had a chance at least of going to Moscow in the future, which was confirmed when I was there. It was a very pleasant and rewarding year.

JJ I can imagine yes. Biggest, most well-funded university in America. That gave you a good break and prepared you for Moscow the following year, where you went as Counsellor this time. So you were pretty senior in the Embassy?

### **Posting as Head of Chancery, Moscow, 1972**

BC I was Head of Chancery, so No 3 in the hierarchy.

JJ Had the Embassy expanded by that time?

BC In some ways it had. The commercial department had got bigger.

JJ Which was a good sign for us.

BC Indeed. We also had a better staffed and more active cultural and scientific section. We had a Scientific Attaché as well as a Cultural Attaché. The Service Attachés – there were still the number of Attachés but they had a bigger number of staff than they'd had before. The political staff was about the same I think; expanded a little, not much. There wasn't much room. I think that was one of the reasons. We all crammed into the ground floor of the one building we owned – the grand building opposite the Kremlin, and the commercial department was out-housed quite a long way away. So were the cultural and scientific sections, but the political staff had to be within these very cramped quarters in the main building, so we couldn't really get more staff in if we wanted to. I think there's a lot to be said for a small unit. The answer to problems is very often seen in expanding staff but usually expanding staff has the opposite effect; it just creates new problems.

JJ It was an active time during that period of your stay there, wasn't it? It seemed to me from looking in books that relations were improving. Treaties were being signed of one sort or another. You could probably say quite a bit about those? The Soviet Union was generally moving into a modern era and perhaps dropping some of the old-fashioned Stalinistic attitudes. Can you talk a bit about that?

BC Yes, that's true. Compared to my previous tour there, ten years before, the differences were really quite striking. There was more in shops. A lot of new building had been done. Both residential and otherwise. Although the quality was really low, at least it was an advance on the situation in the 1950s and 60s, when the norm was these communal flats where several families lived in one, usually an ex-bourgeois flat or house. That had become rarer, but was by no means extinct. Most Russian families had a small flat to themselves. The emphasis was on small, and they really were small, and very badly built. But they had a degree of privacy which they didn't have before, and socially it was an improvement. It was a fairly stable set-up at the time. It wasn't very exciting, but that suited the Russians very well. It was a period of stability after all the ups and downs of the Khrushchev era. Subsequently it became known as the period of stagnation, which is true in many respects, but from the point of view of the ordinary man in the street, that had some advantages.

JJ But weren't relations between the Soviet Union and particularly the United States, - I don't know about the UK – improving?



BC They were improving up to a point. Both with us and the Americans, relations were still bedevilled by the activities of the KGB. Shortly before I arrived in Moscow we had the famous expulsion of 105 KGB agents from London.

JJ This was Alec Douglas-Home's idea wasn't it? Not his idea, but ...

BC He presided over it. When I arrived in Moscow our relations were still in the deep freeze. We were bottom of the class as far as the Russians were concerned.

JJ Did they reciprocate?

BC Yes they did, but not to that extent.

JJ We would not have had 105 agents anyway.

BC I think we lost about six, which was quite a modest riposte. But a lot of my time as Head of Chancery was spent on making sure the morale of the Embassy held up in a very difficult period. We were receiving constant harassment from the KGB of one kind or another. And travel was very difficult – that was one of the ways they got back to us by always confining us to barracks.

JJ Did we reciprocate on that point?

BC Yes we did. Not as much as we'd hoped would be the case, but yes, we also imposed restrictions, but they weren't anything like as severe in London as the restrictions we laboured under in Moscow. So keeping the Embassy happy and secure was my main preoccupation as Head of Chancery. There was also a lot of political work to do – political reporting, coordinating the Chancery's efforts on that front. But our relations began to improve by Spring 1976, I would say. Things gradually returned to normal, and became certainly more active in a bilateral sense than they had been in the 1960s.

JJ The CSCE Conference which I believe was being prepared in 1972 was quite an important piece of international legislation, if you can put it that way?

BC It hadn't yet really got going. It didn't really get going until 1974-75, but it was in embryo, you're quite right. There was a good deal of scepticism in London and in Washington as to where it was going to get us. It did have a number of enthusiasts who were proved right in the end, I think. I was certainly on the wrong side, that of the sceptics.

JJ It was called the Basket 3 which really came out perhaps surprisingly at the time – became such an important part of the Treaty.

BC Indeed, and that's where the enthusiasts were right. They took the view all along that the West would gain more from the provisions of human rights, reunification of families, the general loosening up of barriers, both within and on the frontiers of societies, than they would lose from the formalisation of the post-World War Two frontiers. I think the sceptics were in the majority in the Soviet oriented communities, that is the Embassy in Moscow and the Department in London. We were very sceptical about the willingness of the Russians to deliver on Basket 3, because the Russians didn't have a great record for keeping agreements.

JJ That was reasonable scepticism.

BC Yes, it was. It turned out to be only partially justified in the event. Just as well too. But I think the sceptics, including me, underestimated the effect which the CSCE could have on the relationship between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, to name just but one. Also I think we underestimated the courage of individual Russians and Poles and others, in making use of the agreement which had been eventually concluded.

JJ They put substance to the text.

BC They had the courage to turn to their Government and say – look you signed up to this and therefore we are entitled to do what we're doing. Although they ended up in prison, they had made their point and cumulatively, I think it had a tremendous effect on the momentum of political change in all the Communist societies. It was very important indeed.

JJ The freedom of the media played quite a large role in that opening up the communications.

BC The Russians did some strange things. For example, *Pravda* published the entire text of the final act of the conference – the so-called Helsinki Agreement. Something we didn't do in this country. We published it as a Government thing, but I mean you wouldn't have found it in the *Daily Mail*, for example, or even in the *Times*. There were extracts, however.

JJ But we didn't realise the implications either?

BC No we didn't. As I say when I was in Moscow from 1972-75 it was still the West and the Russians sniffing around each other to see whether this was going to develop into something or not, and it did. It was also seen in part as a trade off for progress in MBFR – force reduction negotiations – the idea being, to oversimplify it, that if we were to give the Russians the conference on security and cooperation they would make concessions on arms control. As it turned out, the concession which they thought they were making in arms control, turned out to be fairly minimal, and the concession we thought, in agreeing to the conference, turned out not to be a concession, but win-win for us, so it all turned out rather differently to what one anticipated.

JJ It must have been a complicated procedure to work out the balance on arms controls. How do you count our tanks and all this sort of ..?

BC Very complex and that's why negotiations dragged on for so many years. It was very, very difficult as you say to count equipment, and in the end MBFR never really achieved very much. It was subsequently superseded of course by the agreement which Putin is now reneging on which ...

JJ Which one was that?

BC Which limited the ...

JJ Nuclear weapons?

BC No, conventional forces. The MBFR was concerned entirely with conventional forces. It wasn't concerned with nuclear. But the result didn't really justify the years and years of effort put into it.

## Return to the FO as Head of East European & Soviet Department, 1975

JJ You came back to London again as Head of East European Department. Was EESD separate from Soviet Department?

BC It was all combined. The only difference between that and the Northern Department where I started my career, was that we got rid of Scandinavia, so we weren't bedevilled by cold wars any more. But the Department looked after the Soviet Union and the whole of Eastern Europe including Yugoslavia.

JJ What were the main issues that you had to deal with there?

BC The main issue was *détente* and the management of *détente* – was it for real; what would we get out of it; what was it the Russians hoped to get out of it; what directions should we take? In other words, what policies should we pursue in order to move it forward, if indeed we wanted to move it forward? In general we did. So I was looking back, when I read the very helpful *aide mémoire* which you emailed, to the published volume of documents on *détente* which were published at the end of the thirty year rule, and there was quite a lot of stuff I had quite forgotten writing. The main emphasis of our work was on parity and the emergence of the new phase in our relationship with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The CSCE was part of that. By 1974-75 it had really got going. Indeed a whole section of the Department was doing nothing but CSCE and the pace was quickening. September 1975 was the climax to the negotiation, when the Final Act was signed. Ministers decided on our advice that we should be much more active in cultivating relations with Eastern European countries on a differentiated basis. In other words, good behaviour should be rewarded and bad behaviour punished - or not punished so much as not rewarded. So we tried quite hard to increase the tempo of exchanges of various kinds. These included Ministerial visits and delegations, round table conferences, and a whole range of things. That was successful. I think the policy of differentiating did have a good effect, although it would be hard to produce chapter and verse as to its extent. Some Governments modified their behaviour, and I think there was a cumulative effect.

JJ I can imagine that at a guess the Hungarians were the most eager to come forward and be good allies in a sense – given their history – the Russians occupying Hungary? Subsequently I noticed they were the first East Europeans to join the Council of Europe.

BC Much later on – I'm running ahead of myself – they were the first to join the IMF and the World Bank as well. At that time you are right – they were ahead of the others despite the aftermath of 1956. That was terrible of course, but by the mid-1970s the regime had relaxed its control quite significantly. Foreign travel was deemed to become possible for ordinary Hungarians – very limited and restricted financially, but possible. They were making some interesting economic experiments in the way they ran the economy, which was in a more liberalised direction, and there was a definite easing of the restrictions that had pertained up to then, but still pertained in other East European countries. So yes, they were the blue-eyed boys to some extent.

JJ What about Poland?

BC Poland was on a different scale. There were much more inbuilt tensions in Poland. For example, agriculture had never been nationalised. You would still find small private farms in Poland as the norm and there was above all the Catholic Church, which no Communist regime had been able to tame or had really tried, because it is obviously impossible. So in Poland there was always much more potential for some dramatic happening and of course it did eventually with Solidarity, and martial law and all that. Whereas little Hungary was kind of trundling along quite happily over a much more even path. Poland was obviously the most important of all the East European countries and still is.

JJ Didn't they do well?

BC Very well indeed. Then they got rid of the Kaczyński twins – one of them anyway. One of them is still President.

JJ And Czechoslovakia?

BC Czechoslovakia was not good news really. It had, by comparison with Hungary, a very illiberal hard-line Government and Husak, the First Secretary of the Party, was an emphatic

hard-liner. Culturally things were very restricted. The economy was run on very traditional Soviet type lines, and there didn't seem to be much hope of change really. Of course what wasn't foreseen at that time was not just the Dubcek – the Velvet Revolution, but also the split up of the federation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but that was all in the future at that time. In the 1970s things were set in concrete and seemed unlikely to change. The same is true of Romania, although Romania was the maverick in some ways in foreign policy terms.

JJ Yes, they ... with the Chinese.

BC Yes, which led us to expect rather more from them than was actually going to be forthcoming. There was a State Visit by Ceausescu to London which was in retrospect a huge mistake, but at the time it seemed to be justified by the fact that Romania seemed to behave in a more independent way, and we thought that should be encouraged. That was the rationale, but it didn't do any good for the Romanian people, because things were just getting progressively worse.

JJ Going back to Czechoslovakia again – I suppose the Soviet Embassy must have been more or less giving instructions to the Government of the day and keeping a very close eye on them and how they behaved and what was said and so on? Was that true more or less with other satellite countries in fact?

BC Oh yes. Not only that, the Russians had so-called advisers planted in every Ministry and Department who were reporting directly back to Moscow. It wasn't just the Embassies. There were large numbers of officials, military and civilian, seconded to work alongside their East European counterparts, to keep an eye on them, making sure they didn't stray from the straight and narrow. There was an interesting reflection of that when you get on to my time in Hungary later on. I must remember to mention it.

### **Secondment to Prime Minister's Office as Private Secretary (Overseas Affairs), 1977**

JJ After heading East European Department you then were posted to be Private Secretary to Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's office covering overseas affairs. Tell us about that rather important post.

BC I hadn't actually by any means finished my time in EESD. I'd only done two years and normally would have done four, and I fully expected to and, indeed, I was just getting into my stride, I thought, when Personnel Department called me one day and asked if I would be willing to let them put my name forward as one of the candidates to succeed Patrick Wright in No 10 as Overseas Affairs Private Secretary. I said yes I would, but frankly didn't expect the job would come my way because I learned on the grapevine there was another very strong candidate in for it. Anyway, the day after that I was summoned to see Jim Callaghan in No 10. I'd never been inside the building before, and that in itself was quite an experience. I thought if I didn't get the job, at least I had seen inside No 10. We had a good talk, and of course I'd had a lot to do with him when he was Foreign Secretary, because he took a great interest in East-West relations, and I felt I knew him pretty well. I had been on one or two overseas visits with him. He wasn't a stranger by any manner of means. The interview went well and then he asked me the question he asked everybody up for interview, whether there was anything political or otherwise which would make me uncomfortable about working for him, by which he meant was I a diehard Conservative and would I object to working for a Labour Prime Minister? I truthfully answered no. There were no inhibitions of that sort at all. In fact I had always voted Liberal, as it was then. I had no hang ups about Labour particularly, and very shortly after that I got the job, and then arrangements were put in hand between me and Patrick Wright to have some kind of handover – just on the eve of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting which was being held in London in June 1977, and the idea was that the handover would actually take place immediately after that was over. Obviously Patrick was up to his eyes in that and so as soon as it was over, we had a short handover and I started the job. It was absolutely fascinating work. I don't think anyone could ask for a more (awfully clichéd) challenging job to do. The arrangement then was, although I think it all changed under Tony Blair, that the Principal Private Secretary, who was then Kenneth Stowe and the Overseas Private Secretary, namely me, shared an office immediately adjacent to the Cabinet Room, and the other Private Secretaries were in another larger room leading out of ours.

JJ How many private secretaries did he have?

BC In those days there were always the Principal Private Secretary, the Overseas Private Secretary, generally No 2 in the team, one from the Treasury, always, to look after financial

and economic affairs, and when I first went to No 10 that was Nigel Wicks, who subsequently had a very distinguished career; then there was one from any Whitehall Department who was responsible for the Parliamentary side of things – principally Prime Minister’s Questions. There was another who was responsible for the diary and accepting or refusing engagements, and making sure the Prime Minister wasn’t meant to be in two places at once, and there was another one who did all Home affairs apart from financial and economic. So there were altogether six, plus, sharing the same large office a duty clerk, who was one of a team of very bright Branch B officers who did nuts and bolts really, who was always there on eight hour shifts 24/7. He was a continuum and always very well chosen. Worked very hard, and very effectively. What to say about No 10? The Overseas Private Secretary had three responsibilities, I suppose, in terms of Whitehall. One was to be the link between the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, working obviously through the Foreign Secretary’s Private Secretary, and the same with the Ministry of Defence, because in that job you were responsible for Defence as well as purely overseas affairs. And the third one was Northern Ireland, so we had a kind of triple responsibility in terms of the Whitehall bureaucracy. The way it worked was, very roughly, that supposing the Foreign Secretary had approved some course of action which had been put up to him by some Foreign Office officials, that would then be passed in the form of a letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister, or if it was a very unimportant thing, it would be a letter from the Private Secretary to me, and I would then read the letter and come to a view as to whether there was anything in the letter which needed to be checked or amplified or clarified before it went to the Prime Minister, and identify the points in the proposal which called for a definite decision – yes or no – as opposed to just background stuff. Having done all that, one would simply as a rule, mark in the margin the points for decision – if there were three, you would mark them X, Y, Z, and simply write at the top – “Prime Minister agree X, Y, Z?” And then it would be put in his evening box which went up to him at about 7 o’clock, 8 o’clock, and hopefully would come back the following morning; if not, very soon, with “yes” scrawled on it or “no”. If “no” he would probably give reasons why not or ask questions, or he might just send for me and have a word about it. We had a very antique but effective system of bells in our offices – a row of coloured lights, and each had a colour according to which private secretary the Prime Minister wanted to see; he would press the button on his desk and your little light would light up, and you would rush upstairs to see what he wanted. There was another very admirable gadget in No 10 which was that none of the telephones had bells, just a large flashing light. I remember in the Foreign Office, in the Third Room, sometimes there were four people in the room and



all the telephones were ringing at the same time – it was an absolute nightmare. So it was a good thing for working conditions.

JJ So there was a constant connection between No 10 and the Foreign Office through yourself and through your opposite number in the Foreign Office to sort out questions and clarifications. That was quite a smooth operation?

BC It worked very smoothly on the whole, and it helped if you knew the people at the other end.

JJ But I suppose you had to stay on till you'd seen the Red Box come down with all the Prime Minister's replies in them.

BC There was a firm rule in No 10 that you couldn't leave the office until your in-tray was completely empty, and you were never allowed to leave anything overnight, and sometimes it meant that you were there very late indeed. There were so many aspects of the job it's difficult to know where to stop really. Do you think I've said enough?

Another aspect was that one private secretary always had to be with the Prime Minister at any time. For example, it was during the time when the Government had a majority of one in the House of Commons, and that meant that the Prime Minister's vote was important and pairing was in that situation not on, except in dire circumstances. That meant that the Prime Minister himself had to be in the House of Commons or in No 10 in which he could get to the House very quickly, all the time, and that meant that one of us had to be over there with him in his office. When he was in the Chamber, we were in his office, and sometimes he left the Chamber and came to his office to see what was going on, and sometimes we were there to 3 or 4 in the morning, and the next night it would be somebody else's turn. But the Prime Minister himself always had to be there. It put a tremendous strain on one man. Quite remarkable how he stood up to it, but he did so. One could forgive him when very occasionally he became slightly tetchy for one reason or another, because he didn't get enough sleep. That was another aspect of the job. A major aspect of the Overseas Private Secretary's job was planning, preparing and doing everything to do with foreign trips. It had been agreed in principle, for example, this happened in my time, that the Prime Minister should go to India. That was agreed. Then the Foreign Office decided he couldn't go to India without going to Bangladesh and Pakistan as well, so that was added on, and all the planning of the itinerary, the programme, whom he would meet, the briefing required, the transport

arrangements, what clothes he would wear, everything like that came on to the Overseas Private Secretary's desk, including the sometimes most time-consuming task of writing all the thank you letters at the end of the visit. Everyone had to get a thank you letter from the Prime Minister, even down to the captain of the aircraft and the chief stewardess, all the various people who played any part at all in the visit, very often accompanied by a signed photograph. So when the visit was over, it was by no means over so far as the Private Secretary was concerned. He still had an awful lot of clearing up to do. So that played quite a major part in the job. Occasionally, one would be inspired, if one had a bright idea about some aspect of foreign affairs, one might put it on paper shortly, briefly, and put it to the Prime Minister and see what he thought. I think my successors, especially Charles Powell, did that much more than I did. I did it very rarely – only on about two occasions, I think, in two years. One of the aspects of the job was you had to forget about your – not exactly forget about your loyalty to the Foreign Office, but you had to constantly put your loyalty to the Prime Minister first, and if you thought that the Foreign Office had got it wrong, you would say so – politely, obviously. Very often you could tell when something came over from the Foreign Office, that the Prime Minister wasn't going to like it and you wouldn't bother to trouble him by saying: "Am I right in thinking you don't like this?" You knew instinctively that either the Foreign Office ought to forget about it, or recast it, or give more reasons why, and so on. So there was quite a lot of that which went on without things going to the Prime Minister at all, but one gradually gained in confidence in doing that the longer you'd been there. To begin with, I suppose, one erred on the side of putting too much up to him because you hadn't yet got the feel for how he would react to certain kinds of suggestion.

JJ Can I ask – how good was he on foreign affairs really? Did he have an intuitive grasp of what were inevitably complicated questions from time to time – complicated situations to deal with? The buck stopped with him after all.

BC I thought he was very good indeed. Of course he had the great advantage of having been Foreign Secretary for two years before he came into No 10 after Wilson resigned. During that time he dealt directly with virtually all the major issues of foreign policy, and so he knew the language and he knew the personalities too. I thought he was extremely good, and he was a very good Prime Minister anyway. The way in which he controlled such an immensely diverse and highly talented Cabinet was remarkable. His Cabinet included heavyweights like

Denis Healey, Wedgwood Benn, Michael Foot, David Owen – I can't remember them all now, but they were a very heavyweight lot.

JJ Was Michael Foot a heavyweight, in your view?

BC In terms of argument he was, and he also had tremendous following in the party, so what he said couldn't be ignored, but keeping the balance between left and right and steering them towards a consensus was not easy, and I thought Jim Callaghan did it very well indeed. I should have mentioned, one of the duties of the Private Secretaries was to sit in on Cabinet when your field was being discussed. The Principal Private Secretary always did the kind of key domestic bits and then as soon as they got to the foreign affairs items in the Cabinet meeting he would rush out through the door separating our two offices, and wave at me and I would rush in, and take my place at the little table at the end of the Cabinet table which was there for the Private Secretaries. The purpose of that was so that if half way through the Cabinet meeting a decision was taken on a foreign affairs issue, the Overseas Affairs Private Secretary, would rush out into his own office and forewarn the Whitehall Departments concerned that this decision had been taken, and give them an idea of the action which they should be getting on with, rather than wait to the end of what might be a very long Cabinet meeting. By the end of the Cabinet Meeting the wheels in theory should be turning. It worked very well. You also had to keep an eye on the Cabinet minutes, although they were primarily the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary, you occasionally had to help with silly little things like the spelling of foreign names. That was a clerical duty really. I found that very interesting. Also one attended meetings of the Cabinet Committees which were concerned with foreign affairs in a sense; those which were chaired by the Prime Minister at least – one was OD – Overseas and Defence. Every time there was a change of Prime Minister or change of Government the names of the committees changed, with their attendant abbreviations. I had to attend the Hong Kong Committee and Northern Ireland as well. So the job gave you an enormous insight into all the workings of Government across quite a wide field, and that was an immense privilege for a middle-ranking civil servant like me at the time; it was unparalleled. There was no job in Whitehall which gave you such a wide insight into what was going on. I thoroughly enjoyed it, although it was very hard work.

### **Arrival of Mrs Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, 1979**

JJ Two years was probably enough?

BC Well, yes. I stayed on a bit more simply because of the change in Prime Minister. It was another great privilege to witness not only the handover from one Prime Minister to another, but from one Party to another. I thought that was an immensely impressive operation. It showed up all the virtues of our political system: the fact was that it was possible for Jim Callaghan, in this case, to leave No 10 after lunch on 5 May and go to the Palace to hand in his cards, and within an hour or so for Margaret Thatcher to walk through the front door, Jim having left, and find all the staff of No 10 lined up right down the entrance corridor applauding her as she came in, having only just before clapped Jim Callaghan on his way out. It was a very emotional moment when Jim Callaghan left. People were very fond of Jim Callaghan. He was very good to work for. A lot of people were in tears when he made his final farewell. I felt a bit moist-eyed myself I must confess. He took it extremely stoically. He knew, I think, at quite an early stage that he was going to lose the 1979 election, so it didn't come as a great shock to him. He had a last lunch in No 10 which was a family affair, literally, in the sense that his children were there, and his wife Audrey, plus the Private Secretaries. It was a very pleasant, but moving occasion, and immediately after that he was off to the Palace. It was quite a moving day. Then Mrs Thatcher arrived; she took over the whole staff *en bloc*. There was no question we wouldn't be as loyal to her as we had been to Jim Callaghan. There was no weeding out or anything like that. It was taken for granted that our duty was to the Office of Prime Minister, and not to any particular Party or individual. She took over immediately and we helped her obviously, as far as we could. She gave us all supper in No 10 that night. She had the food cooked in her house in Flood Street – shepherds pie, I remember – and had the whole lot motored round to 10 Downing Street and she was serving herself. She was at the seat of power spooning out shepherds pie for all her team.

JJ I can't see this happening in any other country.

BC Exactly. I mean, at the White House when the President changes, every single member of staff down to the doorman changes because they are all political appointments, and they're all part of the pork barrel and the distribution of favours. Mrs Thatcher was, like Jim Callaghan, a delight to work for, but they were both obviously very different in many ways. Jim Callaghan had, in my view, by far the harder task of the two, at least initially. Comparing his time with Mrs Thatcher's early years, he had a potentially very difficult Cabinet and he had a tiny majority in the House of Commons, which meant that he had the constant preoccupation of having to survive the next debate, the next Prime Minister's Questions, the next vote of

confidence, which of course ultimately he didn't. But I think we all realised what a strain he was under. As I think I said earlier, he did get a bit irritable, especially with the Foreign Office representative. There was a suspicion of the Foreign Office in the Labour Party which even his time as Foreign Secretary didn't entirely eliminate. The Foreign Office was not really on side so far as Labour was concerned, and had to be treated with some – I wouldn't say suspicion – but caution.

JJ You were the Etonians and the Wykehamists?

BC Exactly. I was the occasional recipient of grumpiness from Jim, I wouldn't put it higher than that, but on the whole we got on extremely well, and particularly so when we were overseas because then we were obviously in much closer contact the whole time, and the relationship, I would like to think, worked very well. With Mrs Thatcher it was completely different, but equally pleasant. I would put it like this – while Jim Callaghan was all honey with his Cabinet, as he had to be to keep them sweet, and occasionally vinegary with his staff – Mrs Thatcher was completely the other way round. She was vinegary with her Cabinet and sometimes tore them off strips in front of civil servants like me, to an extent which was really embarrassing. But she was always honey with her staff. She was so considerate and took such an interest in one's family. For example, while I was there I had to move house. She was immensely concerned about this. Kept asking me how it was going. Gave me two days off without my asking for it – that kind of thing. She couldn't have been a nicer, kinder, more considerate person. Jim was not like that, but then he couldn't be. Life was much more serious.

JJ And difficult colleagues in the Cabinet.

BC Well that and the tiny majority. Keeping the Liberals sweet and the LibLab pact going and all that. Whereas Mrs Thatcher to begin with, like all Prime Ministers had a honeymoon, and I had left before the honeymoon was over. Maybe I've got a particularly rosy impression of her and her style. But I don't think entirely. I've met her several times subsequently and indeed I was at a much later stage in the Cabinet Office. I had a lot to do with her then and I found the same qualities then as before. It was very exciting to be working for her during her induction to foreign affairs and foreign policy.

JJ Which she'd never had to deal with.

BC Well she'd been on various trips. She'd been to China. She'd been to Yugoslavia, and she wasn't by any means completely ignorant of foreign affairs. She'd had a lot of briefing, obviously, as Leader of the Opposition, not always from the people one would have chosen. I remember Richard Helms, the very rightwing American Senator, was one of her *confidantes* on foreign policy. I don't think he made a lasting impression, but he was not the person one would have chosen to groom a future Prime Minister in foreign affairs. Robert Conquest was a much healthier influence. I think she learned a lot from him about Russia, but basically she was new to it and it fell to me to give her some basic guidance on the way in which, for example, foreign visits worked, and the way in which the whole foreign affairs machinery worked. She, like Jim Callaghan, perhaps even more, had an innate suspicion of the Foreign Office. I think with her it was again partly, to put it crudely, – the misconception that the Foreign Office was stuffed with toffs – and she had enough of that in her Cabinet. They were all Old Etonians with one or two exceptions, and that accounted for, to some extent, her acerbity with the Cabinet. She felt she had to be super-dominant – (a) because she was a woman; and (b) because she was a grocer's daughter and they were all grandees – or many of them were. I think that ironed itself out over time but to begin with she was inclined to be a bit shrill with them. But it was wonderful to be with her during the early days because within three days of coming into office she had a very important visit to the UK by Chancellor Schmidt of Germany, and she did very well, I thought, with him. Very shortly after that we had a visit to Paris for one of the six-monthly talks between Heads of Government which we had with the French. One bee in her bonnet – I don't know where she got it from – obviously she'd been struck by the size of the civil service and other *entourages* Prime Ministers had traditionally taken with them when they went abroad and she was absolutely determined to stop that and cut down on the size of her *entourage*. Hers was to be absolutely minimal. She came in with this idea so when this first visit to France was being planned, she told me that her party had got to fit in to a tiny little aeroplane with eight seats – a Hawker Siddeley 125.

JJ What about journalists?

BC Oh, none. That was normal on this particular kind of visit. This was a kind of routine official visit and journalists wouldn't normally expect to go. It was different for example when she went to the Far East on a VC10, but anyway what happened was that when we flew to Paris the party consisted of her, Peter Carrington, me, a detective and three others, and we

all piled into this tiny aircraft and landed at Le Bourget. The French were arrayed in force. They had a welcoming party, not Giscard d'Estaing of course – but the Prime Minister and a number of Ministers and umpteen civil servants, and they were all lined up along the red carpet. To their amazement, out of this tiny aircraft appeared the Prime Minister, Carrington and four other people, and they couldn't understand it. They thought this was quite extraordinary. Not at all in keeping with the French way of doing things. The other interesting aspect of that visit when we had lunch in the Elysée, was that Giscard was in the middle of one side of the table with Margaret Thatcher on his right, and by custom, because he was Head of State, he was always served first, even if his guest of honour was a woman, as on this occasion. And when this happened I could see Margaret Thatcher's face freeze and she obviously disapproved very strongly. I don't think she ever got over it. She disliked Giscard from then on. There might have been other factors; he had a very patronising manner, and if there is one thing she absolutely rebelled against it was at any suggestion she was being patronised.

JJ And he was a French aristo as well, to make things worse?

BC He was a fairly pseudo aristo, but yes, aristo he was. So that was her first foreign trip and the ones which followed it were to Strasbourg – the European Union Heads of Government meeting and then to the Far East for the Economic Summit in Tokyo in 1979. Throughout my time there she insisted in keeping the size of her delegation down. She used to ask me what the size of the other delegations would be and I had to count up all the other delegations, for example in Tokyo, and tell her. She hoped that we were the smallest, and in Tokyo we weren't. We were beaten by the Canadians. She was very cross about that. But we were the second smallest.

JJ But did this small number work?

BC Oh yes, perfectly well. She was quite right. It really wasn't necessary to take representatives of every Whitehall Department just in case something came up that concerned them. These days with mobile telephones, that sort of thing, you could easily avoid having people on the spot. She handled the foreign visits extremely well and she charmed most of the people she met, even those with possible preconceptions against her. We had the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting as well during that summer in Zambia. She had a very hostile reception from the Zambian press, and indeed had to sit through a hostile

sermon preached at a big service in the Cathedral in Lusaka. The bishop was obviously very left wing and delivered a sermon which was highly critical of British policy, and accused Britain of being too kind to Ian Smith. The Lancaster House talks had just taken place. She took all that very well and in general I found her marvellous to work for and had a very stimulating five months.

JJ How did she handle our resident Ambassadors or High Commissioners?

BC With great courtesy. More than Jim, I suppose really. Jim sometimes took “agin” a Head of Mission whom he thought was either not up to the job or too keen to push himself forward, or something like that. Obviously she formed her own views, but in general she was a very good guest, as I found myself when I was Ambassador in Moscow when she came out. She was a very considerate guest and never put people to any trouble if she could help it.

JJ When she came to Strasbourg and I happened to be there she kept everybody up very late. She didn't need any sleep.

BC That's true. She expected people to make do on as little sleep as she had. Although in London she wasn't really like that. She used to be very concerned that we should get home to our families at a reasonable hour, and so she made a point always that her box closed much earlier than Jim Callaghan's had, and she was perfectly happy just to take all her stuff up to her flat at the top of No 10 and work on it through the night. She was much more – I wouldn't say much more thorough, because Jim Callaghan was also extremely thorough – but she wrote much more on stuff which was put up to her and did a lot of underlining and marginalia and so on, which showed she really had done it in a very thorough way. It must have kept her up till 2 or 3 in the morning most mornings.

JJ How long did you actually serve with Mrs Thatcher?

BC She came at the beginning of May 1979; I left about the end of September.

JJ Right. And so you then went elsewhere. Do you think you've finished with that?

BC I think so – on No 10. Just one general observation – I think the reason why at that time No 10 worked so very well as a unit was because it was small, and everyone knew everyone else. There was obviously a political unit which was only two people and a policy unit which was perhaps three or four, but even including that, it was a relatively small team working in



what was still in most ways a nice London house – it wasn't an office. It was a house that had certain disadvantages but they were more than outweighed, I think, by the very friendly, almost domestic feel of the place, and it made it a very good place to work in, I thought. Now I gather – I haven't been inside No 10 since I left the Service – but I gather that it's a much bigger operation now and much less informal. I think the bureaucratic side has got too big and too hierarchical.

JJ And too many advisers perhaps?

BC Too many advisers, probably, and I gather that the Prime Minister himself, or somebody has taken over the office which we used to inhabit, next to the Cabinet Room which means that the Private Secretaries have been shoved further away from the seat of action. I think that is a great shame. It's obviously impossible to recapture what has gone, but I think that one thing Mrs Thatcher did have right, and Jim Callaghan too for that matter, was that a small team by and large works better than a big one, and I think it's a shame that things have gone in the other direction.

JJ Good. That was most interesting. I'm sure that many people will be fascinated by your comments on No 10. You moved on and you were then made British Ambassador to Hungary in 1980. There was not much of a gap between your leaving No 10 and going to Hungary?

### **Appointment as British Ambassador to Hungary, 1980**

BC No. It was a tradition again, and probably isn't any more, that in those days when the time approached for the Overseas Private Secretary from the Foreign Office to move to another appointment – usually you did two years – the Prime Minister of the day would ask him or her what they'd like to do next. That was a perk of the job; you were allowed to put in a plug for your favourite next job, and the Prime Minister would try and fix it. When my turn came and Margaret Thatcher asked me what I'd like to do next I said I'd like to go to Hungary, partly because I wanted my own post as Ambassador. I knew that that was going to come up fairly soon, because the then incumbent was due to leave. I'd been to Hungary when I was in the Foreign Office East European and Soviet Department and had been very attracted by it. I'd liked the the Hungarians. So that was definitely top of my list. I said: "I'd like to go to Hungary please", and she said: "Hungary? How boring!" To her Hungary was just a Communist country, and she'd never been there and didn't know anything about it, and so to

her it was quite an extraordinary choice, and she couldn't understand it, but she nevertheless fixed it for me and I duly went in January 1980.

JJ It doesn't sound as if she knew much about Hungary.

BC Small country.

JJ So how did you find it?

BC I loved Hungary. For one's first post as Ambassador it was ideal. It was a small country and the advantage of small countries from an Ambassador's point of view is that you had far, far better access to Ministers and to the people at the top of everything, than you have in a large country. In a large country there are many more embassies. In Hungary there were only about forty or so out of the hundred plus which there could have been in larger countries. You have a smaller Embassy so you get to know everybody very well and again small is beautiful.

JJ How many people were there apart from clerks and local staff and so on?

BC There were about a dozen Diplomatic staff I suppose.

JJ It's not many.

BC We had quite a few local staff in the Commercial Department and Consular Department.

JJ Were they trustworthy? Could you give them sensitive stuff to do?

BC You could never totally assume that they were trustworthy because you didn't know what pressures might be applied to them or their families by the regime. It was still, although things were beginning to unfreeze quite a lot, a communist system. The secret police were still very active, and one always had to be on one's guard against that. We had as in all Communist posts a special safe room in the Embassy where we conducted all our confidential conversations, but as far as I could tell, our Hungarian staff, most of whom had been there quite a long time, a very long time in some cases, were trustworthy and loyal, and did a very good job. But Hungary, again going back to size, is a small enough country geographically for you to be able to get to know all of it very well physically. You could drive across from one side to another in a day, and I found it immensely rewarding that you could really get to know the country and its people to an extent which made you very confident that you were on

top of the job. You didn't have kind of grey areas where you weren't entirely sure because you'd never been there or never met so and so, or whatever. But quite apart from size, I found the Hungarians a very attractive people. The language of course is a major problem.

JJ How did you cope?

BC Well, I had lessons every day and I got to the point where I could read it reasonably well with a dictionary if necessary, obviously, and I could make short after dinner speeches in Hungarian, that sort of thing. That was enough really to win the hearts of the Hungarians. They were delighted that anyone would even bother to learn two or three words in their impossible language. It was well worth the effort, and it did help in one's understanding of them. They are a linguistic island in Europe, surrounded by totally different languages, and that's one of the reasons why they attach such enormous importance to their literature and poetry. In order to understand Hungary you have to understand their literature and their poetry – it's the thing in which their national identity is most clearly expressed and I found that very attractive as well.

JJ What sort of identity would you say they had, given their particular history, I suppose?

BC Well I suppose the answer is to ask you to read my book, all 620 pages of it, on the history of Hungary. But the short answer is a determination to preserve their very individual national identity. They have always been surrounded by Slavs or Germans, and they've always been under pressure to either become German, Austrian, or to become Slavs, and they've succeeded against all the odds in remaining Magyar. Their whole history has been a struggle to survive. They have been invaded five times, and occupied five times. Mongols, Tartars, whatever you want to call them; the Austrians; the Turks of course for a century and a half; the Germans and the Russians: they have been occupied by all of them. The last sentence of my book quotes one of their recent Prime Ministers as noting that all the empires that have conquered them – Mongol Empire, the Turkish Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, the Nazi Empire and the Soviet Empire, have all disappeared, but he said: "We are still here". I found that very intriguing and very moving, and I found them a very interesting people to deal with; very easy to deal with. Sometimes they could be infuriating on a bad day like everybody else, but in general I couldn't have asked for a better environment to work in. We didn't have any major crises when I was there which was lucky. I had three delightful years. I was very fond of horses and of course Hungary is wonderful horse country, and I could do

all sorts of things like carriage driving which I couldn't possibly afford to do here in Britain and they were very generous in making facilities available for me to ride and carriage drive. It's another good way of getting to know the country if you're on horseback.

JJ Presumably from what you say you were able to travel quite widely in Hungary without any bureaucratic impediments.

BC None. In fact they encouraged it. They wanted Ambassadors to see as much of their country as possible. They were at that time beginning a sort of charm offensive *vis-à-vis* the West, because they wanted to reorientate their trade increasingly away from COMECON towards the West and so they were putting their best face forward, as it were. There was one episode which I should mention before I forget it, because I think I alluded to it at an earlier stage of our talk. I can't remember in what context, but perhaps it was in the context of Hungary being different when I was talking about EESD differentiating between the goodies and the baddies in Eastern Europe. There was one fascinating episode towards the end of my time in Hungary when I was suddenly asked to go and see the Deputy Head of the International Department of the Communist Party. This was unusual, because, apart from the Communist Ambassadors, normally Ambassadors didn't have any dealings with the Party apparatus at all. You naturally met them, Kadar and the other Communist bigwigs – you met them on State occasions and other official engagements, but didn't actually transact any business with them, because you did all that through the Foreign Ministry or the Finance Ministry, or the Ministry of Foreign Trade, and so this was very intriguing. I was very interested for the first time to penetrate the Party headquarters building, which was called the White House, because it was white, and to meet senior Party officials.. It turned out that what they wanted was to establish contact with what was then the European Community. Secondly, they wanted advice as to how best to go about that, and thirdly they wanted to work towards some kind of agreement with the European Community covering as wide an area of trade as possible. Hungary was still a so-called satellite, so this meeting was quite remarkable in that they were prepared to stick their necks out as far as that, and to actually want to work towards some kind of relationship with the European Community. Gyula Horn – who I was talking with, who subsequently became Prime Minister a long time later, after the change of regime – handed me a list of what they wanted and I was able to tell him straight away that he was absurdly over-optimistic. They wanted far more than was conceivable in terms of access to EC markets and that sort of thing. But I said I would report all this back. He then said that

he had to ask me to accept one condition of our conversations which, he said, he hoped would continue – and that was that I shouldn't mention our discussions to any other Hungarian Ministry; not to the Foreign Ministry, not to the Ministry of Foreign Trade; not to the Finance Ministry – all of whom were closely concerned – I mean this was their business, but they were not to know about it.

JJ I thought you were going to say: Don't tell the Russians.

BC This was the same thing you see, because all their Ministries, even at this late stage in the 1980s contained Soviet implants, so-called advisers who were part of the bureaucracy, and reported everything back to Moscow. The only organisation which was not penetrated by the Russians was the Communist Party. This was quite extraordinary and an amazing paradox. Anyway, these conversations continued on a confidential basis. In the end they petered out because it was obvious that the European Community couldn't come to any arrangement which didn't require the Hungarians to go beyond what they could prudently do in terms of their relationship with the Soviet Union. So in the end it came to nothing. But of course Hungary is now a full member of the Union. I was the first, and I'm very glad of it, to be involved in this first approach, which, a long time later, twenty years later, resulted in Hungary being accepted back into the European family.

JJ They were the first after the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that to get into the Council of Europe.

BC Yes indeed, that's right.

JJ Hastily followed by the Poles as fast as they could get there – yes and they were very congenial in the Council of Europe and bright.

BC Yes very bright. I suppose that was the most, in professional terms, that was the most interesting thing which happened to me in Hungary. There were various other nice little *vignettes* like the time when there was a trade fair and I was on duty at the British section, with firms with stands at the Show. The Deputy Prime Minister was doing the honours on the Hungarian side. He took my elbow and said in Hungarian: "There's something I'd like to tell you, Ambassador". He steered me to a corner and said he wanted me to know that the Hungarian Government fully understood and supported our position in regard to the Falkland

Islands (this was during the Falklands War) but of course they couldn't say so in public. I thought that was quite something.

JJ Apart from that, - that's very interesting – there were no great problems or difficulties that you had representing the UK at that time?

BC Between Hungary and the UK?

JJ I seem to remember Harold Wilson, when Prime Minister, employed two Hungarian economists as advisers?

BC Kaldor and Balogh. Didn't turn out to be a very good thing. The Hungarians were always very amused by that: "we always export the ones we don't want." Hungary is a very congenial country and they're a very attractive people, otherwise I wouldn't have spent seven years writing a book about them.

JJ Do you know how the Hungarians themselves received your book?

BC Pretty well, I think. It hasn't yet come out in Hungarian. It's coming out in Hungarian next April (2008) and that will be the real test, but such reaction as there has been to the English edition has been favourable; very favourable. I think they're always very cheered when anyone from another country takes any interest in their little corner of Europe, so I think they are predisposed to react favourably, unless you tread on one of their corns, of which there are plenty. There are things in my book which I think will attract very strong criticism from Hungarians when it comes out in their language, but anyway we'll have to wait and see.

JJ Just to continue a little bit further, what were Hungarian-Soviet relations at that particular point? Were they still difficult? How did it seem from your point of view?

BC Kadar's great strength was that he knew how to manage that relationship. His technique was to imply to the Russians that if he was not allowed to do things a little differently from the other East European countries, and go a little further in relaxation – things like allowing Hungarians to travel abroad and that sort of thing, which other East European regimes did not do, or not so much anyway – unless he was allowed a little more leeway, there might be another 1956. "You watch it Russians. Don't hold me on too tight a rein, because if you do you might regret it." Though at the same time he was saying to the Hungarians: "Don't press too far. Don't rattle the bars of the cage, because if you do, remember what happened in

November 1956,” and so he was able to use the 1956 tragedy both to the advantage of the Hungarians and the advantage of the Russians, in the sense of being able to reassure them that things would not get out of hand in Hungary, and they believed him.

JJ How did they deal with the media in Hungary?

BC Well, the media obviously was tightly controlled. The newspapers were either formally or informally Party newspapers, but in the journals; the academic journals – they had their equivalent of *The Economist* - there was a reasonable degree of free discussion. There were certain taboos. It was totally forbidden to criticise the Soviet Union or to criticise Hungary’s relations with the Soviet Union. That was absolutely off limits, but apart from that, Hungarian journalists, mostly a very bright bunch, were allowed quite a lot of leeway in their reporting. Hungarians were far better informed, for example, about what was happening in the West than most East European republics. They listened to the BBC without any threat or hindrance. The BBC at that time had a Hungarian service – since defunct, sadly. Culturally they were allowed an enormous amount of freedom in terms of what Western films were shown in Hungary; what plays could be performed; what Western literature was available – things like that where the level of free expression for a Communist country – there were limits – but for a Communist country were very high indeed. It was only in the daily press and the television news that the censorship was quite strict. The Hungarians were beginning to watch a lot of television. There was reasonable permissiveness with regard to soft porn movies. It was all part of the compromise and it worked. Apart from the activities of the AVH secret police the Hungarians were reasonably content. Of course that was partly because they had had such a dreadful time up until about the mid-70s. First of all the Rákosi regime, then 1956 and its suppression, then years of retribution by Kadar and his colleagues against the supporters of those involved in the 1956 revolution. That went on for several years, well into the 1960s, and then a period of considerable economic deprivation. Now by the 1980s, although Hungary was getting badly into debt and had taken on far more in the way of Western loans than they should have done, the general standard of life was not bad. Above all the situation was stable and that was what they hadn’t known for so long. They were pretty contented, apart from things like housing, which was terrible and the general level of boredom, certainly among young people, who of course hadn’t known 1956. The young were not so appreciative as their parents were of this period of relative stability and even the beginnings of something like prosperity.

JJ Were Hungarians allowed to travel abroad?

BC While I was there it became progressively better. To begin with their foreign currency allowance was so minute that they couldn't really go unless they had somebody to stay with. A lot of them did, because the Hungarian diaspora is almost as large as the Hungarian population within Hungary. A lot of them had relatives and friends abroad whom they could go and stay with. Then progressively the foreign currency allowance was increased and package tours became normal, and limitations on how often they were allowed to go almost dwindled to nothing, so they were able to travel much more than Czechs or Poles or Romanians.

JJ Presumably Hungarian businessmen were always travelling into Western Europe?

BC Absolutely.

JJ Trying to develop what was already in its infancy but growing.

BC Usually, it has to be said, they travelled as part of a delegation. In the 1980s they weren't able to travel in their own right as a businessman, because foreign trade was still done almost entirely by trade associations, in other words State-run conglomerates, the head of which was equivalent to a junior minister and it was usually in that context they travelled.

### **Return to the Foreign Office as Assistant Under Secretary of State, 1983**

JJ After Hungary you returned to London in 1983 and served for a year or so as Assistant Under Secretary within the Office. Which Departments did you supervise at that point?

BC I had invested quite a lot of time and effort in learning Hungarian and on that basis I had asked Personnel Department if they could promise me four years in Hungary, minimum, in order to recoup on the investment. That seemed sensible to me and I really liked being there, and they agreed. Two months later I was told I had got to go back to London because David Gillmore was being moved on from his post as Assistant Under Secretary in charge of Arms Control. Francis Pym, who was then Foreign Secretary, was very keen to get somebody with knowledge of that side of things to take his place. There was a slight misconception on his part, because although I had quite a lot to do with Communist countries in one way or another, I had not actually had a great deal to do with arms control, and it was really rather a closed book to me to begin with. Also David Gillmore had been in the job at least three



years, and had really made it his own. He had become extremely expert to the extent that the Americans sought his advice on this or that point, and he famously gave Mrs Thatcher a briefing several times on arms control and disarmament, and this guided her as Prime Minister in that field. As well as being an extraordinarily nice man, David was highly skilled and highly talented, as I knew because we worked together in Moscow in the 1970s when he was in the Commercial Department and I was Head of Chancery. So I knew how good he was. Succeeding him in a job which he had done so incredibly well was daunting, starting as I would have to from nothing or almost nothing. I found it very hard going to begin with. I was very dependent on his Departments and on John Weston, who was head of the Defence Department, and subsequently Ambassador in the United Nations and many other distinguished jobs. A very bright person with a formidable intellect. I couldn't have wished for a more reliable prop and stay during that time as AUSS. I was very largely dependent on him and the Head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Department, Michael Pakenham, who was also extremely bright. So I was very fortunate in having two such good and knowledgeable Heads of Department working to me. They more or less kept me afloat. I was fresh obviously and I picked up quite a bit on the job. I could have done with a few weeks to swot it up but as usually happens I didn't get a few weeks. I had about one weekend between leaving Hungary and starting work in Whitehall. I enjoyed parts of the work in that job. I enjoyed the NATO side of it, because I had to represent the UK in the various arms control forums, some of them within the NATO framework, some of them not, and also I enjoyed the bilateral side of it. We had very intense and intensive talks with the Germans and the French, and the Americans in particular, about arms control matters; all during the Cruise missile and INF crisis – during the on-going argument between the Soviet Union on one side and NATO on the other about the stationing of INF in Europe, SS20s on the Soviet side and Cruise missiles on our side. A lot of the job was persuading the back-markers in NATO, like the Dutch and the Greeks and the Italians to agree to the stationing of Cruise missiles on their territory, which some of them for electoral reasons were very reluctant to do.

JJ What was the threat (for other listeners or readers) of the Cruise missiles? Just explain what these problems represented?

BC The SS20s, which the Russians had decided to use to target European capitals. Although they were intermediate range, they couldn't reach the United States. They could reach every European country. The consequence of that Soviet action was inevitably to provoke a

reaction from NATO. The doctrine was that so far as possible we had to achieve equivalence, at least, to Soviet forces in every band of the deterrent strategy. In other words, we had to have battlefield nuclear weapons, with which to respond to their battlefield nuclear weapons, if they used them. We had to have intermediate nuclear weapons to respond to their intermediate nuclear weapons, and we had to have strategic weapons in order to respond to their strategic weapons. I think it was a fairly sound position, in that if a situation had arisen in which the Russians had chosen to launch an SS20 against say, Brussels, the American wouldn't necessarily be happy with a response which involved strategic nuclear weapons which might invite a strategic strike on the United States. And so you had to have this equivalence; so the reaction to the SS20 was the Cruise missile. Now the Cruise missile as you remember was not only internationally controversial, because there were some European countries which didn't want it on their territory, but also domestically because of Greenham Common and the other site in East Anglia, and that became a domestic political hot potato, and there were a great deal of protests about Cruise missiles. All that added some spice to my job at that time. Equally I became convinced of the need to push forward, despite American reservations, towards a comprehensive test ban treaty. Actually we had some reservations too, but I thought a comprehensive test ban was the only goal worth aiming at if the object was to halt proliferation and create a more secure world.

### **On loan to the Cabinet Office as Deputy Under Secretary of State, 1984**

But before I'd done about eighteen months in that job I was needed to succeed David Goodall in the Cabinet Office, as Head of the Overseas and Defence Secretariat, so in the autumn of 1984, I moved across to the Cabinet Office. That was another completely new experience, and had its own pluses and minuses, like any job. The pluses were that it brought me back to the world I had known in No 10, all the Cabinet committees, a very good overview of a wide range of issues. I attended Cabinet meetings for the Overseas items. I had, ex officio, to chair some Whitehall committee meetings. I was responsible for taking the Cabinet minutes when Robert Armstrong could not or was away. I found this terrifying because the consequences of making a mistake such as misquoting someone were unimaginable. Usually Cabinet Minutes do not give the name of who is putting forward a particular view. You don't say – "the Chancellor argued that". You say – "the point was made that". Of course, they knew – they know what they said and so did the other people present, and if you got it wrong, it was a huge blow to the Cabinet Office's prestige. It did happen – fortunately not to me – in my

time, and there was all hell to pay. That was all on the plus side. On the minus side, I was frankly under-employed. It was the kind of job where you needed a crisis, to make the job completely worthwhile. When things were just ticking over, there wasn't really a great deal for the Secretariat to do.

JJ So you weren't as heavily employed as you were when you were the Overseas Affairs private secretary working under Mrs Thatcher?

BC Not nearly. It was a very reactive job. You did not create your own activity – it wasn't like being in a Foreign Office Department where to some extent you create your own recommendations, based on the information coming in from overseas posts. You were there largely 'just in case.' For example, during the Falklands War, the Overseas and Defence Secretariat was the hub, under Robert Wade-Gery – it was the hub of everything that was happening. It was the central point where all the information, all the recommendations came flowing in, and they must have had an immensely busy time there. But during my fairly brief time in the office actually nothing very much happened. There wasn't a major overseas crisis. The main crisis I suppose was the Brighton bombing.

JJ I was going to mention that.

BC Again, although it was up our street, the IRA didn't create much activity for us because the work was done by the Home Office or MI5 security establishment in general. I didn't regret the experience in the Cabinet Office, because it was fun working under Robert Armstrong. My predecessor, David Goodall, rather like David Gillmore with Disarmament and Arms Control, had been immensely involved with the Northern Irish problem. He had been there a reasonable time and he had really specialised in the Irish problem. I took a different, and I'm afraid, a much more sceptical view than either my predecessor or Robert Armstrong, and I was very dubious as to whether the various comings and goings that were in progress then in 1984-85, were going to fulfil the hopes placed in them. I was wrong in the long term, but right in the short term. That added a little spice and interest to the job, but basically as I said, I didn't feel I was earning my money in the Cabinet Office.

JJ Was not that a more senior job than the previous one you'd had?

BC Oh yes it was.

JJ With less to do.

BC Yes. One was well paid.

JJ You got home at a reasonable hour in the evening?

BC Yes I did. I even had time, when I knew I was going to Moscow afterwards, I even had time to brush up my Russian during working hours, which was, I suppose, shameful, but better than doing nothing

**Appointment as British Ambassador, Moscow, 1985-88.**

JJ You then went in 1985 to your final job as Ambassador to the Soviet Union, which was well deserved, I'm sure, having spent so much time on Russian affairs.

BC Yes, it was the job I'd always hoped for one day and I was delighted when things worked out.

JJ When did you actually get there – just before or after Gorbachev had taken over?

BC Just after – three months after. One big advantage of being in the Cabinet Office was that I was involved in the Gorbachev visit to the UK in December 1984, when he and Mrs Thatcher had the talks which led her to say “this is a man we can do business with.” I was in on those. Not in on her *tête à tête*s with Gorbachev. There was only one person from each side present and in her case it was Charles Powell, who was by then the Overseas Affairs Private Secretary in No. 10. But I had the delightful job while that was going on in Chequers of showing Raisa Gorbacheva round Chequers. It's an amazing place Chequers. Have you ever been there?

JJ No.

BC It's an extraordinary house with some extraordinary *objets* in it, both *objets d'art* and otherwise – a lovely house. Raisa was extremely interested and very well versed, and displayed an extraordinary knowledge of British history, and British philosophy. When we came across a portrait of David Hume, she knew all about Hume.

JJ Did she speak English?

BC Not very much – a few words, but not very much.

JJ And what about Gorbachev himself?

BC He didn't speak any.

JJ You weren't asked to act as interpreter?

BC Oh no. I wasn't nearly good enough in Russian for that. To be an interpreter you had to be super fluent, and also to have all sorts of interpretership skills. No, I wasn't in that class at all. That day at Chequers was quite memorable. Of course it was very useful for me subsequently, because I'd already met Gorbachev, and so he wasn't an unknown quantity when I eventually got to Moscow. I left the Cabinet Office in the spring of 1985 and went to Moscow in August. I went there in the knowledge, made known to me as I just set off to Moscow, that there was a crisis in the making in our relations, because of the planned exfiltration of Oleg Gordievsky.

JJ Can you just explain that?

BC Oleg Gordievsky has just been awarded the CMG, somewhat to my surprise. He was a double agent who had been a very senior KGB officer and who had also been working for MI6 for a number of years and to very considerable effect. He finished up as head of the KGB operation in London. He was by then Colonel. He had been summoned back to Moscow during the summer of 1985, obviously for questioning because suspicions had grown around him and his activities. He was not immediately put under arrest, or anything like that. He was, in theory, as far as he knew, called back for consultations, although I'm sure he knew why he was being called back. They knew that he had escaped from the flat where he was meant to be living in Moscow. He'd gone out jogging one morning and hadn't come back, and the Russians assumed that he had realised that he was under suspicion and that he had tried to make a run for it. They didn't know that he had actually got out of the Soviet Union. In fact their assumption was that he hadn't, because they couldn't believe that it could be done, any more than I could, and so there was a hiatus of about three weeks during the course of which I presented my credentials. Then of course when they finally twigged how it happened, everything started to unravel. I had presented my credentials and in the Soviet Union, and probably in other capitals as well as Moscow, they take a kind of ceremonial photograph. When you present your credentials you are accompanied by all your diplomatic staff and the home side field members of the relevant departments and all that and wear diplomatic uniform.

The uniform is a bit of a sore point with me because Moscow wasn't classified as a 'uniform wearing post'. The Foreign Office refused to give me any allowance towards the cost of the uniform. The cost of a uniform, which I had never had to use before, meant that I would have to buy it from scratch and the cost was enormous – about £1000 altogether. So to get round this I went to a theatrical costumier in London and they fully entered into the spirit of the thing. I gave them that wonderful picture of Sir Paul Gore-Booth in full fig from the Diplomatic Service Regulations handbook and they set to by cannibalising several things in their wardrobe and made an absolutely perfect replica of a British senior ambassador's uniform. I took it out with me and sent it back when I'd used it.

JJ How much did you have to pay for it then?

BC Not very much. £25 or something. They gave me a favourable rate. I promised them a copy of the photograph to frame on their Managing Director's wall which I sent them, and they were delighted with that. So they charged me virtually nothing. Anyway, we had this photograph taken of my full staff, including the members of the staff who had been involved, because the theory was that they had gone to Finland for innocent reasons and had come back. And when we had the show down with the Soviet authorities, the Head of the Department which looked after us, was Vladimir Pavlovich Suslov, whom I'd known for years and he'd been in that job for a long time. We had crossed swords on many occasions. I rather liked him actually, and we got on really rather well. He sent for me and I knew what it was bound to be about, and I sat down in his little office, because even his department in the Foreign Ministry had tiny little offices in this huge wedding cake building, and he produced out of his folder a copy of the credentials photograph and put his two fingers on the heads of the two members of staff who had conducted the operation and I of course said – "what's all this about?" – played the innocent. After that little joke, as it almost was, was over, he then got serious and told me that his authorities were aware that this had happened. Can't remember the exact words he used - but in defiance of Soviet and international law and dah-dee-dah-de-dah – and in consequence the following members of staff would be being declared *persona non grata* and had 48 hours to leave the Soviet Union, and he then produced a list of about twenty three names, which was pretty swingeing. Now we had already expelled from London – I think I've got this the right way round – we'd expelled, using the information that Gordievsky had given us about KGB personnel in the Soviet Embassy in London – we'd expelled as many names as he had given us – about twenty three. So their retaliation was

numerically proportionate. That was bad enough because, as they always do, they pick the Russian speakers because they know that is going to cause the maximum damage and so I lost all my Russian speakers at a stroke, and a third of my staff, and the question then was what did London do next? Mrs Thatcher and the Foreign Secretary, who was by then Sir Geoffrey Howe, were in favour of expelling a further half dozen Russians who they wanted to get rid of. I argued against this when I was told that this was the recommendation being made. Partly on purely practical grounds – I couldn't afford to lose any more staff, but also because I didn't see where this was going to end.

JJ Close down!

BC Exactly. In my telegrams I quoted a maxim which had been told to me by Tom Brimelow when he was Minister in our Embassy in Moscow back in the 1960s, *vis-à-vis* dealing with the KGB. His motto was 'never get into a pissing match with a skunk,' so I put this in the telegram and to my horror I found out subsequently, not only was it seen by the Prime Minister, but it also leaked from No 10 to *The Guardian* and was duly printed, in the gossip column in *The Guardian*. Much to my wrath. They went ahead and expelled another six, so I lost another six as well, which meant that we'd lost half our Embassy and it took a long time to make that up. It was a very difficult time quite apart from the fact that for about three months we were in a freeze zone as an Embassy, and we couldn't get any appointments; we couldn't do our job. I expected that, but the loss of personnel was more serious than I had feared it would be. But we got through it and I think it was a mark of the new look of a more pragmatic approach of Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev that within three months things were more or less back to normal, and this was signalled by me being summoned for the first time to meet the Foreign Minister. As a new Ambassador, you always put in your requests to meet Ministers you'd like to meet, and obviously top of my list was Shevardnadze, the Foreign Minister. Because of the expulsions this hadn't happened. One day the word came through that I had my appointment with Shevardnadze, and in the circumstances we had a very amicable conversation, largely formal in nature, but subsequently we had a number of talks about this and that. I got on very well with him. I liked him. I thought he was very straight. He had of course a reputation of being a very hard line Minister of the Interior in his native Georgia, and I'm sure he did do a lot of nasty things as Ministers of the Interior tend to do. But I always found him very good to deal with on foreign affairs and we became, I wouldn't say friends, but we were on friendly terms. I suppose that apart from all that and

when things settled down, the next highlight was Mrs Thatcher's visit to Moscow in the Spring of 1987.

JJ She appeared on television?

BC Yes, she did.

JJ The famous debate.

BC One of the many remarkable features of that visit – she was a star on that visit. She was at the height of her powers. She looked like a million dollars in her fur hat and her fur coat, and she and Gorbachev charmed each other. He found her very charming and she found him very charming, and they got on like a house on fire. To an extent which gave rise to some pretty risqué Russian jokes at the time. In fact very risqué. There can never have been a case where two heads of Government so radiated a kind of chemistry between them. You could see sparks flying off. They both liked talking. They both liked the sound of their own voices. They were both very difficult to interrupt. But they both managed to interrupt each other, and they had met their match; that, as in many other ways, was a very interesting political and personal relationship. The Russians handled the visit very well. They granted us most of what we asked in so far as the programme was concerned. She went to Zagorsk, the big monastery near Moscow, and attended a service and lit candles and did all sorts of things you would think the Russians would not have been delighted by, but they took it on the chin. She visited a Russian family in a so-called typical Russian flat – of course it was much better than typical, but it was a genuine family – we checked up on them – they weren't all KGB part-timers or anything. She, as you say, took part in a television discussion in which she told the Russian audience some home truths about their nuclear armaments which was news to most of them, and she acquitted herself extraordinarily well, and really ran rings round them – because people who took part on Soviet debates on television were used to a scripted, very steady formalised exchange which of course wasn't her style at all. She said what she thought and she said it when she felt like saying it. The Russians were absolutely captivated by this. For weeks afterwards people would come up to me and say 'your Prime Minister is so wonderful. We'll never forget that debate on television. She told us things we didn't know, and she showed us how it should be done.' It was an amazing PR coup, really.

JJ She'd had discussions on these subjects when she came into the premiership, hadn't she, as I understand it, from senior British diplomats who knew what it was all about?



BC David Gillmore, whom I mentioned earlier, who was my predecessor as AUS had given her a very good grounding in nuclear arms control and nuclear weapons matters in general. So she knew her stuff, and by that time she'd been in office for seven years nearly, she was on top of the job and she really was in her prime. After the election which followed Moscow, which she won handsomely, Charles Powell, exaggerating, told me in his thank you letter that I had won the Prime Minister the next election. She'd won it herself, but I think the visit was a help. She got enormous publicity all over the world because she was a woman, because she was good looking and because Gorbachev had been so appealing. It all came together in an amazing PR success.

JJ Would you say that this was a point where you could see the door opening, and that they would be able to hold serious discussions about the future on world terms, if you like?

BC Oh yes. By the time of her visit I think the Reykyavik summit had happened, hadn't it – I'd have to look that up. The dialogue between – certainly Geneva –and the dialogue on strategic arms control between the Soviet leadership and the Americans was already well under way, and it was on-going business. I don't think that on that score Mrs Thatcher's Moscow visit could be described as the breakthrough. I think a breakthrough had already occurred, largely because of Gorbachev's willingness to engage in significant dialogue with President Reagan in particular. I think what the visit did was to give Mrs Thatcher herself a tremendous political boost in this country and elsewhere, and it did mark a very significant normalisation of the bilateral relationship which was then imitated by other Western Heads of Government.. It really did establish a benchmark in how these things could and should be done, how they should happen, and I think also of course it enhanced Mrs Thatcher's standing in the eyes of Washington as somebody who really was on the inside track as far as knowing what Gorbachev's thinking was. I think that was important too.

JJ President Reagan also had a completely different approach from his predecessors when the Americans began to get into serious discussions with the Soviet regime and Gorbachev in particular.

BC Certainly. I mentioned the Reykyavik Summit at which Reagan came within an ace of giving away the whole Western deterrent. He and Gorbachev agreed that both sides would bring their nuclear weapons down to zero within ten years. Of course, when Mrs Thatcher heard about that she had a fit, as she made clear in her memoirs. We were only saved –

assuming the Russians were serious – if they had been serious, we were only saved by their insistence, in typical Russian style of pushing for more and not being satisfied with what they had got, by putting a stopper on the Strategic Defence Initiative – Star Wars – as well. At that point Reagan drew the line and said no and the whole thing fell through. Gorbachev had insisted that SDI should be capped at laboratory level. Gorbachev had insisted that it should never come out of the laboratory; that it should be confined to scientific research into its possibilities, but it should never be tested, let alone become operational. And Reagan at that point said Star Wars was his baby and he said – not on your life, no. So the whole thing, including bringing nuclear weapons down to zero, fell through. In Mrs Thatcher's view fortunately. I think she was right. So that was the other highlight of my time in Moscow.

Apart from that it was absolutely fascinating to watch the process of change beginning to accelerate in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. During the first year I was there nothing much changed. Various slogans were launched – like *perestroika* and *glasnost* and all that, but on the ground things didn't change all that much. And then what began to change with increasing speed came under the heading *glasnost* rather than *perestroika*. *Glasnost* meaning 'openness.' The most exciting process I think was that which one could observe every day in the academic journals, in the theatre – particularly in the theatre – the kind of plays that began to be performed, which had been forbidden up till then. Even a play I remember which was pretty uncomplimentary about Lenin, and of course Russians were absolutely over the moon with all this – when I say the Russians, I mean the theatre-going Russians; the intelligentsia, I suppose. But the most striking test for *glasnost* was of course the Chernobyl disaster in April 1986. I came into it at an early stage because we had a number of British students studying in Kiev and when we heard that there had been some kind of accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station, we immediately instructed all our students to come home, come back to Moscow and then fly home. At a late hour of night, rather reminiscent of Stalinist days when these things always happened at midnight or later – I was around midnight called round to the Foreign Ministry and confronted by a trio consisting of the senior Deputy Foreign Minister, the head of the Soviet Nuclear Authority and the head of their Ministry of Education. They gave me a real dressing down accusing us, the Brits, of deliberately spreading alarm and despondency by making a mountain out of a molehill, and recalling our students when there was absolutely no need to worry about anything at all, and everything was under control, and we were just making propaganda, and all that. I told them that in our view they were wrong and that there was a risk. I told them that we'd been through this with Windscale. We'd had

our own nuclear accident, and we did actually know something about these matters. I should mention in parenthesis that subsequently at my suggestion I was authorised to hand over to the Russians all the secret and top secret records of our Windscale disaster in order to help them, in case they found things there which could help them to limit the damage. Anyway, that came a bit later. At the time we went ahead and our poor students protested vigorously and didn't want to go home at all; they'd just started or were half-way through their course. To make matters worse, it was a May Day holiday and that meant no public transport. Nothing was working and we had somehow to get all these students out of Kiev to Moscow, across Moscow and then to the airport. In addition we had to confiscate all their clothing because it might have been contaminated.

JJ What was the distance between Kiev and Moscow?

BC About 700 kilometres, something like that. Fortunately on 30 April, the trains were running to Moscow. The problem was to get them to the airport. However, we found them transport somehow.

JJ How many students were there?

BC If I remember rightly there were thirteen or fourteen – something like that, and we had to arrange for them to deposit all their clothing – outer clothing anyway, and BA very kindly supplied them with tracksuits to go home in. I should explain that all this – our alarm was based on reports that we were getting from Sweden, if you remember. It was the Swedes who first detected that there had been a major nuclear explosion, and so the Russians had not missed it. They said there were two tiny mines tucked away in Prague where there had been a minor accident. Anyway, once the Russians realised the cat was out of the bag – I mean our students got out all right, and once the Russians realised the cat was out of the bag they then went away to the other extreme, which they always do, and it became a huge great public relations things – the bravery of Soviet helicopter pilots, the bravery of Soviet firemen – and indeed they were extraordinarily brave. Having realised they couldn't keep this whole thing secret, they decided to make a virtue of Soviet heroism at its best. Five months later, Peter Walker, who was then our Secretary of State for Energy came on an official visit to Moscow which had been arranged a long time before, and he insisted on going to Chernobyl, much to the horror of the Russians. And so we did. We had the dubious distinction of being the first Westerners to enter Chernobyl after the accident.

JJ Wearing special clothing, presumably?

BC Special clothing amounted to a couple of rather dirty white coats like lab technicians wear and a little kind of surgeon's hat and plastic overboots and that was all and we went right into – to my horror – Unit 3 which was next door to the one which had blown up.

JJ Was anybody holding Geiger counters?

BC They gave us a going-over when we came out, but nobody was holding Geiger counter as we went round, no. That was a memorable visit. I will never forget as we arrived by helicopter we flew over the cooling tanks and this murky water was giving off sinister wreathes of steam.

JJ You survived?

BC We survived. My staff told me afterwards I glowed in the dark! No, it was all okay. I suppose that was one of the other highlights of my time in Moscow – Chernobyl, the Thatcher visit, Gordievsky.

JJ When you left finally in 1988 things were looking rather more positive than when you arrived?

BC Yes. Not because of me, obviously. I think I left probably at the peak of optimism that things really were going to change for the better in the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev had got things under control and was on the right track. He was doing the right things, and it was only very shortly after that, that it all began to fall apart, and basically I think the mismatch between the Gorbachevian rhetoric about *perestroika* and reform, and the reality of Soviet life became so glaringly obvious that his credibility began to suffer. I remember seeing on television very soon after we got back to the UK, shots of his visit to Krasnoyarsk or somewhere towards the east where he had been quite extensively barracked by people who wanted to know where 'was the beef?' literally, because the economy was still in a dreadful state and there were terrible shortages of virtually everything. He'd over-reached himself, I think. As I say the rhetoric and the basic reality of reform had moved far faster in the cultural sphere, in freedom of speech, or relative freedom of speech and media and so on, than it had in the day to day economic sphere. The shops were still empty. Large loads of vegetables would arrive in Moscow from the south already rotten. This was routine. The extent of economic mismanagement was rendered worse by *glasnost* in many ways.

JJ Everyone knew what was going on by that time?

BC They'd discovered how bad the situation was and were allowed to say something about it. I suppose it was inevitable that the speeches and the promises of a golden future were bound to outpace the real graft of getting the economy moving.

JJ It's happened in other countries.

BC Very true. Of course the other dimension which Gorbachev hadn't taken nearly sufficient account of and is the first to admit now, was the whole nationalities question. The loosening up inevitably encouraged the non-Russian nationalities to start to believe that their hour had come and that if things were say-able now which hadn't been say-able before, they had their say to say as well. It was true with the Georgians, the Armenians, Azerbaijanis, the Kazakhs, the Uzbeks, and most sensitively of all of course of the Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians, and it was in his efforts to keep them quiet that Gorbachev came unstuck, and where he met open defiance, especially in Riga, I was told. Also in Vilnius; open defiance of Russian domination of the Baltic States. In the south, defiance of Russian domination over the other nationalities.

JJ Is this about the time when the Government formed what was called the Russian or the Soviet Commonwealth?

BC That was after. That was the consequence of unrest in the Soviet Union when Yeltsin toppled Gorbachev and sometime after the coup against Gorbachev - which was a separate issue - the hardliners had thought he'd simply gone too far, whereas the Yeltsin operation believed that he hadn't gone far enough, and it was consequent upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union that the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States formed as a kind of Soviet Union substitute, but it never really came to anything in real terms. I feel very sorry for Gorbachev. I think he was a man of destiny in many ways. I think that the Soviet Union was bound to change eventually, but it would not have changed when it did or in the way it did without bloodshed, which is important, if hadn't been for him. He couldn't finish the process but he cherished the belief that he could reform the Soviet Union without reforming the Communist Party. Yeltsin instinctively realised that he was wrong on that and that is why Yeltsin walked out of the Communist Party, leaving Gorbachev stuck with it. At the famous Party Congress in 1988, Yeltsin walked out of the hall and you could see Gorbachev watching him go wistfully - thinking 'that's what I should have done.' He was and is a Communist.

He's still a Communist now. It simply wasn't in his genes to cease being a Communist or to change the Communist Party in any significant way.

JJ That would have been an enormous step.

BC It was impossible. It was too entrenched in so many ways.

JJ You then retired after that. Can I just ask, looking back now with President Putin – how do you think things are going to work out?

BC Well, I think it's a very difficult question. My own belief has always been, and I don't want to sound "I told you so", but I've always thought that the Russians would find it difficult or impossible to live with any system, any political system, other than an authoritarian one. I think we tend to demonise this in the West - democracy good, authoritarian system bad. It's not necessarily like that, I don't think. I don't think the Westminster model was necessarily applicable, or even good for everybody, and part of the function of the enormous size of Russia, and the consequent fear which individual Russians have for their security, there's always been tendency to favour a strong centre. They really felt happier and more secure under a very strong Government. Putin when he very first became Prime Minister as he first was, made no secret of this. He gave a number of interviews right at the very beginning where he said in so many words that Russians are much happier with a strong State. He is absolutely right. I don't think a strong State necessarily has to be accompanied by all the apparatus of secret police and concentration camps and so on, but it is much more vulnerable to that because people running strong states never want to risk being ousted and losing their place at the top of the heap, and so they tend to an authoritarian system. They may start with the best of intentions, but they tend to assemble around themselves the apparatus to keep them where they are, and that impinges inevitably on individual liberties and freedoms. That classically has always been the case in Russia, not just in the Soviet Union. Russia, both pre-Revolution and now, again Russia. So I think Putin embodies Russian preferences with their way of political life, hence his 80% popularity rating, which I am sure is genuine. But he also embodies another historic Russian characteristic, namely a suspicion of the outside world. He is an archetypal Russian figure in that way. Both the authoritarianism and the paranoia about the rest of the world. You find this going right back to Ivan the Terrible. It sounds simplistic to put it like that, but it is actually true. I don't think that the Russians are going to change very much over the next hundred years. I think obviously eventually they will, because the

factors that made them that way, principally the size of their country and its highly inhospitable climate over much of it, these factors will be ameliorated I believe over the years by science. Distance and climate will become much less threatening or hostile factors in everyday Russian existence than they are now, and at that point maybe the Russians will be amenable to a different form of government and a different way of life. But for the time being I think that it will take them more than a generation, certainly more than a generation, to change their preferences and their habits. But I do not believe that this should necessarily worry us, for two reasons. The first is that we should be willing to accept the Russians as they are and not as we should like them to be. One of the late Edward Crankshaw's best books was entitled '*Putting up with the Russians*' and in the introduction to the book he said he had called it '*Putting up with the Russians*' "because that is what we have to do." I thought that was a very brilliant encapsulation of the basic truths about Russians; we have to accept them as they are. We're not going to change them. There is no point in getting all upset about the fact that they don't have our kind of elections, or our kind of political system. We've got to work with them as we find them. The other reason not to get too worried, I believe, is that they are not nearly as much of a military or material threat as we tend to believe. Their economy, although their growth rate at the moment is amazing, is totally dependent on oil and gas, and there continuing to be a high price for oil and gas. Now we know from history that these things tend to be cyclical and that what goes up must come down, as I'm sure for one reason or another it will. They are not by any means as strong as they look in other ways. Their education system is in a mess, which is a shame, because one good thing the Communists did do was to give them one of the best education systems in the world. It's now a mess because teachers aren't paid enough. A lot of them have deserted the profession. It is all a legacy of the Yeltsin era; the economic collapse over which he presided. Equally their social services are appalling - their life expectancy; their ante-natal care; their infantile death rate is Third World, still, and we get all excited when they fly some 1959 vintage bombers round our coast in order to enjoy the fun of letting us intercept them. I think we do tend to get over excited about Russia as a threat or a potential threat. I don't think it is - now.

JJ I would just like to ask though – they are becoming, and you mentioned a stronger economy since the late 1990s – that consumerism will gradually develop and that does change nations, and it's possible that as they change and more people have more spending money and become better off, that that will have an impact on the internal politics of the Soviet Union.

It's happening already in China, I think. The Chinese are loosening up very fast in comparative terms, and if the Chinese do it, it almost requires the Soviet Union to keep up and try to overtake them, or at least guard what they're getting. The other thing that worries me is – you mentioned oil and gas – by anything I've read in recent months, it looks as if they are going to be the world country of domination over the supply of gas and oil, and who is going to get it, and how much we're going to have to pay, and that's a bit dangerous for us. It looks to me as if Western Europe becomes terribly exposed.

BC Indeed all that is true. I'm not sure about the analogy with China, because China is a totally different culture with a totally different history. Russia is already in many respects a consumer society. Admittedly it's a society with a growing middle class of haves, and largely rather stagnant underclass of have-nots, but the enthusiasm for Putin is just as strong among, if not stronger, in the now, by Russian standards, almost affluent middle class, as it is down at the bottom. I'm not sure that assumed affluence necessarily goes with a desire for democracy. I think that remains to be seen.

JJ Yes, I understand. But if he has been the key mover on the development of consumerism and people can be better off, it's going to help his future. He might return again as President.

BC I'm sure he will. With his popularity rating, if he wanted to he could change the Constitution tomorrow if he wanted to. They want him there because they feel that he's gutsy, that he stands up to those nasty Westerners, and he makes us feel big again, makes us feel good, and added to that, as you said, there is more in the shops. I think he's got it made, but I'm not sure that increasing affluence, even if it's wider spread down to the bottom of society than it is at the moment, I'm not sure that it will necessarily lead at any time soon to a greater love of Western-type democracy. I think the preference for a strong State and a strong central Government will persist until the factors which have created their preference, namely the size and climate of the country, are overcome by technological means such as will be invented over the next hundred years.

### **Retrospective views on the Diplomatic Service**

JJ That's a fascinating look at the Soviet Union. Can we just have a quick look back, or may I ask you to look back on your views on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Diplomatic Service as you see it? Whether it's become more professional than it was when you joined? What are your views about the Office?



BC Well, where to begin? I think the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Service as I knew it obviously had to change. It was going to change for fairly obvious reasons. To take just one example, email and the computer were bound to have an impact on the way in which our embassies communicated with London and we were bound to see the demise of the telegram, the demise of the formal dispatch, if that has happened and I think it probably has, and a general – how can I put it – I don't mean devaluing in a pejorative sense. An environment in which how you say things is much less important than it used to be.

JJ Processes dominating the content?

BC Well yes. To the extent that all that matters is to make your point as briefly and quickly as possible, rather than taking any trouble over how it's presented. I think this is a perfectly strong argument in terms of business efficiency and productivity and so on, but I nevertheless think it's a shame and I think it has taken some of the professionalism out of the profession, it seems to me. I think that there was something to be said in terms of future historians for example, for the formal dispatch, elegantly written, making powerful points about the country which they came from. And I think it doesn't do ministers any harm to receive advice in a form which both makes an impact and is not too dreary to read. I think the packaging in which advice is given isn't completely without importance, is really what I'm saying. I think the packaging is now being totally discouraged leaving just the content which perhaps, as I said, may have less impact without the packaging than it would have otherwise.

JJ I've heard one or two people, senior retired people say that just the amount of emails which land on people's desks is now so overwhelming. There is really no room for thinking, composing a lucid well-argued paper to senior officers and Ministers. And if you go away for two days holiday, you spend the next day just reading through emails. I heard this just a couple of weeks ago. A burden as well as an advantage.

BC Absolutely. I'm entirely in sympathy with that. It's just like photocopying. The thing spins out of control. The incidence of leaks is the direct function of the photocopier, and just as proliferation of emails is that it is quite easy to write one and send one off the top of your head. That's one thing I'm worried about. Another thing I'm very worried about is this new cult of gagging former members of the Service. I'm not sure to what extent my old friend Christopher Meyer was responsible for that. If he was, then he shouldn't have been, because I read his book and to me it is almost 100% innocuous. It is not a bad book; it's not very

profound. It doesn't pretend to be very profound, but just because he made one or two disobliging comments about one or two Ministers, there is absolutely no reason for erecting this enormous cult now of confidentiality, and imposing it on retired members of the Service, who now, as I understand it, risk breaking the law, or even losing their pensions, which is a case in point – the Craig Murray case, for example. He was threatened with the loss of his pension, and he's not the only one either, I'm told. "If you publish this your pension may be at risk." That to me is absolutely monstrous, and I think shows a kind of paranoid insecurity on the part of the present Government which needs to be challenged and exposed. Edward Clay, a former colleague, ex-High Commissioner in Kenya, who made some very brave speeches about corruption in the Kenyan Government has written very tellingly about this in the *New Statesman*. It will be interesting to see if his pension is threatened as well, but I sincerely hope not. That's another thing which worries me about the current state of the Service. The other major thing which worries me is the apparent, as it looks to an outsider, preoccupation of the Service with its own entrails. If you look at an organogram of the Service there are at least as many, in fact possibly more, departments or directorates or whatever they call it now, and sections and units and so on, concerned with things like gender equality, ethnic this and that, management *per se*. I just happened to pick up a recent minute of the Diplomatic Service Association which I'm not actually entitled to, but it came my way. I don't recognise today's Diplomatic Service as being the Service I belonged to. There is now a job called Director General Change and Delivery. That's the worst kind of idiotic management-speak, and these minutes are absolutely full of that sort of thing. The Washington Embassy has a job called Change Co-ordinator. There is a post in the Foreign Office – Assistant Director (Diversity and Equality). There is something called a Corporate Pool. There is a Business Change Manager of the Future Firecrest Programme. These are true things. I'm not making them up. They're all in the minutes here. There's a Professional Skills in Government programme; what we used to call 'training.' [laughter] Somebody spoke at this meeting in which he said – the speaker – "he believed in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its ability to change the world". Now that's a chilling concept. He "believed in the FCO's capacity to change itself".

JJ It's certainly done that.

BC Exactly. This kind of dominance of political correctness and management-speak I think has created a totally different kind of service which I certainly would not want to belong to if

I was starting from scratch now, and I'm very glad that my son followed my advice, which is don't try to follow your father in anything, so he didn't. He's gone on to make a lot of money.

JJ Do you think that the Diplomatic Service or the Foreign Office has lost its independence of mind and action?

BC Yes I do.

JJ It's all run by No 10. That seems to be the case.

BC If a Service or Whitehall Department finds itself in the situation where its advice is consistently ignored, as it was over Iraq for example, why bother? Why go on banging your head against a brick wall? If you can't beat 'em join 'em, seems to be the philosophy. I find it enormously depressing. I suppose this comes back to email again, but I've been, in the last two or three years, to a number of functions not necessarily anything to do with the Foreign Office, which have been held in the Foreign Office, which now supplements its funds by letting out the Locarno Rooms, and they've all been held in the evening, usually at 6.30 – something like that. If you go into the Foreign Office now at 6 o'clock/6.30, the place is like a tomb. When I was working there at 6.00 or 6.30 the corridors were teeming with people running hither and thither with boxes, getting submissions to the Secretary of State before he went home. A general atmosphere of buzz and activity and urgency. Now completely gone, everyone, presumably, if they are there at all, which is a question I suppose, if they are there at all they're hunched over little screens sending each other emails. It must surely detract from what used to be the real buzz you got out of working in that place. I certainly did.

JJ Perhaps it means that management has successfully cut down the working hours which were overlong at some point?

BC They were, but I remember when I first joined we didn't start work until 10 o'clock in the morning.

JJ Those were the days.

BC People were surprised if you arrived before 10.00. I'm not advocating that. When I was working at No 10 I had arrived by 7.30 and I had to skim the newspapers before the Prime Minister had arrived. I didn't have to make a summary, but I had to be aware of anything he

or she ought to be aware of. I think looking from the outside of the Service today I think it's very depressing.

JJ Well let us leave it there and I hope that is not excised from your very interesting account of your life and career in the Foreign Service. Thank you very much.

Transcribed by Evie Jamieson

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