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CMG 1993

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF DAVID HUGH COLVIN, CMG, RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CAROLINE COLVIN

CC: Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us about your life in the Foreign Office. And first of all, I think in 1960 you went up to Oxford to read PPE, is that right?

DC: That's correct but first of all I'd like to say something about what came before then. It had quite an influence on my life. I was born in Lincoln in 1941, at the height of the war as it were, after the Battle of Britain and the debacle of Dunkirk. And then in 1946 my father was posted, while he was still in the Army, but was transferred to the Control Commission for Germany. And so we spent the next eight years in Germany in a variety of places and my father doing a variety of things. We started off in Ratheim which is a small village near Aachen near the border with the Netherlands and Belgium; and that was his job, he was part of the Control Commission Frontier Control. Later we transferred to Flensburg, again that was a frontier town, on the Danish border. And then when he went back into the Army we transferred to Goslar in the Harz Mountains, and finally to Berlin.

Initially in Germany after the war there were no schools at all, certainly not for children of the occupying British Army, so I was taught by a German governess, including Gothic script. Eventually the British Army or Control Commission opened schools, and I went to the first co-educational comprehensive school under the 1944 Butler Education Act, Prince Rupert's School, Wilhelmshaven. That was an interesting experience because it really was comprehensive in every sense – there was a bit of streaming but all competences of the schoolboys, schoolgirls - it was fully co-educational - were mixed up and I fear the academic level was rather low. I certainly discovered this when I went to Lincoln Grammar School in 1955 when I went to the bottom of the class, having been at the top in Germany! I was there to 1959 and eventually became Head Boy; and in 1960 went up to Trinity College, Oxford to read Politics, Philosophy and Economics.

I suppose my background with all this living in Germany after the war would have pushed one in the direction of the Foreign Office and indeed that's what eventually happened. On

leaving Oxford that wasn't in my mind and I joined Unilever as a trainee Account Executive with their advertising agency Lintas. That was quite a formative experience in as far as one learnt how the commercial world worked, although in the end I decided it wasn't for me.

I therefore dropped out for a year by teaching English as a foreign language in the British College in Palermo in Italy. That was quite a seminal experience and it's where I realised I really wanted a career which took me abroad.

I therefore came back to England in 1966 and took the Civil Service exam, which I thought was for the Foreign Office but in fact was for the Home Civil Service. Anyway I got in.

CC: So you didn't realise which exam you were taking at the time?

DC: No, I applied from abroad and I thought it included the Foreign Office, but it didn't. I worked in the Board of Trade, on Commercial Relations and Exports with North America and included three months in the Export Credit Guarantee Department - all this was useful experience for transferring to the Foreign Office, which I did, on a head-to-head basis, in 1967.

CC: Was that an easy thing to do, to transfer to the Foreign Office?

DC: No it wasn't actually, it depended on someone wanting to transfer out from the Foreign Office.

CC: So you could have actually been 'stuck' which is what you might have felt it was, in the Home Civil Service, for any amount of time, or could you have come out and taken the Foreign Office exam again?

DC: Could have done that, but anyway it worked out and I joined what was indeed the Foreign Office, not the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which didn't happen till two years later. So I can claim to be one of the last people to join the old Foreign Office.

Foreign Office Central Department, 1967

I joined the Central Department under a man called Alan Davidson who was an extraordinary character. He was a tremendous stickler for bureaucratic procedures and he had an extraordinary mind whereby everything was categorised – indeed he wrote two major Penguin books on Mediterranean Fish and related matters, and that was his cast of mind, to classify everything. Anyway he certainly classified his new intake and drilled them strictly in bureaucratic procedures including making sure that red tape wasn't twisted when it was submitted to Ministers, and every draft was properly cleared throughout Whitehall as necessary!

The job involved political relations with Switzerland and Spain, not exactly central governments but the Central Department had evolved over the years and I think was abolished not long after I left it. The main issue there was the crisis over Gibraltar when Spain which had never ceased to reclaim the Rock, decided it was going to be difficult about it and declared an Air Exclusion Zone, hemming in the approach to Gibraltar airport. This caused a certain amount of grief, and indeed we deployed Hawker Hunter aircraft to Gibraltar to show we weren't going to be pushed around.

I also visited Madrid for talks with the Spanish Government over this crisis; the British team was led by Sir John Beith, who stonewalled Spanish demands in the most extraordinary fashion. He must have driven them to distraction because he managed to agree with them without agreeing to anything, as it were. And these talks were spun out over two days, in the course of which the Spanish got nothing and got nowhere. The other thing which I remember about the issue was that I researched the two Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla to put the Spanish on the defensive. These are two enclaves which the Spanish cling to as it were, in North Africa and see no contradiction in their position and attacking our position in Gibraltar. In the event the Department thought that it was best not to raise the Ceuta and Melilla question, presumably on the basis that they might one day hand them back in which case it would put pressure on us to do likewise.

2nd Secretary, Bangkok, 1968-71

Anyway, in 1968 I was given my first posting which was 2nd Secretary in the Embassy in Bangkok. I was going to travel out on Messageries Maritimes but there were the May Events, the May riots, in France which meant that the port of Marseilles was blocked, so I had eventually to travel out by Qantas.

The job was an interesting one in so far as it was a multilateral, nothing to do with our relations with Thailand. It was relations with the South East Asia Treaty Organisation, SEATO, an organisation which was progressively moribund but which still enshrined certain Treaty commitments. It was certainly an excellent introduction to the field of multilateral diplomacy because I was really the only person dealing with the subject. All sorts of impressions and recollections come to mind – I remember one day our Pakistani colleague woke up to find his country had split into two, he had in theory to report to two governments.

CC: Had he seen this coming?

DC: There had been trouble in what is now Bangladesh, but I think it was quite a surprise. There are many recollections about Bangkok, particular the fantastic Embassy compound in all its historical glory. I think it's just been sold, rather controversially. There were also memorable up-country visits, including two into Burma along the route of the Death Railway.

CC: You weren't allowed into Burma presumably at that point, officially?

DC: Absolutely.

CC: How did this come about?

DC: It came about through friends, a particular friend, who had two American friends who thought it would be a good idea to travel up the River Kwai and see whether we could shoot something of interest up there on the border. So we took a powerful weapon with us.

CC: What sort of animal were you looking to shoot?

DC: I think it was a tiger or a leopard, I think was the idea, but we never saw one! I also visited Laos where a man called Billy Whitbread who was in our Embassy in Vientiane had his own aeroplane, piloted his own aeroplane. I think he was a member of the Whitbread family so he was not short of means.

CC: He was allowed to have his own aeroplane was he?

DC: Yes Indeed. In fact we in the Embassy in Bangkok also had our own aeroplane, a De Havilland Dove, which the Air Attaché flew, and I flew in that on a number of occasions.

CC: So that remained in Thailand and the Air Attaché would change but the aeroplane stayed, is that right?

DC: Yes that's right, he shared the aeroplane with the Embassy in Djakarta I think. So six months it was down there and six months it was with us.

CC: And what did he use it for mainly?

DC: He used it to liaise over his parish and keep in touch with the Air Forces concerned. On another occasion I spent a week in a Red Lahu village in Northern Thailand in the Golden Triangle with a British anthropologist, a man called Anthony Walker, who was working I think for the SEATO Tribal Research Centre. The other recollection which I retain was of a very strong US military presence in Thailand. They had this enormous air base at Sattahip.

CC: This is during the Vietnam War presumably?

DC: This was all during the Vietnam War. In fact I arrived just after the Tet Offensive which shook up the Americans no end. There were a number of meetings of the SEATO Ministerial Council and I remember one in Manila which included a lunch at President Marcos's Presidential Palace - what I remember most vividly about that was a most unbelievable stench rising off the river which ran outside his front door, as it were. There were also twice annual visits to the Commander-in- Chief Far East in Singapore and I had three. There was Lt Gen Michael Carver, Admiral Hill-Norton and the last one Sir Brian Burnett who became the President of the Wimbledon Tennis Club, I think, whatever it's

called. My purpose in going up to these sessions was to report on the situation in Thailand, particularly internal insurgent situation.

We had a visit from Denis Healey to Bangkok in June '69, which presaged the withdrawal from East of Suez. He was a remarkable character who gave me one of my standing jokes - which was that Dover was for the Continent and Frinton for the incontinent!

I also visited South Vietnam and spent some days with US forces in the Mekong Delta which was fascinating. I had a particularly good introduction to all that from a member of our Embassy in Saigon, Roger Martin who had remarkably good contacts on all sides. That was a good insight into the unwinnable nature of the Vietnam War. As indeed Ambassador Tony Rumbold, who was just before the Ambassador I had, had argued and maintained somewhat against the grain. The Ambassador I had was a former Commonwealth Relations Officer, Sir Neil Pritchard, who had some difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that Thailand wasn't a Colony or an ex-Colony. We also had the visit of the Duncan Committee which recommended that the FCO focus on 'Areas of Concentration', Europe and North America, largely to the exclusion of other diplomatic commitments dismissed as 'Outer Area Selective Posts'. This as so many other such exercises, came to nothing. The quadrupling of oil prices exposed the naiveté of this analysis and globalisation completed it.

I might mention another visit which I paid from Bangkok which was to Afghanistan, Kabul, where I had a brother who was working in a UN project there. It was particularly interesting having seen the country and the Panshir Valley and the Selang Tunnel in later years before Afghanistan became a war zone, and indeed still is.

In 1971 I was posted back to London, initially to assist in the preparation and conduct of the SEATO Ministerial Council that year. There was one highly embarrassing moment which I've never forgotten, when the South Vietnamese Foreign Minister was inadvertently left off the guest list at a formal dinner at Hampton Court and created a memorable fuss about it – he thought he'd been deliberately snubbed and indeed since he was very sensitive anyway about what was happening with SEATO and SE Asia, he had every reason to be.

I also got married on return and we bought our first house in Barnes. The new job …

1st Secretary, European Integration Department, FCO, 1971–75

CC: This was 1971?

DC: 1971. The new job after the SEATO Council was when I was appointed First Secretary in the European Integration Department. This happened at the tail end of the negotiations for our accession to the European Community. The first assignment I had was speech writing for Geoffrey Rippon, the chief British negotiator. There was an extraordinary messianic atmosphere in the Office at that time around our quest to join the European Community, because ever since Macmillan had announced our intention to do so we'd been frustrated by no less than two vetoes by General De Gaulle; and there was an atmosphere of, a messianic atmosphere I would say, to try to get it right this time.

My first assignment as I said was speech writing for Geoffrey Rippon, the chief British negotiator. And my record was six speeches in one week during the so called 'great debate' which led up to the crucial vote in Parliament in which we accepted the negotiated terms of entry.

CC: Were your speeches saying much the same thing, they were to different audiences?

DC: There were a variety of audiences, but it was pretty well the same speech with minor alterations to suit the occasion.

CC: And this was in order that the audiences would feel they wanted to go into the EU, the EEC as it was then?

DC: Absolutely.

CC: Was it trying to convince them, therefore?

DC: It was trying to convince them, and I was explaining what a historical moment this was and how much effort had gone into reaching this point, as I said with no less than two previous vetoes by the French.

CC: Did you share this messianic atmosphere, were you part of that, with your heart as well as your head?

DC: I wouldn't say that, I hadn't really focussed on the issue before but the atmosphere certainly swept one up and one swiftly became a mini-messiah oneself.

The structure of the Department was interesting. There was a key role played by an official called John Robinson who was a sort of *éminence grise* behind Sir Con O'Neill who in ranking terms was the senior negotiator. And he, John Robinson, was absolutely determined to drive this policy through, steamrolling anything and everything in its path.

CC: He was a member of the Foreign Office?

DC: He was a member of the Foreign Office and he was a driven man. There are any number of stories about his zeal for this policy. I remember sitting next to him once when we were talking about something in a meeting with the Treasury, and he was busy drawing on his pad in front of him gibbets on which were hanging senior Treasury officials.

CC: With their names? Quite clear who they were?

DC: Well it was quite clear who they were as they were sitting opposite us at the table! He was a very strange man. But absolutely key to the success of the negotiation. There then followed the European Communities Bill which was progressed through Parliament leading up to our Accession on 1st January 1973, when Norway voted to stay out, which was a moment of reflection.

CC: Because of the fish?

DC: Mainly because, indeed because of fish. It's a particular moment now when we're trying to leave the EU there was this precedent, way back when Norway who had been taking part in the proceedings with European Community, but then voted to stay out. The first Brexit or one might call it Noxit.

The first year of our membership was rather anti-climactic, because everything was overshadowed by the first great oil crisis. The Prime Minister Ted Heath obviously felt that after the build up to European Community membership, there was some tangible evidence that it was beginning to pay dividends and that all the promises which had been made on its behalf might be shown to be true. Then came another General Election and a change of government, in which Harold Wilson was elected on a pledge to renegotiate the terms of EC membership. So right from the beginning of our membership of Europe, as it were, we've caused problems and raised doubts and reservations, right from the word go. Anyway, Ted Heath cast around for some example of the advantages of joining Europe and he lit upon an EC Socio-Medical Initiative which has never received any publicity and which has sunk in the mists of time. It involved Lord Zuckerman, a key figure from the Second World War actually, when he'd been in the Ministry of Defence analysing our bombing campaign.

With Harold Wilson elected on a pledge to renegotiate the terms of EC membership, the renegotiation obviously fell again to our Department in the Foreign Office.

CC: How did that feel, trying to get us in and then suddenly you're having to renegotiate, what was the atmosphere like at that point?

DC: Well it was something one had to go through. I mean, we were overshadowed by the oil crisis and the general malaise in Europe, or in the world actually. But we still had Ted Heath who was …

CC: Messianic still?

DC: Messianic. And although he'd lost the election the impetus was still there, and Harold Wilson's pledge to renegotiate was conducted by the AUS responsible, Michael Butler, to whom I acted as assistant.

An interesting side-line on this, I analysed the Labour manifesto as regards what it entailed - and my analysis posited the fact that it might be necessary to change the Treaties in order to meet all of Labour's manifesto commitments. When Michael Butler saw this Minute addressed to the Legal Advisors, he had it suppressed, forthrightly. Because it was absolutely vital that renegotiation did not entail Treaty amendment.

CC: Because you'd never had got it I suppose?

DC: Well there was a risk we might not have got it and it might have been too much for our partners to stomach particularly so soon after Treaty ratification.

Anyway, I accompanied Michael Butler on a tour of EC capitals to explain what was needed by way of renegotiation and to satisfy the Labour Government's manifesto demands. And it turned out that these demands could be finessed in one way or another without having to amend the Treaties, with the demand for a change to the budgetary arrangements the most difficult and also the most important issue.

CC: And who else was doing the rounds? Were the politicians also going round the capitals or was it left to the officials?

DC: It was left to officials basically, as I recall, because it was very technical. Well I think it must have been buttressed by Ministerial efforts too. Anyway on the key budget issue there was a crucial sentence in the Accession Treaty, that if, and I quote, "an inequitable situation should arise, the very survival of the institutions would demand that an equitable solution be found." This sounds very turgid and bureaucratic but it was actually totally crucial to getting an arrangement for modifying our budget contribution which was destined to reach alarming proportions quite quickly.

CC: Now this was therefore later on what Mrs Thatcher managed to get. Is that right?

DC: Yes absolutely right.

CC: So without that piece in there she would never have got our rebate.

DC: That was the hook on which the whole of the negotiation hinged and eventually it turned out to be sufficient, as it were it performed its function. Anyway the renegotiation results were successfully put to the British people in a referendum and the British people resoundingly accepted the outcome, I think by something like 60-40, after my departure for Paris in 1975.

First Secretary, Paris, 1975–77

In 1975 I was posted to the Political Section in the Paris Embassy.

CC: The Chancery?

DC: The Chancery. The job entailed reporting on French foreign policy positions with a view to harmonizing them with our own in the context of European Community political cooperation. There had been a meeting with the French earlier at which we had expressed our desire to beef up our cooperation in this field. I took over from Nick Spreckley who actually had left earlier so there was a gap, and we took over his flat in the Avenue Hoche, paying the landlady's monthly rent in cash to her *homme d'affaires*.

CC: The whole amount? In cash?

DC: The whole amount in cash. A characteristically French arrangement.

CC: And the Embassy supplied that did they?

DC: The Embassy supplied the money and we took it along to his, no it was a her, it was a female, the landlady's *homme d'affaires*.

The Embassy when I arrived was under Ambassador Edward Tomkins who was supported by the admirable one-eyed Christopher Ewart-Biggs, the Political Minister. He was a tremendous character. He'd lost his eye in the desert in 1942 I think it was, and he had a tremendous sense of humour and a tremendous knowledge of the French political scene. Things changed when Sir Nicholas Henderson replaced Edward Tomkins.

CC: Was that quite soon after you'd arrived?

DC: I'm trying to remember, I think it was a matter of months, less than a year. Nico Henderson was a different kettle of fish. He ran his Embassy through a system of favourites

is I suppose the way to put it, people he regarded with approval and he showed his disapproval of others in a rather blunt fashion.

CC: Where did you fall on this, which side of the line?

DC: I was regarded with disapproval I think, I'm not quite sure why. But the person who was regarded with total disapproval was Christopher Ewart-Biggs, who left to become Ambassador in Dublin where he was assassinated by the IRA. I remember hearing the news on the car radio in Alsace, when we were on holiday. I fear that put the whole period in Paris under a certain cloud as it were, although there were many excellent moments.

CC: You said here you had flying lessons, and went beagling, this was all the while you were in the Paris Embassy?

DC: Yes, there were a number of very good aspects to the time in the Paris Embassy; indeed I took some flying lessons at Villacoublay.

CC: What kind of airplane?

DC: It was a small, can't even remember what it was, a single engine thing.

CC: And what made you do that? Had you always wanted to fly or was it just a spur of the moment thing?

DC: It was partly because, I knew about this when I was being posted to Brussels, where the Ambassador to the European Community was Donald Maitland who used to fly around, he was a flyer, and that gave me the idea. He was a pilot.

CC: And were you thinking that you might also become one?

DC: I don't know what I thought!

CC: How much did you enjoy it, flying?

DC: I did enjoy it, but it was too short to get anywhere because I then left for Brussels. We also had some memorable occasions beagling, particularly on the Chemin des Dames amongst the First World War battlefields. One of the main charms of Paris for me was I joined the Cercle Interallié next door, which had an *ensemble sportif* and I used to play a lot of squash there, and it was extremely handy for the Embassy.

CC: Right next door?

DC: It was right next door to the Embassy.

CC: And it's got a lovely garden I think too, hasn't it?

DC: Yes it's a very attractive club, it's got very good facilities.

First Secretary (Press and Information), UK Permanent Representation to the European Community, 1977–82

CC: And then you said you were posted to Brussels, so direct from Paris to Brussels; what year was that, 1977?

DC: That was 1977, yes.

CC: And did that come as a surprise or was it time to move on, because you weren't very long in Paris?

DC: It didn't come as a great surprise because I certainly felt that I wasn't getting on with the Ambassador, and I think he probably, and his Head of Chancery Nicholas Gordon-Lennox, I think they thought I would benefit from doing something else, and particularly perhaps a return to the European scene.

CC: Multilateral – SEATO was multilateral in Bangkok.

DC: Yes. I was very fortunate to start work there for Sir Donald Maitland, who'd been Ted Heath's Press Secretary in No.10, and was a great source of wisdom and advice on tackling the job of press spokesman in particular.

CC: As press spokesman you have to know about everything presumably?

DC: Precisely, you have a sort of licence to poke your nose into everything and it was a very interesting time. It was trying to get our money back, as it were, and I've already mentioned earlier on the shortcomings of our entry negotiation terms which gave us a bad deal financially, that was one of the main issues which preoccupied us.

CC: There's mention of Michael Butler, Chinese porcelain collection, Venice paperweight - what is the story behind that?

DC: Ah that is very interesting! Michael Butler was the key man at these European Council meetings – well key man as the one I worked for. And he asked me after a Summit meeting in Venice to take back to Brussels a very heavy glass paper weight – sorry, he asked us to take back a Venetian glass vase - I had the heavy paperweight.

CC: These were gifts to you then were they?

DC: These were gifts by the Italian government. But I foolishly, ill advisedly, put the heavy paperweight inside the Venetian vase and it promptly went through the bottom and took the bottom of the vase out!

CC: Why had Michael Butler asked you to take it back, why was he not carrying his own vase back?

DC: Because he was staying on, the European Council meeting was followed by a World Economic Summit, and he stayed on for that.

CC: And so once the paperweight had gone through the bottom of the vase, was there any way of repairing this, or was it the end of your friendship with Michael Butler? Did he mind, did he like the vase?

DC: He said he did. What happened was, obviously I came clean, but the vase was repaired, I'm not quite sure how it was done, but I remember seeing it on his shelf and wondering, trying to get a close look and see whether one could see how it was repaired, back in Brussels!

Anyway, the job of Spokesman was very active and as I said very interesting in the sense that one had a licence to poke one's nose into everything that was going on and produce a line for it. One of the problems always with dealing with the press was the workings of EC were technical and arcane and required a lot of explanation and even then they weren't designed to attract much favourable attention and publicity - in fact everything to do with the European Community tended to produce a giant yawn. And certainly it was very difficult to interest the large press corps there. I described the problem faced by press spokesman in UKREP in these terms "What might be needed of an UKREP spokesman in future is a combined publicist and populist, someone who can identify from the mass of telegrams which flow daily across his desk the positive European Community stories which, dripping on the stone of British public opinion and attitudes might gradually re-shape them. But during a (pre-Thatcher) period of economic decline, de-industrialisation and incipient protectionism there were countless matters, other matters of greater immediate importance and higher priority than the European Community. And positive stories are hard to come by during such an ice age." That was the problem, to try to make the whole project interesting.

CC: Who did you write that piece for?

DC: I think I wrote that to the Office, on reflections on the job.

CC: Was this as you were leaving?

DC: I think it was, yes. I did have one wheeze to stimulate wider understanding and discussion - I drafted a series of green papers on European Community issues - things like Monetary Compensatory Amounts, the dispute between the Council and European Assembly over the 1979 budget, the UK contribution to the EC budget, that perennial hardy annual Iron and Steel, the so-called Davignon Plan, the Common Fisheries Policy, Energy and the EC. And as an attempt to try to get our views across on what were highly technical and in many

ways boring, subjects. However our success in getting our views across even caused the Irish Prime Minister Garrett FitzGerald to complain, I'm not quite sure why he should complain, but he did.

CC: He complained about you, or just about UKREP's position?

DC: He complained about what he saw as one-sided or prejudicial presentation of our case.

CC: But isn't that what all spokesmen do?

DC: That's what all spokesmen do. And we were all in competition in doing that. I hope that our efforts never lapsed into what would now be called fake news, but there was certainly that risk.

CC: Did you feel it at that time, sailing a bit close to the wind?

DC: Um, no, I believed in what we were doing and believed that on all those issues and many others, that our position was eminently reasonable. The trouble is that we always seemed to be in a minority in many of these respects.

CC: Even then?

DC: Even then. Anyway, in 1980 I concluded that our briefing arrangements with the British press were reasonably successful but needed constant effort, and that more could be done in London, notably with the Commission office. And that once the dominating issue of our budget contribution was settled a serious effort should be made to reverse the deep-seated hostility towards the European Community in the UK.

CC: And this was another report you wrote back to London was it?

DC: That's another report I wrote back to London; that inspired my efforts. It's really based on the simple proposition that the European construction is itself, was itself, an important national interest - an argument which should have been forcefully made in 2016, but never was with the result that we know, ie. the lost referendum.

CC: Do you feel all that work you did before is rather wasted now?

DC: Well it was all necessary at the time, but put it this way, the effort to get the British public to love the European Community was always an uphill struggle and I wouldn't say that I made much difference to that in one's time in Brussels! Anyway it was a great job which led to lasting friendships and some interesting side events, two of which stick in the mind. One was a week in Berlin for the Grune Woche, which means green agricultural week, staying in the Hotel Kempinski and sharing a sauna with Herbert von Karajan.

CC: Did you recognise him at the time?

DC: I did, yes.

CC: Across the steam.

DC: Across the steam, and he wasn't wearing anything too. And there was also an interesting high-level seminar on European Community/United States relations, at a Chateau in France. I also had regular tennis and squash at the Chateau Sainte Anne Club and we sailed with the de Jonquières off Vere in the Netherlands.

CC: The de Jonquières, Guy de Jonquierès of the Financial Times?

DC: Of the Financial Times, yes.

CC: And these lasting friendships you mentioned, were they with officials, or your colleagues, or your customers shall we say, the newspapers?

DC: Amongst all those categories I would say, particularly with the British press who one kept in touch with over the years and are still in touch with. We also had a regular group which trekked at weekends in the Ardennes, so there were many entertaining aspects to living in Brussels. And it was definitely an easier place to live than Paris had been.

CC: So you left Brussels and came back to London, is that right?

Assistant Secretary, Cabinet Office, 1982–85

DC: That's correct, I was posted to the Defence and Overseas Policy Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, I was the Assistant Secretary there. On a personal level we returned to London to find that our house was occupied, in effect by a squatter; we'd lost track of who was in there after originally letting it to members of the Office, or the civil service anyway. This rather objectionable person said that he would only leave if we paid him to go. Which is what we had to do. Simultaneously we were negotiating the purchase of a house in Pimlico, so there was some urgency about this.

At work it was a rather different matter. Within a month of arriving back, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands and there followed the most hectic and nerve-wracking three months of my life. The problem initially was that the Deputy Secretary, Robert Wade-Gery was away, and so the office was under-manned. But what we had to do immediately was to set in train procedures to deal with what was effectively a war situation. The first thing we looked at was the NATO War Book, and summoned a meeting of the Transition to War Committee.

CC: So what happened then?

DC: The first decision was that this wasn't a war, it was a state of belligerency, hostilities, and we didn't want all the paraphernalia which were involved in the NATO arrangements, so we had to set them aside.

CC: That was a political decision was it?

DC: Well it all happened at a gallop, that decision was taken I think in the Cabinet Office.

CC: Mrs Thatcher would have been highly involved in it presumably, would it not have been her decision?

DC: Well this was the sort of bureaucratic consequence of what had happened.

CC: And what was your role in this at that point?

DC: Well, as the Assistant Secretary in the OD Secretariat, when I arrived there, there was a bunch of papers which had been in the in-tray, obviously put aside for further reading. Amongst these papers, almost at the bottom of the tray, was the record of official talks between us and the Argentines, I can't remember where they were, in Geneva perhaps. I read this record and immediately went next door to the Under-Secretary, who was a man called Roger Facer who'd been there a long time and seen many a season of foreign policy issues, and I said this looks rather serious doesn't it? Isn't something rather unpleasant going to happen soon? He said don't worry old boy because we go through this every year. The Argentines make belligerent noises and the talks, which is the record you've been dealing with, is something which happens every year so don't worry about it. I wasn't entirely reassured by this because it did seem to me that this time at least, there was a real threat coming through. And sure enough, within a matter of days after that we got news that the Argentines were invading - and the proverbial what hit the fan.

The first task, as I say, as to set up and service a War Cabinet. Unlike in later years with Tony Blair's sofa government, Margaret Thatcher followed established procedures for Cabinet Government and the OD Committee was consulted, even over military decisions such as the sinking of the Belgrano. After the war was over I was asked to write a report on how the machinery of government during the Falklands conflict had worked, for the Cabinet Secretary. And that was one of the conclusions, that it had worked rather well.

I also assisted the Franks Report into the war which concluded memorably that "we would not be justified in attaching any criticism or blame to the present government for the Argentine Junta decision to commit an act of unprovoked aggression in the invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982." Some people said this was a white-wash but in fact it was closely argued and I think that was the justified decision.

CC: What was the atmosphere like while you were working in the Cabinet Office while all this was going on?

DC: Very busy, hectic really.

CC: Everybody had their role presumably, and did you follow that or where there many meetings and new orders?

DC: Well we were in the eye of the storm, but I think the atmosphere was much more hectic in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. We were tasked with meetings of the ODSA, the sub-committee which was the War Cabinet as it were, and we weren't involved in the implementation side of it, which was the most hectic of all, of course.

CC: Then what happened? You had the Franks Report afterwards, and then?

DC: Well looking back on that whole period, I do recall a number of moments. I remember attending the Cabinet meeting just soon after the Argentines invaded. I talked to Admiral Leach, who was the First Sea Lord. He revealed, or we discussed, it was his father who'd been in one of the capital ships, the Prince of Wales or the Repulse which was sunk by the Japanese in 1941, prior to the invasion of Malaya. And the received wisdom after that event was that you should never put your ships in range of land-based aircraft or you were asking for trouble. Leach at least had a point to argue this, he thought that we could manage it, and in fact we kept the aircraft carriers as far off shore as possible, hopefully out of range of the Argentine aviation.

CC: Then you were still in the Cabinet Office when the war was over?

DC: Yes when the war was over there was a certain amount of follow up. There was the Franks Committee which was to look into the war …

CC: Which you mentioned.

DC: I mentioned that, yes.

CC: So what other things happened while you were in the Cabinet Office, you are in the centre, in many ways, what else was happening?

DC: Well a lot of things happened during that time. There was the siege of the Libyan People's Bureau, the one in St James's Square. We staffed the Cabinet Office briefing rooms under the Home Secretary Leon Brittan which met regularly again in the course of the crisis.

I do remember one slightly hilarious comment or aspect of that – the siege had been going on for some days when it was announced over the radio that the SAS was becoming involved. And we didn't know how many Libyans were in the Bureau and the best estimate that could be made was made on the basis of measuring the outfall, in other words what the inmates were excreting into the sewers.

CC: So you were tapping their lavatories as it were?

DC: Exactly that. That was the rather disgusting aspect. Anyway after it was announced over the radio that the SAS was involved, this outfall increased dramatically. *Laughter*.

CC: I imagine there was a certain amount of mirth around the Office on that one!

DC: I think there was. Then another issue we had was the question of Northern Ireland. There was a programme, Rolling Devolution, under the Secretary of State Jim Prior. A lot of work went into it but it didn't get very far. But later on, a year or so later, we had the extensive Anglo-Irish talks which would eventually lead, some years later to the Good Friday Agreement.

CC: This was still under Margaret Thatcher?

DC: It was still under Margaret Thatcher. The Under-Secretary David Goodall played a key role in all that.

CC: Were you involved in that?

DC: I was involved at a rather low level, taking minutes at meetings and that sort of thing. Another issue which I remember clearly, was we had problems with the United States over the so-called Siberian pipeline dispute on which we took a different view from the United States. And also there was the question of the Soviet Union cloning American technology.

CC: So this is an early fake news cloning, which brings it up to date today?

DC: Not exactly, it was more straightforward pinching industrial secrets as it were. But the Americans had discovered this by capturing sonar buoys, they call them boo-ies for some reason. Anyway, one of the American senor officials came over to London to present this evidence, of the Soviets cloning their technology. And there was also of course President Reagan's Star Wars initiative, which we in the Cabinet Office took the minutes of in certain important meetings.

CC: What sort of role does the Cabinet Office play in all of this? It's all going on around you and you are taking the minutes in meetings, what actually are the people working the Cabinet Office actually doing in that way, in influencing events?

DC: Well they are really recording the meetings which take place with Principals mainly, with the Prime Minister. They are really trying to monitor these international talks, with a view possibly to organising a meeting of the Overseas Policy Defence Committee of the Cabinet. That was really what it was all about.

CC: What else was going on?

DC: Well, we had the opening of Anglo-French talks which would eventually lead to an agreement to build the Channel Tunnel, that was going on.

CC: So what year was this?

DC: That must have been 1984/85. It was one of the things I handed on to my successor. There was a G7 Economic Summit in 1984 with preparatory meetings in Leeds Castle.

CC: You went to that did you?

DC: I went to that.

CC: Nice place to be.

DC: And we also had meetings in London with President Reagan, I remember meeting him in St. James's Palace.

CC: You met him, how did he strike you?

DC: Well he looked like a rather aging film star, I suppose.

CC: Did you press flesh with him, shake his hand?

DC: No it was a, what's the word, it was a long reception, you know, St James's Palace had these very long rooms.

CC: And your role was there because you were part of it, rather than on duty?

DC: The Cabinet Office had to be represented, as it were. Another thing which I often think about now in the light of what happened afterwards. There were various security initiatives. I remember writing a paper on the potential threat from aerial terrorism, aircraft flying into buildings whether guided by radio or with humans on board, it was mainly the former actually, we couldn't really believe that people would commit suicide by doing that, but that's of course what happened in 9/11, what, some 20 years later.

CC: So what provoked that kind of train of thought?

DC: It is fed into the intelligence machine. Obviously it seemed to have had no effect because the West was caught with its pants down in 9/11.

CC: But when you wrote the paper was it because it occurred to you it might happen or was it within an ongoing looking at this, research into the sort of possibilities?

DC: It was really a look forward to what kind of threats we might face in the future. I often wonder what happened to those papers, presumably they're in the archives somewhere I suppose, but clearly they had no effect on people's behaviour!

CC: Do you think anyone read them, at the time or afterwards?!

DC: The whole Cabinet Office experience was absolutely fascinating, I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

CC: I imagine you really felt that you understood how government ran?

DC: Absolutely and it was put to the test in a number of ways, as I indicated. The biggest test of all of course was how Cabinet Government worked during a war. We wrote a paper on that, and showed that the co-ordination of the government machine through the Cabinet Office was of crucial importance. Sadly a lesson which was lost under the later Blair Government. But interesting that this took place under Mrs Thatcher, who was regarded as rather domineering and not necessarily very collegiate in her approach to crises.

CC: But on this sort of issue she followed exactly the right rules presumably?

DC: She did, we followed the text book solution to Cabinet Government. And it was a great success.

Counsellor and Head of Chancery, Budapest, 1985–88

CC: So then in 1985 I think it was, it says here at three weeks' notice, you were sent to Budapest. Was it really three weeks? That seems too short for anybody, what happened?

DC: Well what happened was I was summoned in to see Brian Cartledge who was the Deputy Secretary then; who had actually been in Budapest before. He told me it was my next posting. He said it with some enthusiasm as he'd greatly enjoyed his time there. The reason why it was such short notice was that the person I was replacing, a man called Adrian Fortescue who had spent a year learning Hungarian, difficult language, and had been in post doing the job for only about 10 or 11 months, had been posted to Brussels as the chef de cabinet to Lord Cockfield, one of the two British Commissioners. So this short notice meant that there was absolutely no time to even attempt the difficult language of Hungarian, although my German turned out to be quite useful.

CC: So the Embassy was prepared to take someone, having waited for a Hungarian speaker, was then prepared to take some who had absolutely no chance at all of learning the language, just to fill the gap presumably?

DC: Well I don't think there was anyone else frankly who was qualified in that respect.

CC: So how did that pan out?

DC: That was an absolutely fascinating time to go although with hindsight one can see that Communism was going to collapse in '89/'90. At the time we went, I went, it still looked pretty solid. But what we had right from the start was Mr Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost which obviously showed that things were changing and shifting in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe. I had been told by one of my previous bosses, Bill Squire, that one needed to "do one's demonology" behind the Iron Curtain at some point in one's career, and this was my chance.

CC: What was going on while you were there, you were there from 1985-88 and what strikes you most, what do you remember of those years?

DC: Well what I remember most of all was detecting and monitoring, and well encouraging, the various dissident movements which were springing up. I cultivated the dissidents, there were a number of them including a man called Janos Kis, and Gaspar Miklos Tomas, Miklos Haraszty, Laszo Rajk, Miklos Vasarhelyi, all names from the pantheon of dissidents.

CC: Your job was to cultivate them, was it?

DC: I suppose so, I caused some doubts amongst at least one of my Ambassadors, Len Appleyard who had been the Ambassador, no he hadn't been Ambassador he'd been in Peking when the Embassy had been invaded and he'd been assaulted, I think he been actually physically assaulted. He was pretty nervous about these contacts which might threaten his relations with the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party.

CC: But you were DHM at that point?

DC: I was DHM and I tried to assure him that times were changing and that we weren't taking any great risk. I'm not sure he was entirely happy with that. Right from the start, I do remember this very clearly, even within I think the first week I was there, I had a meeting with a Hungarian Minister who told me the system was completely rotten and condemned,

and in many respects the Hungarian officials went through the motions of the one party state system. I was absolutely astounded to hear this from a Government Minister. It was an eye opener that things were, as it were, rotten - but whether things were going to change that remained to be seen.

CC: So this man had only just met you because you were new, and he was telling you this?

DC: Yes, he was welcoming me to Hungary I suppose.

There were a number of other memorable events. I attended the burial of the Cardinal Archbishop of Esztergom. That was extraordinary and seeing his coffin put into a vault and sealed up with bricks by a couple of workmen. And there was the visit of Mr Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister.

CC: Did you meet him?

DC: I met him, well we all lined up outside the Parliament Building to salute him. I've never ever, before or since, seen a man with such dead eyes, he looked just like a corpse.

CC: You shook his hand?

DC: I can't remember if I shook his hand or not, certainly he was standing opposite. There was the visit of Geoffrey Howe, which was reported in The Times as "testing the limits of glasnost".

CC: He was Foreign Secretary at the time?

DC: He was the Foreign Secretary.

CC: How did that go?

DC: Well he gave Len Appleyard who'd worked for him before, I thought it was useful that, coming from the Foreign Secretary - the idea that we were testing the limits of glasnost.

CC: Did that reassure the Ambassador?

DC: I'm not sure whether he was reassured by that. He was still very concerned that his links with the Party weren't compromised by our activities with dissidents.

CC: Did Geoffrey Howe meet any of these dissidents, or just reading the reports?

DC: I don't think on that occasion we actually arranged for him to meet any dissidents, I can't remember.
(*Later comment: he did meet and sup with two dissidents, George Konrad and Miklos Vasarhely, at a carefully choreographed dinner at the Residence).*

But the whole Hungarian experience was absolutely marvellous in any number of respects. There were incomparable opportunities to hunt and to shoot.

CC: Hunt in what sense, what were you hunting?

DC: Hunting deer, wild boar.

CC: So shooting them, not when you were on horseback?

DC: Shooting them, no they didn't have that sort of hunting, no, they haven't got that there. I shot a deer near Lake Balaton, who was a magnificent trophy which serves as a hat-stand in Pimlico now. There were the annual Guy Fawkes parties with fireworks and an extraordinary hog roast, a wild pig, which was put into a trench with hot coals and eventually consumed. It came out extremely well. That was all organised by our maid and her husband.

CC: But Guy Fawkes is a very British thing, did the Hungarians, did you invite them to the party? Who came to the party?

DC: I think it was for the Embassy. I don't remember inviting any Hungarians, I'm not sure they would have understood that.

CC: That's what I was wondering. (*laughter*) So it was basically an Embassy Guy Fawkes party.

DC: Exactly that. In 1986 we had the Chernobyl explosion, which cast a shadow, literally, over the annual May Day parade which we attended with Janos Kadar. I remember we didn't know what exactly had happened, as the Russians were so evasive about it. But there was a kind of black cloud and a curious light which came over this parade. It must have been part of the fall-out from Chernobyl. I think we all got sunburnt, but I think that may have been because it was sunny, I hope it wasn't radioactivity! I also saw off Janos Kadar who made an official visit to London.

CC: Saw him off, how do you mean?

DC: At the airport.

CC: Oh I see!

DC: And we also made some memorable visits to Poland to visit Krakow and Auschwitz, Czechoslovakia and Romania. We made a trip to Transylvania and Bukovina, the latter with the great friend who later became Lord Mayor of London, and his family.

CC: And how did you find the difference between these countries and Hungary, was there a lot of difference or not so much?

DC: There was, Romania, it's very hard to say really, I mean, the border formalities into Romania were rather tougher than into Hungary.

CC: But the general standard of living for the Hungarians and Romanians?

DC: Ah, I wouldn't say there was much difference really.

CC: Really? At that time, was there not?

DC: I mean, certainly in Bukovina we were out in the sticks literally, so it was still very much a peasant, sort of pastoral agricultural feeling about it, and very poor.

CC: Bukovina being in Romania.

DC: Being in Romania, being in Transylvania yes.

CC: And the history of Hungary and Romania, Transylvania, was that apparent when you visited?

DC: I don't think so, being foreigners they certainly checked our credentials as it were. What was quite interesting was some of the Hungarian villages in Transylvania with their carved fence posts and things. But not speaking either language we didn't have much interaction with the native population.

CC: And so you had these trips, you went to various other communist countries around. Were you happy to be in Hungary at the time or would you have actually have liked a posting to one of the others around because there wasn't much difference between them as far as you could see?

DC: No, we were happy to be in Hungary which was developing clearly in a way which eventually would lead to the breaking out in 1990.

CC: Because you are nearly in 1990, weren't you, the late 80's?

DC: '88, yes. I remember there was one memorable concert which we were involved with. The visit by Queen, that's right the pop group.

CC: Freddie Mercury?

DC: Freddie Mercury. We gave a party for them. The concert itself was tremendous. It was filmed by the Hungarian Film Institute as a means of paying for it, as a means of paying them because they didn't want to be paid in Hungarian currency. That was a great occasion.

CC: Did you meet them?

DC: We met them, yes, we gave a party for them. The Ambassador was away at that time so it fell on me as Chargé d'Affaires.

CC: And the Hungarians met them? Who was the party for? Who did they meet?

DC: We invited a lot of Hungarians, I can't remember exactly who they were, our contacts I suppose.

CC: And they all knew who Queen was, did they, they didn't think they were coming to meet The Queen?

DC: Some of them thought it was the actual Queen! It was reported in the Observer newspaper in a rather arch way, and it quoted what they called the Ambassador's wife, which namely was you in fact.

CC: That was wrong for a start!

DC: That was wrong for a start – but she quoted, or you were quoted, as saying "It was amazing … what was the name of the lead guitarist? Brian May. It was amazing what you did with your – er – guitar."

CC: So what was life like in Hungary, general life, family life, recreational life? How did you, you were in a communist country all this time, how did you actually relax, because there must have been quite a lot of stress knowing that you were being followed, listened and all the rest of it. How did you relax?

DC: Well as I indicated, I personally relaxed by shooting. We also had, the Embassy organised hash harriers, what did they call it?

CC: Hash harriers, yes.

DC: We made regular visits to Vienna.

CC: Ah so you got out of the country sometimes?

DC: Yes we got out of the country. We could get to Vienna fairly easily. We visited various tourist sites like Lake Balaton. There was a magnificent abbey at Pannonholma, we visited that. We also had a very good Hungarian friend, who was, I'm not sure exactly what his past history was, I think it was, he was like so many of those Hungarian middle-class people, they'd borne the brunt of the communism during its carnivorous period. He was very friendly and he introduced us to a lot of Hungarian contacts.

CC: Who spoke English presumably?

DC: Who spoke English yes, in a rather quaint way. No, the whole Hungarian experience was absolutely splendid.

CC: What happened then, what was your next posting?

DC: There's one other thing I want to talk about, certainly at some point, that was the extraordinary problem of the continuing embargo on private travel by officials to Communist and ex-Communist countries. This question came to the fore after the collapse of Communism. But perhaps I'll say something about that a bit later.

CC: Well will you remember, do you want to talk about it now?

DC: I could talk about it now, yes. I suppose one of the spurs was I really wanted to go back to Hungary, to go and do some more shooting. So during the next posting, when I was Head of the South-East Asia Department and communism had collapsed and the iron curtain was down as it were, I made enquiries about going back there, being able to go back there because the travel rules were very strict. You weren't allowed to go back behind what was the iron curtain, even though it had rotted away, without official approval - and this was never given unless it was for an official purpose. So I endeavoured to get these rules changed. I didn't make myself very popular I think with the hierarchy at the Office. The rules were eventually changed but by then my efforts to hasten the process were not appreciated, put it that way.

CC: By Security Department, presumably?

DC: By, well by Security Department, although I actually took the trouble to talk to the head of MI6, sorry MI5, about this and tried to discover why changes weren't happening rather more quickly. I think it was bureaucratic inertia. But anyway it was probably a mistake on my part to try to push the issue.

CC: For your career you mean?

DC: Career-wise, yes. (*Laughter*)

Head, South East Asian Department, FCO, 1988–91

CC: So that apart, you came back to London in 1988, to which job?

DC: I came back to be Head of the South-East Asian Department.

CC: Which links back to your time in Bangkok, presumably?

DC: Indeed it does, it was quite a neat connection. It was also an absolutely fascinating period 1988-92, because the collapse of communism worldwide had, as it were, unfrozen entrenched cold war positions in a number of different parts of the world and a number of different issues, and it was therefore a particularly fascinating time to be in this job. There was a useful Heads of Mission Conference in Singapore in 1988 which set the agenda for the coming years. Interestingly enough the record of that meeting which I kept, quotes me as saying that the developments in China and in SE Asia generally were of a transformative character and that this was something which would completely transform the region. And of course that is exactly what happened.

The other important development which happened was that the UN Security Council began to work again as originally intended, as the cold war blockages were removed. And that led to absolutely fascinating developments in two areas. One was the issue of dealing with the Vietnamese boat people who continued to flood out of Vietnam, most of them ending up in

Hong Kong. And the other was the question of settling the Cambodian dispute, or the Cambodian civil war which had been going for some years.

CC: What part did you play in those as Head of Department?

DC: In terms of the first issue of the boat people, I went to Hanoi to negotiate with the Vietnamese Government, the possibility of staunching the outflow from there and also eventually of them accepting these people back. Of course this was very controversial, particularly for the Americans who were still under a kind of Vietnamese war phobia, they hadn't got over their defeat there and they were adamantly opposed to any idea of sending these people back to Vietnam who in their book had managed to escape persecution. In fact the question of persecution was no longer relevant, they weren't fleeing persecution, they were searching for a better life and that's what led to the outflow, not persecution. It was a considerable effort to try to persuade the Americans to see things in that way.

CC: And then with the Cambodians?

DC: The Cambodian problem was a conflict which was occasioned by the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the occupation of Cambodia by the Vietnamese. It was one of the consequences I suppose of the Vietnam war, and which had spread into Cambodia, de-stabilised the place, led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge, a disgusting regime which murdered a good percentage of its population.

CC: What was UK's role in all this?

DC: Well our role in this was as a member of the UN Security Council, a member of the Permanent Five. And in order to settle or find a way of resolving the Cambodian conflict we had a series of meetings of the Permanent Five in New York, Moscow, Paris, Jakarta. The object of these meetings was to find some political settlement, in order to bring the conflict to a close. This was an amazing effort, it was only made possible of course by the end of the cold war, but it did involve elaborating a comprehensive treaty, which we did, achieved from a standing start. The idea being that you needed to create the groundwork for free and fair elections and to do that you needed to create a neutral political environment in Cambodia in which a free and fair election could take place.

CC: Do you feel you achieved this?

DC: To do that the revolutionary idea was that the UN should take over the administration temporarily to create this neutral political environment and manage things in order that an election could take place. We were greatly assisted in all this by a senior UN official, a man called Sergio Vieira de Mello; he'd also been extremely helpful on the Vietnamese boat question. He was the point man on the UN under which all this was being conducted. And the final product was a comprehensive agreement which was signed in Paris on 23rd October 1991 which as it were resolved this conflict by creating the grounds for new elections and a new government.

CC: There's a note here 'bitter polemic with John Pilger and Chris Mullin'?

DC: Well there was, because in the course of elaborating this solution you obviously had to include all the parties to the dispute, including the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Rouge were included –although exceptions were made, the people who had been directly involved in the Pol Pot genocide were specifically excluded. But there were two or three representatives of the Khmer Rouge who were part of the negotiation. This created an enormous storm of controversy with people like Chris Mullin and John Pilger who characterised it as normalising, even whitewashing the Khmer Rouge, which was beyond the pale. But the fact of the matter is, of course, if you are going to make an agreement you have to have all the parties to the dispute, and by excepting the genocidal people, we held our noses and accepted the Khmer Rouge should to be included.

CC: And what is this joke about folding deckchairs?

DC: Well in the course of this negotiation, details of which had been emerging in the public domain, there were die-hard opponents of the whole process in the person particularly in the British Parliament, of Chris Mullin, who regarded the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in the negotiation as a sell out as it were. And for want of finding anybody who he could blame for this benighted negotiation he picked on me. And there were rather unpleasant if in many ways hilarious, personal attacks on whom he conceived as the architect of this policy. I was supported by British Ministers, I'm glad to say. But it was all rather embarrassing because the British convention is that it's Ministers who are responsible for policy not officials.

CC: And deck chairs? Or do you want to move on?

DC: Chris Mullin memorably said that "Mr Colvin should be given a good bollocking and transferred to the Department of Folding Deckchairs".

CC: This was in the House of Commons?

DC: That was in the House of Commons, but I'm glad to say that my department in the Foreign Office put up a notice on their door saying Department of Folding Deckchairs! (*Laughter*)

CC: And were there any other particular things that you remember during your time in that department?

DC: A lot of things were happening during my time, including notably in Burma. I visited Burma twice.

CC: Did you meet Aung San Suu Chi?

DC: On each occasion I visited she was out of town, but we set up the policy there which persisted for the whole time and we obviously supported her election. And when the election was annulled and she was put under house arrest for the next 20 years or so, we stood by her and eventually of course she emerged as the de facto leader of Burma. Unfortunately most recently her reputation has been tarnished by the Rohinga dispute. But we were certainly from the beginning one of her main supporters.

CC: And so what happened after that? You left South-East Asia Department in 1992, and what was your next posting?

Minister, Rome, 1992–96

DC: In 1992 I was posted to the British Embassy in Rome as the No. 2 in the Embassy, the Minister.

CC: One of the few Minister jobs left, because they were cutting them down I think?

DC: It doesn't exist any more, it was abolished after I left.

CC: Right, so you were the last, the final, Minister in Rome.

DC: Last Minister in Rome.

CC: Sounds like a good title. So tell me about your posting to Rome.

DC: Well there again this was an absolutely fascinating period in Italian history. Because our time there coincided with the effective collapse of the so called First Republic, the post-war political order, which was a kind of delayed consequence of the collapse of communism. The Italian political system had been distorted as it were, by the overriding need to keep the Italian communists out of power. That is why the Christian Democrat Party had become so strong, because it was the main protagonist in doing that. And as people used to say, they held their noses and voted Christian Democrat. With the collapse of communism that particular political conjunction ended. The Christian Democrat Party itself imploded, the communists were nowhere, but the whole power system was upset. Out of this mess emerged Mr. Berlusconi, which was a bit ironic since he as much as anybody had been an exponent of the First Republic. He was tainted by his political background and he was hardly the shining knight to emerge in a new clean Republic. But that's another story, we saw all that, we lived through it.

One of the best aspects of the job of Minister was the fantastic flat we had in the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj. This was a marvellous flat, right in the centre of Rome. When we left it was regarded as grossly unsuitable by the Property Services Agency because it didn't confirm to any recognisable bureaucratic norms – it was 16th century, crossbeams, and it was absolutely marvellous.

CC: Had it been used by Embassy personnel for some time or were you the first?

DC: I think it had been in the Embassy's use for some years.

CC: As a Minister's flat?

DC: As the Minister's flat, yes. And when we left we were the last Embassy people lucky enough to live there.

CC: And it was a Palazzo owned and lived in by the family. Did you come across them at all?

DC: Indeed we did yes, and we still get invitations from time to time from the son, the adopted son of the Principessa.

CC: What else do you remember about Rome? You were there coming on for five years?

DC: Getting on for five years, yes. What I remember most was the fascinating and demanding problem of analysing what was going on, how the political situation was evolving. I already mentioned the emergence of Mr Berlusconi. There was also another, if it was one of the consequences of the change of the political order, there were the outrages by the Mafia, who assassinated two of the leading anti-Mafia judges, or magistrates.

CC: Who were they?

DC: That was Falcone and Borsellino.

CC: Where was this?

DC: Falcone was assassinated in Sicily. And so was Borsellino. Trying to understand and follow this was a major challenge.

CC: This is the Minister's job isn't it, to think, and to get to know the country?

DC: Yes.

CC: While somebody else runs the embassy?

DC: That's correct yes.

CC: So it sounds like a wonderful job.

DC: It was a wonderful job, because there were so many fascinating things happening. I have already mentioned the collapse of the political class or the disgrace of the political class in the so-called 'clean hands' investigation.

Another thing which was happening was the war in Bosnia was going on just across the Adriatic, and one of the logistics bases was in Italy, in Bari. I supported the Air Attaché and the Naval Attaché who had a lot to do with supporting that. And I was lucky enough to be involved with that as well. I remember one memorable occasion we were at the so-called airhead in Bari, waiting for a plane to land from England, when another aircraft appeared overhead and was waved away to wait until the main aircraft had landed. When it did come down, out of this plane emerged Prince Philip, who was fuming. Normally the Royal Family receive total priority.

CC: So he was kept waiting in the air?

DC: He was kept waiting, and didn't like it.

CC: Did nobody know he was coming?

DC: That I don't know, they certainly ought to have done, and I'm not quite sure what he was doing there anyway. It was an interesting vignette or insight into how these things work.

CC: Or don't work by the sound of it!

DC: Or don't work. (*laughter*) There was also a memorable seminar on the Royal Yacht, which put into Civitavecchia.

CC: Was Prince Philip on that?

DC: Prince Philip wasn't on that, no. This was basically a seminar on privatisation which was organised for the greater comprehension of the Italian banking and business class. I remember one of the key people there on the Italian side was the Governor of the Bank of Italy, who is now the Governor of the European Central Bank.

CC: Who was that, do you remember his name?

DC: No, what was his name. It may come – Mario Draghi. I also arranged a visit to Sicily in order to meet up with some students from 1965 when I'd spent some time there teaching English, I'd spent a year there teaching English.

CC: And these were some of your students were they?

DC: These were some of my students, yes.

CC: Had you kept in touch with all that time?

DC: I hadn't actually, no. I found papers which had contact numbers and we put something together. That was fascinating.

CC: Goodness, after all that time?

DC: After all that time, yes.

CC: Thirty odd years. Another event in which I played some part was the creation of an annual conference to bring together politicians and opinion formers from both sides, the first conference was held at a place called Pontignano, outside Siena.

CC: Who came to that?

DC: Well as I say, a lot of senior British people.

CC: Was it multinational?

DC: No it was bi-lateral, the Italians and the British. It was under Patrick Fairweather who was the Ambassador, of whom one could say he was the guiding genius behind. But it continues to this day I understand, and it serves a very useful purpose, of enabling the two sides to consult on developments.

CC: So this is outside the European Union/Community, so when we are - but perhaps that's another question, but Brexit ...

DC: I suppose, it's a bi-lateral conference, I imagine after Brexit it will be even more important. But it was a means of institutionalising our bi-lateral relations. And it's been an enormous success. I'm glad I played some part in its creation. Just as in my next job as Ambassador to Belgium we created a similar forum, which also continues to the present day.

CC: With the Belgians?

DC: With the Belgians.

Ambassador to Belgium, 1996–2001

CC: And so you went from Rome to Brussels, then?

DC: I went from Rome to Brussels in 1996, and we arrived in Brussels at a moment of internal crisis there, slightly reminiscent of what had been going on in Italy. It was a crisis over the bungling of the Belgian police in a famous murder case. Not a murder case, it was the imprisonment of children, which had led to a massive demonstration in Brussels, called the White March.

CC: Marche Blanche.

DC: Marche Blanche. The country was suffering from a kind of nervous breakdown and it was a sad reflection on the shortcomings of the Belgian administration. But like so many other things it was a creature of its time. I'm not sure that it had echoes of what was happening in Italy, but it was more sui generis, I would say.

CC: So how was your time in Brussels? This is your second posting to Brussels, this time as Ambassador.

DC: As Ambassador, bi-lateral Ambassador. I replaced a man called John Gray who I think had done an excellent job. He had faced rather more directly than I did a period in which our relations with Belgium had sunk to a very low level.

CC: Why was that?

DC: There were two issues in particular had caused a lot of grief. During the Gulf War we had asked the Belgians to supply some much-needed tank ammunition for our armoured division, and believe it or not they had declined to do so.

CC: Why was that?

DC: Why had they declined? Because it was politically sensitive and they were not prepared to help a NATO ally. It was extraordinary. There had also been the business of an extraditionary request for a suspected IRA terrorist, who we'd asked to be extradited, and the Belgians had instead sent him back to Ireland, avoiding our airspace. I mean they basically declined our request. On both grounds they had caused a considerable amount of offence in British Government circles, and Belgium's reputation was very low.

CC: But this had happened before you arrived?

DC: That had happened before I arrived and John Gray had borne the brunt of that. I think he had quite succeeded in getting our relations back on a better basis, but the after-shocks were still there, as it were. So I saw that the task was to improve the image which the two countries had of one other. I remember Lord Garel Jones in 1992 had referred to "a deeply unrewarding relationship" between the UK and Belgium, and so really the task was to try to improve relations so that it was no longer deeply unrewarding.

CC: How did you set about that?

DC: Well it was a difficult assignment because it wasn't clear what one could do about it. My idea was to improve, or try to jack-up our bilateral relations and have contacts at every level, and so that they understood us and hopefully we'd understand them. To develop a more friendly and open attitude in our inter-governmental relations.

CC: Do you think this worked?

DC: Well that was the question. I mean, I was there for what was it, four or five years, and there were ups and downs. I believe there is a fundamental problem with our relations with Belgium, quite apart from the particular issues I mentioned. The Belgians are self-confessed Federalists really, they regard the European Union as in evolution towards a federal state. And that is something we have never accepted or regarded with any enthusiasm. So come what may, our relations are sort of destined to be awkward or difficult.

CC: But did you enjoy your posting there?

DC: I did enjoy it, actually. There were many excellent aspects to it. I may have been excessively zealous in defending our interests. And there was one memorable occasion; I had a difficulty with one particular Belgian Foreign Minister, Mr. Derycke, who I'd argued with at a meeting, who complained to the Foreign Secretary Robin Cook that I'd been 'over-zealous', or I forget what the word was, in defending our approach to Europe. I got a rap over the knuckles from Cook, but I'm not sure whether his heart was in it, I think he probably agreed with me. And I think paradoxically this new frankness between us did actually pave the way for an improvement in our bilateral relations.

CC: Do you think he possibly complained as he thought he ought to do so, rather than his heart was in that as well? It seems a funny thing to do.

DC: I think he was rather a defensive character, he didn't like being contradicted.

CC: Ah, by a mere Ambassador.

DC: By a mere Ambassador.

One of the things I wanted to do, and I tried to encourage or try to bring about, was a visit from Tony Blair, a bilateral visit to Belgium.

CC: Did that come off?

DC: Well eventually, it did eventually come off. There was a visit by Blair, I think in 2000, which I think was successful in boosting our relations. What is interesting looking back on that visit is the attitude of Guy Verhofstadt, who was then Prime Minister. He made a proposal to Blair on Europe, which I think if we'd taken up, might have led to many different things occurring in the future. What he said was, that what we ought to aim at in Europe was called *Kompetenzabgrenzung*, which was to lay down limits, limits on ceding competence to the European level. So that would meet our objection that Europe was constantly extending its competence and developing in a way which tended towards federalism. Unfortunately Prime Minister Blair didn't react to this and I think we missed a trick there because if we'd taken him at his word, it could have resulted in the ending of the ever-closer union idea, which caused us such grief. And if we could have laid down prescribed limits as to how far this process was going to go, it could have been important in defending Europe in this country.

CC: What about your general life in Brussels? There are all the European policy institutes and things. As you were living there how did you find it, how did you enjoy your time there?

DC: We had a very good time. We were occupying the house which had been the Residence of the Ambassador to the European Union, which Sir John Kerr in his wisdom had swapped with the traditional Embassy building, which was a Parisian-style palazzo. He moved in there just before John Gray arrived, who had his luggage redirected to the rue Henri Pirenne, which was the house we were in, much to his extreme irritation. In fact it made more sense for the Ambassador to the European Union to be in the rue Ducale, which was much closer to the European Institutions. And was more, as it were, fit for purpose. We actually quite enjoyed the rather more suburban aspects.

CC: Suburban? You were outside Brussels then were you?

DC: We were in Uccle, one of the surrounding areas. Not all that far out from the centre but far enough. And it had a rather nice garden and it was certainly was much more suitable for the family than rue Ducale, which was much smarter.

CC: What else do you remember about Brussels?

DC: Well what I remember is a very full diary of a whole variety of events. I remember too, when the Residence and ambassador's staff were finally put into good shape, we had a rather successful operation I think.

CC: There's a note here "the butler stole the money and jewellery", what's that? It doesn't sound very successful! (Laughter)

DC: We inherited the butler, Portuguese butler, from our predecessor, and he had been actually with the Hannays, previous Ambassador to EU. I found him a slightly insidious sort of man. What happened was I was going to fly to Istanbul to meet a Rolls Royce car coming from Peking on the Peking to Paris rally, and to prepare for this I took out £2,000 in cash from the bank, put it in a blue bag and into my briefcase; came back home for lunch, had lunch and went back upstairs and discovered the money had gone. Meanwhile the butler, who normally was there till I'd gone back to the office, had disappeared. It was blindingly obvious that it was he who had walked off with it. Well the Embassy was called in, security; I think it was Sherlock Holmes who said "if all other explanations fail, and there's only one left" and there was only one left, and it was the butler who did it. Anyway he was fired.

CC: Immediately?

DC: No there was a bit of a gap, but it was absolutely 99% certain and it couldn't have been anyone else, that was the point.

CC: So that's a rather a rather unhappy point. But this is your final posting, is there anything else you want to say about Belgium before you go, you retire?

DC: No I think it was a rather happy posting.

CC: There was the death of Princess Diana while you were there.

DC: Yes, there were various high points, I'm not sure that's the right way of putting it. We had to organise a service for Princess Diana. I was rung up at 5 o'clock in the morning, I think it was, to be told that the accident had happened in Paris, and she was dead. The Belgian police put a guard on the Residence and on the Embassy. I'm not sure what they expected. We had to organise, obviously, a condolence book, there was an enormous outpouring of emotion culminating in this service.

CC: Just one service for her, in Brussels?

DC: In Brussels, yes, and it was attended by Prince Philippe, who became the King later. *(Later note: There was also second service in Antwerp Cathedral that evening)*

We had dealings with Prince Philippe, because he invited us to dinner out at the Palace at Laaken, he and his wife, Caroline and me, and we had a private view of the extraordinary greenhouses, at Laaken. Walked round them after dinner. No other person was visible anywhere, these enormous greenhouses, been built by King Leopold II, I think it was, the one who had exploited the Congo ruthlessly - but never actually visited there and so he built a bit of the Congo as it were, in his back garden.

CC: Why were you invited to dinner, just as good relations was it?

DC: Er, I don't know, good relations. And you also gave some English lessons to his wife. I think it was a good example of how relations had improved. And when I made my farewell Audience with the King himself he commented on the greatly improved bilateral relations which had been achieved over the last four or five years, and he thanked me for my efforts, so that was very gratifying. Although one can't help wondering if he said the same thing to every British Ambassador!

CC: And then you set of for retirement.

DC: Set off for retirement, having spent almost 10 years out of 35 in Brussels.