BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

CHRISTOPHER, Sir (Duncan) Robin Carmichael (born 13 October 1944)
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Career (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

THE RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR ROBIN CHRISTOPHER KBE CMG

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CATHERINE MANNING

CM: Today is 7th June 2021. This is the first interview with Sir Robin Christopher for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording. Robin, can you tell me what led you to think of the Foreign Office as a career?

RC: Encouragement from my father, first of all to go on VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas), as a school leaver aged 19, an organization with which he was involved in its early stages. I was sent to Bolivia for a year before university, as an English teacher in a teachers' training college in La Paz, and I lived with a Bolivian family. I also taught in a school and an orphanage and gave evening classes to railway workers. The experience just opened my mind: it was the most formative year of my life. A lot of adventures on which I look back with amazement because you simply couldn't do them now: floating down tributaries of the Amazon on banana boats and in a canoe, trekking on the back of a cow into the jungle to meet, and stay with, an Indian tribe who shot fish with bows and arrows, and skiing at Chacaltaya (impossible now because of climate change) overlooking Lake Titicaca at 17,600 feet. A wonderful experience and lovely, warm people.

I used to collect my mail from the British Embassy and so came to know the staff working there, Selby Martin with whom I occasionally went fishing in Lake Titicaca who, as a keen botanist, had a sideline in catching rare butterflies which he sent back to the Natural History Museum in London, his successor Andrew Palmer, on his first posting as third secretary, and David Ridgeway, whom I later took over from in Madrid. I liked what I saw of the small Embassy we had there in La Paz. I returned to England and adjusted to Oxford and PPE, but with a greater interest in the wider world. I applied for the FCO but was not accepted so then got myself to graduate school in the US, thanks to the English Speaking Union. I went to the Fletcher School of International Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Boston from 1967 to 1969. To have been a foreign student in the US at that time of such ferment, creativity and

turmoil I regard as one of the greatest privileges of my life. A number of my friends faced the draft for Vietnam. I did not. In my second year I supported myself by teaching philosophy at Tufts. I met my wife, Merril Stevenson, at Fletcher, though it took another thirteen years before we actually tied the knot. I made a shot at a PhD in my third year there, much of which was spent in the UK teaching part time at Sussex University, but that got overtaken by being accepted by the FCO to which I had reapplied on my return. And it was terrific to be told, two weeks after joining, that I was off to New York for the 1970 UN General Assembly.

CM: As I remember it, going to the UN for the General Assembly was rather a perk for the best entrants.

RC: Certainly lucky, not so sure about the best. Three new entrants went: the other two were Robert Cooper and Richard Dalton. We were appointed as reporting officers to various UNGA subcommittees, mine being the Special Political Committee. Peter Petrie was my first secretary boss. Living in New York and working at the UN for three months (especially on the 25th anniversary of the UN with Heads of State constantly visiting) was a wonderful start to a diplomatic career. I also got to work with Tony Parsons who was Head of Chancery. He was everybody's favourite person, a great guy, very shrewd and very funny but also - one of the things that I found on occasion and appreciated in the Foreign Service – with a great capacity for empathy, for seeing where the other person's coming from. I remember my surprise when he said that if he were a Palestinian, he would probably have become a terrorist. Coming from your Foreign Office boss, sitting in the UN, I thought this indicated encouraging open-mindedness!

The 25th anniversary brought many Heads of State to the UNGA, including Emperor Haile Selassie. In retrospect, it was great to have seen him in person as I was later posted to Ethiopia. I remember his speech because it was delayed, as is almost everything at the UNGA. There was a Peruvian general before Haile Selassie, who arrived late and went on at least half an hour too long. Then Haile Selassie emerged, what you could see of his small figure behind the podium, and spoke at considerable length in Amharic. That was fine for all those who had interpretation. The problem was that the General Assembly was packed with as many people sitting on the floor without head phones as in seats with them. Why? Because Richard Nixon was due to speak after him.

While I was at Oxford, one of my closest friends was Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). Another was Shankar Acharya (with me at Keble College) with whom I shared a cabin on the Queen Mary when we both went to graduate school in the US. Shankar went on, via Harvard and the World Bank, to become Chief Economic Adviser to the government of India. After Oxford ASSK went to work at the UN, staying with her aunt who also worked there. On my arrival I introduced her to Richard and Robert. We became known as the three Rs, or, as she liked to call us, her three musketeers. That led to a memorable moment at the end of the General Assembly with Christmas approaching. Suu told us that U Thant, her uncle (everybody's called uncle in Burma), had invited us to sing carols to his cabinet in the Secretary General's office on the 38th floor of the UN building. So the four of us, the three Rs and Suu, did this one evening after work. I remember on our way to his office it was dark and snowing and we were standing on a bus, going up Third Avenue, Suu dressed exquisitely in Burmese costume, practicing *Good King Wenceslas*, to the astonishment of a busload of New Yorkers. When we finished in full-throated voice, there was a second's silence, and then the whole bus erupted in applause. The Secretary General appreciated our performance too!

I was posted back to UN Department at the FCO. We didn't have any training, you learned on the job. UND was fairly routine stuff. The year came round for the next UN General Assembly and I was asked to do the first draft of Ted Heath's speech to the UNGA, based on my 'long' experience in the UN. I did my best and it was sent up to my Head of Department. I think it just reached the desk of the Under Secretary but came back, I remember, scrawled across it, 'This is far too idealistic. The Prime Minister would never say this.' It went into the waste paper basket and somebody else did the speech.

CM: It would have been during this year that you would have done your hard language test. You scored well on your hard language test?

RC: So-so. I was not cut out for any really hard language but I was offered Hindi.

CM: You weren't given a range of choices?

RC: They said, 'These are the possible languages for you and we think India would be a good place for you to go.' I was delighted. Hindi language training was for one year, six months in London and six in India at Benares University. For the first stretch an elderly Sikh, Dougal Singh, would come to my flat each morning and we would have four or five hours of

Hindi. It was very relaxed and he was a lovely man. To change the vocabulary a bit we used to go rowing on the Serpentine.

Then the office said, 'How do you want to go to India? You can fly or go by sea.' I said, 'I'd like to drive overland.' They said, 'OK. You can take as long as it would take to go by sea which would be about six weeks, but you should aim to get there by early September. Stop in at the High Commission in Delhi, then go on to Benares and do the other six months language training and then join the High Commission in spring 1973.' So that's what I did.

Second, then First Secretary, New Delhi, 1972-76

In those days, you will remember, you had to get three estimates for packing your luggage. I got the three estimates and I dutifully said yes to the cheapest. On the appointed day one man, a horse and a cart showed up outside my flat in Emperors Gate. He was eventually joined by a second man and they wrapped and packed everything, my entire belongings, such as they were. I watched them leave on the horse-drawn cart and I didn't see them again for ten months, because I went straight from Delhi to Benares. When I unpacked later in Delhi everything was there; nothing was broken; everything was impeccable. That's how things were done in those days.

CM: I think there's a bit more. How long did it take you to drive? What adventures did you have on the way? And what did you drive? Did you have a Land Rover?

RC: No, I had a Ford Cortina and two friends came with me. We took six weeks, which gave us time to stay a day in places where we wanted to spend more time. It's about 6,000 miles. It was nice driving east, because the sun was not in our eyes. I remember thinking I will never do this drive the other way, because I am not an early riser, so the sun was high in the sky when we set off and it went down behind us. Strange to think that there haven't been many years since then when you could do that drive. Our route was Venice, Yugoslavia, Dubrovnik, Turkey, Lake Van into Iran to Tehran, then a side trip to Isfahan for two or three days, Mashed, then Afghanistan, Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, Peshawar, Islamabad and then the Wagah border into India. A few dramas along the way: A village in eastern Turkey where stones were thrown at us as we drove through, things like that, but a wonderful trip. And the Khyber Pass.

CM: And the Ford Cortina? It did its bit?

RC: Perfect. It did its bit, but there were initial anxieties. When it was brand new, here in London, I had four punctures in two weeks. I thought this isn't looking good and I took it back to Ford and they said, 'Oh, everything's all right. Why don't you take two spare wheels?' So I took a second spare wheel. From the day I left, the next puncture I had was six weeks later, the day after arriving in Delhi. No more punctures!

There was a bit of drama in the Khyber Pass. We'd been slightly ill in Kabul and so had left later in the day than planned. We went through the Kabul Gorge – magnificent – and arrived at the border post with Pakistan. We were informed that our car had been identified as suspect for carrying drugs, so they needed to search the car and that took an hour or so. No problem except that the Khyber Pass is closed from sunset until sunrise and nobody's allowed through. They said, 'It's almost sunset, you must go quickly. Don't stop for anything.' So we got into the car, the barrier was lifted and we drove up into the hills. We came round a corner and there was a chain across the road and a heavily armed soldier came out from behind a rock. He said, 'I've had word from the border crossing that you are importing this car illegally. You do not have the stamp for the car. You must go back.' So we went back to the border and I went into the Customs House. There was one man at the far end, who assailed me as I came in, saying, 'Why did you avoid customs?' I apologized and said I'd been told not to stop for anything. Long pause, and his mood changed. He said, 'Do you live in Ramsgate?' I said, 'No.' He said 'My daughter lives in Ramsgate.' I said, 'Ramsgate is a wonderful place.' He became very friendly and finally said, 'Give me your passport.' Stamp. 'Now, if you're going, you must go now. You're a diplomat, so if you want to go we'll open the barrier for you, but you must know that the pass is officially closed and we have no jurisdiction in the Khyber Pass after dark. If you are stopped or run into any trouble, we will not be able to come and help you, so you must decide.' We either slept in the car or we went, but it was now dark. I said, 'We'll go.' I've always thought this was the stupidest decision I've ever made in my life. Anyway, we went back up into the Khyber Pass. There was tense silence in the car. A few lights in the mountains. The Pass itself is about thirty or forty miles long. Nothing happened. We came out the other side and we knew we'd arrived in Peshawar when we saw we were on a road called The Mall. Great relief! We stopped at a little hotel with a guard in full Punjabi dress outside, who asked, 'Have you just come from England?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Welcome! We missed you in '47.' That was my rather surprising welcome to the subcontinent.

We went to Islamabad and stayed a few days there and went to the hills, including a visit to Azad Kashmir. Following the Bangladesh war the Wagah border crossing into India was open only once a week, on Thursday mornings. My target was Thursday 7th September 1972. We reached Lahore the night before, queued the next morning and got through with no difficulty. It was very hot. Soon after crossing the border, we stopped at a roadside trestle table stall just outside Amritsar. The stallholder insisted on giving us six cold lemonade drinks for free. 'Sahib, I've seen your number plate and you have just arrived in India. You have come from England. No charge.' I tried to insist but he refused. Those two initial experiences on the subcontinent … It's so remote, so other age, but, as you can tell, they made an unforgettable impression.

Then we went on to Delhi where I met my predecessor, Oliver Everett, whom I already knew by name because he had had the ESU scholarship to the Fletcher School the year before me. Later I also replaced him in News Department and he was our best man in 1980.

Then I set off for Benares (also known as Varanasi), with the name of a Hindi teacher on a piece of paper. When I got there, I started in a local hotel and began to look for accommodation. And I was lucky. I went for a drive in my Ford Cortina into the countryside and I had my second puncture. I was changing the wheel and two young boys came up and said, 'Can we help you?' So they did and then they invited me to join their parents for a coffee just the other side of the road, from where they had been watching this little scene. They invited me to join them on their family picnic by a waterfall nearby and I ended up living with them for six months. That's how I met the Gyan Das family, and they introduced me to Indian life. And their seven-year-old son became my second Hindi teacher in Benares.

Through them I was involved in an Indian wedding. A member of the wider family in Benares was marrying a girl – they had met once – in Allahabad. So I was invited to join the bridegroom's entourage. It was quite a big wedding and we were all housed in a local school. There were about sixty of us in our cavalcade (I was the only foreigner) and we trekked through the streets of Allahabad behind the bridegroom as, per custom, he made his way to his bride's house on a white horse. We were accompanied by a local band of trumpets and bagpipers and we set off to the strains of *Rule Britannia* and *Over the Sea to Skye*. The celebrations lasted all night.

I loved my time in Benares, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. You could sit on the banks of the Ganges and imagine what it was like a thousand years ago. I had two

particular interests. Philosophy had been my subject at university, so I read a lot and used to visit an ashram. I got to know an orange-clad yogi, Yogi Raj, who taught me yoga. I also developed an interest in Indian music and attended a number of local concerts. I found a tabla player who was willing to teach me the drums and became a good friend. Later, as a young, rising musician, he moved to Delhi. When I had my own house there, he would bring singers and instrumentalists, sitar and sarod players, to the house and we would share the evening. He'd bring the musicians and some friends and I'd provide the food and invite a few guests as well. We did this quite frequently, with some quite serious musicians such as the Daga brothers, who were the top singing duo of Indian classical music at that time, and the sarod player Amjad Ali Khan who became a friend. Four decades later we met again when he played at the Royal Festival Hall. I also knew a number of Indian dancers quite well. Indian concerts are often all-night affairs, or at least until 4 a.m. when the dawn ragas are played. You have to stay for the dawn raga. I just loved it. I came to feel that India was like a huge balloon with its own multiple worlds inside. I could never get inside it myself, but with care and interest I could watch from the outside and it gradually became clear enough to see inside.

Calcutta is just a 30-minute flight from Benares and the High Commission arranged for me to have accreditation to attend the All India Congress Committee meeting, the annual party congress, taking place there. So I flew to Calcutta and managed to take in a Test match, which was enthralling the whole country at the time (including the sadhus on the banks of the Ganges who congregated in groups around portable radios listening to the commentary). I was accommodated, probably Oliver arranged this, in a guest house that had been the home of Rabindranath Tagore, very peaceful, trees in the garden, lovely place, secluded, no one else from the High Commission was there so I was still in Indian clothes, relaxed. I came down to breakfast in the garden and the only other person there was Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who'd come for the Congress Party conference. So I had breakfast with her. She asked what I was doing there and I explained. She was mildly amused. She was taciturn, the occasional smile, pleasantries, but clearly preoccupied with what she was there for and I was of no importance. But for me it was extraordinary.

I had some trouble adjusting to the High Commission in Delhi because I had spent six months living an Indian life, wearing Indian dress – sandals, kurta and pajamas. I continued to wear Indian clothes in Delhi much of the time.

My position was Second Secretary Political (Internal) which meant that it was my job to follow and report on the domestic political and economic scene. When I arrived the High Commissioner was Sir Terence Garvey and he was followed by Sir Michael Walker.

CM: Generally speaking in the Foreign Office, the language speaker had an importance in an Embassy or High Commission which they might not have had from their youth or junior position, because they spoke the language.

RC: It was not quite like that in Delhi because everybody we were dealing with spoke English. Hindi was of use to me when I went touring outside Delhi, with Members of Parliament and particularly during Mrs Gandhi's Emergency, and of course in some personal friendships. Officially I believe it did help that there was someone on the UK staff who was known to speak Hindi and had studied in Benares to get to know the country. I think that mattered, for example, at my surprise breakfast with the Prime Minister. I could, with a struggle, read the Hindi press, but it wasn't really necessary. Most of the serious press, including *The Hindu*, was in English. Having some Hindi was definitely useful and it provided insights, just having access to the language and the ability to understand conversations that weren't necessarily meant for your ears. Not important, but it helped you to know what was going on around you.

I became immersed in Indian politics. The timing was so fortunate. I started in early 1973 after Mrs Gandhi's overwhelming victory in the elections in 1972. Before that she had split the Congress Party, left and right, so there was a new party called Congress O which Morarji Desai headed, which was the rump of the old Congress Party. She had moved to the left, with a political arrangement with the CPI (Communist Party of India), and she'd won her victory largely on the back of the Bangladesh war. She was riding high, supreme, but she ran into serious troubles. As often happens with an overwhelming majority, corruption gets out of hand, and the name of L N Mishra, who was Minister for the railways, was at the heart of this. Plus there was a lot of unhappiness within her Cabinet, some of the old guard who had come with her, but who felt that the top job should be for them rather than her. And there were serious economic troubles. Things got tense. J P Narayan, the great Gandhian figure of the day, led a march of young people from Gujarat to Delhi calling for clean government and change. The cause was taken up in Bihar. There was a profound sense of revolt in the vast crowd from all over the country that assembled in Delhi. I remember Gujarati students on the platform declaiming their passion for change, but in Gujarati, so not everyone could

understand what they were saying. The ignition of revolt was somewhat lost in communication, but the cause was firmly established on the doorstep of Government in Delhi.

In the background Mrs Gandhi's opponent in her constituency of Rae Bareilly, near Lucknow, in the 1972 elections was Raj Narain who had always been a thorn in the side of the Nehru family. After the election was over, he challenged the legitimacy of her election in court on the grounds that she had used loud speakers at her rallies that were the property of the government, not of the Congress Party, and that this was a breach of electoral law. This rumbled through the local courts for three years ending with the Allahabad High Court deciding in favour of Raj Narain and invalidating her election to Parliament. Mrs Gandhi appealed to the Supreme Court. This all coincided with J P Narayan's march for change and L N Mishra's corruption and other scandals plus a behind the scenes challenge to her leadership of the Congress Party.

In an extraordinary judgement on 24 June the Supreme Court put a conditional stay on the High Court order allowing her effectively to remain Prime Minister but not to vote in Parliament. So in the early hours of 26 June 1975, at Indira Gandhi's request, the President of India signed a declaration of an Emergency suspending all constitutional rights and freedoms, citing "the imminent danger to the security of India'. A few hundred people were arrested, including Raj Narain and J P Narayan, and electricity to all the newspapers was cut. Mrs Gandhi called a Cabinet meeting at 6 o'clock in the morning and told them what she had done. No indication of how long for, but effectively an overnight dictatorship in the world's largest democracy.

Everything went quiet. There was no news at all for two days. Newspapers that then appeared had any political news blacked out. The government had total news control. All foreign correspondents were kicked out of the country including the BBC's Mark Tully. There was just silence. Four or five blocks around the Prime Minister's house were secured; nobody saw her. After her initial announcement she went into seclusion. Government just continued. The 15th of August is Independence Day, when traditionally the Prime Minister addresses the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort at sunrise. Three weeks after declaring the Emergency, would she do it? One foreign journalist who had been allowed to stay was Reuters' Gerry Ratzin. I went with Gerry to the Red Fort at 6 o'clock that morning. Mrs Gandhi did appear, silhouetted against the rising sun. There was a thick piece of glass in

front of her but she was there. She was on national television and gave her justification for what she had done. She left and we went back for breakfast at Gerry's place. While we were having our coffee the Reuters ticker tape came alive. Gerry tore off the paper and read that at 4 o'clock that same morning in Dacca, in neighbouring Bangladesh, Prime Minister Mujib Rahman and all his family had been machine-gunned in their beds. I subsequently discovered that Mrs Gandhi had been told about this as she got into her car to drive to the Red Fort.

I was lucky that by then I had been in the country for two years and knew my way around fairly well. I knew Members of Parliament from all political parties and most of the leading Delhi-based journalists. It was my job. And I was lucky that, at my insistence, I was not living on the High Commission compound, but in my own, secluded house nearby. After the Emergency was declared India became a police state. People were arrested on buses for overheard conversations that were considered anti-government. There was no free press, no foreign correspondents (apart from Reuters, who followed the rules) and there was no real news at all. The new 'underground' opposition had no way of telling the public, indeed the world, what was really happening. The Americans were always suspect and anyway they were known to be watched. So opposition figures came to my house, often in the middle of the night, to tell me what was happening, who else had been arrested, the latest act of sabotage, a train derailment in Orissa for example. Soon after his arrest J P Narayan wrote to Mrs Gandhi from prison. I received a copy of his letter the same day that she received it.

CM: The copy of the letter went to London to the Foreign Office. Did it go anywhere else?

RC: The letter was given to me in confidence. It was a private letter. Had a copy got out J P Narayan's delicate relations with Mrs Gandhi would have been compromised. To have given it to the press would have been quite the wrong thing to do. It was given to me by those opposed to the Emergency because they wanted the British government to know what was happening. And of course London was informed. This was the kind of situation when knowing Hindi was helpful.

There came a point when the Emergency became an accepted political fact of life and people had resigned themselves to it. Foreign embassies began to realize that there was going to be no upheaval or revolution and that this was the new India, at least for the time being. Any return to the old freedoms would at best be gradual, and certainly not soon. And there was the Sanjay factor.

Sanjay Gandhi was Indira Gandhi's younger son, who emerged as an important influence on her. Amongst other things he was determined to use the opportunity of the Emergency to reduce the country's birth rate. He launched a programme of forced vasectomies using 'goons' who would go into the villages at night and kidnap the young men. Word of this spread like wildfire through Uttar Pradesh and the result was that the men left their homes at night to sleep in the fields.

I remember going to Lucknow to get a sense of the impact of the Emergency outside Delhi, because in the capital the country seemed to be running normally, to all intents and purposes. I met local government and the press which was working according to the new rules—namely that you just recorded the local news and you didn't talk about politics. I visited a local market with individual stalls separated by just a thin fabric curtain and stopped by one of them selling colourful shirts. The owner offered me a Coca Cola and we sat down. I said, 'How is the Emergency?' He said, 'It's wonderful; it's really working well, I mean the streets are safe; the children go to school every day; they take their exams; students are not demonstrating any more. There's no crime; my wife is quite safe walking in the streets; the taxis and buses are safe and working properly – it's all right. And it's good for business.' There was a long pause and we sipped our Cokes. Then he leaned forward and whispered in my ear, 'Sahib, you must understand. These days when someone speaks loudly, they do not mean what they say.'

The High Commissioner at this stage was Michael Walker, who had been head of ODA (Overseas Development Administration). The Emergency gave rise to much interest among the British political establishment and we had many visitors. Among them was a parliamentary delegation who came out to investigate what it was all about and, basically, to make a judgement. It was part of my job to look after them, to arrange meetings so they could hear a cross section of views. Their visit started with a briefing given by Michael Walker who described the events that led up to Mrs Gandhi's Emergency and what had happened since. His message was 'This is the new government of India that we have to deal with. Mrs Gandhi is still a sound pair of hands who will continue in office and there's no sign that things are going to change. So as regards our bilateral relations it is business as usual.' But then, to his credit, he said, 'But I'd like you to hear another point of view,' and pointed to me. So I told them what I thought was happening to India, the institutional destruction, loss of freedom and the downside of it all, including the Sanjay factor, and I concluded that, in my judgement, it really couldn't last. By the end of their visit some MPs

were quite confused. But ultimately you could tell who would come down on which side, and it had little to do with party affiliation. Those who instinctively sided with authority, sided with Mrs Gandhi; those who instinctively were suspicious of authority concluded that this was all wrong. The High Commissioner got one or two complaints about me being too anti, but he wasn't bothered about that. I was grateful to him for not telling me to toe the line. The Emergency lasted 21 months, ending in 1977, after my departure.

CM: Can I ask you how you feel you were perceived by Indians? We were after all the ex-colonial power.

RC: It very much depended who you were talking to. There were certainly some conversations and occasions when I felt resented because I was English, particularly among intellectuals. But they were few. You have to remember this was almost fifty years ago. I'll give you a couple of examples. One of the people I knew quite well in Lucknow ran the Lucknow Theatre and he invited the leader of the Communist Party in the local Assembly of Uttar Pradesh to dinner for me to meet. He was well-educated and articulate and spoke at great length against the Americans and warmly of the Soviet Union. We discussed the state of the world and India's role in it. I said, 'What about us? You haven't said anything about the British and the Empire.' There was a pause and a big smile. He said, 'You British are different. You may have governed us but when you ran this place, one thing that every Indian was sure of was that before the law they would get justice, Indian to Indian. Justice and fair play are a legacy which we understand. We have a long history and being part of the British Empire is part of it. You shouldn't have been here and all that, but we're not hostile and we've taken on so much of what you put in place, particularly in our political institutions, press freedom and especially education.'

The other example was a friend, a senior retired permanent secretary in the Indian administrative service in Delhi, who was talking about his past. I asked him where his family was from. He said, 'We have always been from Delhi and we've always been in service. First of all we served the Moghuls, then we served the British and now we serve this lot.' I felt that was a large part of the civil service in India speaking. We were former rulers and there had been other former rulers, but we weren't discriminated against because of that. That has to be set against strong feeling particularly among Indian historians who were quite hostile about the Empire and everything else, but generally there was an underlying

acceptance of a shared past. After all, a wedding in Allahabad to the tune of *Rule Britannia* - it says something! But that was then. I'm sure it wouldn't be like that now.

One other small observation. I went to Nehru's home in Allahabad, which is now a national museum. In the house was the big sitting room that was the meeting place of the Congress Party throughout the Independence struggle, from the 1920s until independence. There on the floor was a big blown-up photograph of the Congress Working Committee from 1942, the year they launched the Quit India Movement. All of them were there, Gandhi in the middle with Nehru seated next to him. The inner sanctum of the independence movement, behind a big glass pane so that no one could touch anything. Just inside the glass pane, on a little side table, there was a photo of Nehru. Propping up that picture, in that room, was the Harrow Year Book of 1907 when Nehru was at school there.

I want to touch on Kashmir. Kashmir was of interest in my time because Sheikh Abdullah, the so-called Lion of Kashmir, was Chief Minister and was seeking greater autonomy for his state as a means of 'solving' the problem of Kashmir. Within the High Commission this subject fell to me. Although we did not formally recognize Kashmir as part of India we treated it like other Indian states, followed its politics and went there for holidays.

I thought I should go and meet the Sheikh and find out what was going on and I told my High Commissioner (I think it was Terence Garvey then) of my intention. He said my visit should be cleared with London before I went. The proposal was sent to London, copied to Islamabad. Sir Laurence Pumphrey in Islamabad objected, saying that in the eyes of the Pakistan government an official visit of this kind would be tantamount to recognition of Kashmir as part of India. London overruled the objection, so I was allowed to go and I did meet Sheikh Abdullah, at his house. A very impressive figure, everything I had expected from one of the remaining leaders of Nehru's generation. I learned a lot and reported to London and Islamabad. And the Pakistan government never complained. An autonomy agreement was eventually signed by Mrs Gandhi and Sheikh Abdullah and the Indian constitution was amended accordingly. But I was the last, and just possibly the only, British diplomat who ever met Sheikh Abdullah in Kashmir.

I'd like to mention Prince Charles's visit to Delhi, accompanied by his uncle Lord Mountbatten, the last Governor General of India. I was involved in his programme, and this was before the Emergency. It was Charles's first visit to India and he was the priority; but that was not exactly Mountbatten's view. He came to show his nephew his former place of

glory. On arrival they went to Rashtrapati Bhavan, the President's Palace and the former Governor General's home, where they were staying. Mountbatten announced that evening that at 6 o'clock the following morning he was going to do an inspection tour of the entire building 'from the roof to the cellars.' His Indian hosts were appalled. The guest rooms were all neat and tidy, but the whole building ...? They quietly got in 200 cleaners to clean and polish everything, down to every brass bath tap, overnight.

I knew what was going on because Brijendra Singh, a close friend of my predecessor, was head of the Presidential Bodyguard. He was also a leading polo player. He arranged a game of polo for Prince Charles which was beautifully done, you know, a good crowd but not too big, high quality polo and, of course, Charles scoring the winning goal. All fixed! Everybody was happy with that.

There was a moment at the airport before departure when the tension between uncle and nephew was evident. An old friend of Mountbatten's was talking to him and asked for a photo with Charles as well. Mountbatten said, 'Of course, I'll get Charles.' He caught Charles's eye and beckoned him to come over. Charles refused. I saw the communication between them. So the photograph was just of Mountbatten and his friend. Mountbatten was not best pleased. A tiny thing, but a little insight.

India means so much to me. It's a whole world, a deep and complex world, and in so many ways it's the most wonderful country on the planet.

First Secretary, FCO, Financial Relations Department, 1976-78

CM: After four completely wonderful years in India, you had to come back to earth in a different way. You returned to London in 1976 and went into Financial Relations Department. That sounds rather specialist. Was this something you were interested in?

RC: Not particularly. I did what I was told. We were basically the sorting house for the CIEC (the Conference on International Economic Cooperation) which was nineteen developing countries and six developed countries. It was the North-South Dialogue and went on for a couple of years (1975-77) and met regularly. We were the clearing house for it so we had a lot of dealings with the Treasury, with the ODA (Overseas Development Agency) which was part of the Foreign Office in those days, on all aid issues and debt and such things. It was interesting, but as my Head of Department, Humphrey Maud, used to say, it was a bit like making bricks without straw. We put the bricks in place. Our role was coordination of

policy and keeping Foreign Office ministers up to speed. A good team. Later Humphrey Maud went as Ambassador to Argentina when we resumed relations after the Falklands war and he was succeeded by Peter Hall who was the Assistant Head of FRD. And later there was me. So all three of us ended up in Argentina.

FCO, News Department, 1978-80

CM: You spent two years on the North-South Dialogue then you moved into News Department which I seem to remember from those days was a very exciting, sexy department, quite pressurized.

RC: We were quite busy. Both my Heads of News Department there were superb, Ham Whyte and Nick Fenn. The Rhodesia talks at Lancaster House took place during Nick Fenn's time. My responsibility was the EEC, as it was then, so I used to liaise with the European Departments and I would accompany whichever minister it was who went to the Foreign Affairs Committee in Brussels, once a month. That was the time of the EEC budget renegotiations, Mrs Thatcher claiming back 'our money'.

Well, it was very much in the news. Lord Carrington was Foreign Secretary and he had to mind his Ps and Qs with Margaret Thatcher. I remember when it came to the closing stages of the budget negotiations. Carrington went out for the final session of the Foreign Affairs Committee at which the negotiations took place and it went on all night. I was with the press, hanging around, waiting for news, getting ready for a press conference which Carrington was due to give when it was over. There was much anticipation. Literally at five o'clock in the morning Carrington came out, having done a deal and the press were full of expectation. He said, 'Oh, I'm not going to talk to the press. I've got to talk to Margaret first. You go and talk to the press, tell them all about it. That's your job.' I had to explain the situation to the very frustrated press corps. I described what the outstanding issues were about as best I could. Obviously, I had to avoid saying there was a deal, but I did say, 'It's looking good.' Once home Carrington persuaded the Prime Minister to accept it.

My other memorable News Department moment was at the European Council meeting at Dublin Castle in 1979 where I was working with Bernard Ingham, the Prime Minister's press secretary. Mrs Thatcher had agreed to do an interview with Robin Day and I was helping to set that up. Robin Day was in the interview room and they started testing the speaker system. Robin Day looked at his notes and, since he had his questions written down, to test the sound system he read out the questions. I thought this could be useful. So I listened carefully and

scribbled a few notes. Then I ran up the corridor and met the Prime Minister coming down for the interview. I said, 'Prime Minister, just a moment, Robin Day is already there and I've got all questions he's going to ask you.' She brushed me aside and didn't even stop. 'Questions? I'm not interested in the questions. It's the answers that matter.'

High pressure job? There wasn't an immense amount of work, but there was exposure. We took it in turns to take the daily morning briefing which was on the record. Attendance was not large, a dozen or so, mainly agencies, particularly Mosin Ali from Reuters. John Dickie of *The Daily Mail* was often there. Anything could be asked, so anything was asked. The afternoons were better attended, off the record background briefings. Somebody was on night duty every night, so you were often telephoned about some obscure event in some corner of the world. One night at 4 am I was pestered by an agency on some issue I didn't know much about, and I did say something that I thought was completely anodyne. When I woke, I heard myself being quoted on the BBC 8 a.m. news. I came to work and I was met by a wry smile from Ham Whyte. Without referring to anything, just lifting his eyebrow he said, 'Robin, really?' 'This is what happened' I spluttered. 'He called me at four in the morning wanting information. This is all I said.' Ham was the calmest and nicest man in the world.

I was attached to the UK delegation to UNCTAD IV (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) in Manila in 1979 because I had done the CEIC/FRD job and had experience with the press. It was a bit of both but there wasn't a lot of press to be worried about. So that was a month in Manila which was one of those nice things that occasionally happened if you were lucky. I was also later sent from Madrid to 'look after' the press in Majorca when Prince Charles and Diana went to stay with King Juan Carlos for a few days of 'isolation' in the period before their break-up. It was a paparazzi madhouse.

Deputy Head of Mission, Lusaka, 1980-83

CM: Robin, we are launching off today with your posting to Lusaka in 1980 as Deputy Head of Mission, which seems to build on your expertise with the North South Dialogue and India. Did Africa seem a totally new experience?

RC: This was my first experience of Africa and it was followed by plenty more, as Head of Southern Africa Department and as Ambassador to Ethiopia. It was a great way to start and it was also a good moment. I was lucky with the timing because the Lancaster House

Agreement had settled the issue of Zimbabwe's independence and, of course, Zambia was a Front Line State and took the brunt of a great deal of the conflict.

President Kaunda was very pleased with us as a result of the Lancaster House Zimbabwe settlement. He had recently even danced with Mrs Thatcher at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. It was a good time. John Johnson, the High Commissioner, had a lot of experience of Africa and we worked well together. If the winds are behind you there are all sorts of things you can do.

The main event during my time was President Kaunda's state visit to the UK, invited by the Queen to stay at Buckingham Palace. My colleague in the Zambian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was very excited that this was happening and that relations between us were so good. We worked together on the arrangements and it all went extremely well. For me Kaunda's departure from Lusaka had its own special moment. The High Commissioner had gone ahead to London to be there to welcome him. I went to the Lusaka airport with the rest of the diplomatic corps to see him off – much pomp and ceremony, with the national anthem played as Kaunda arrived at the airport, as he boarded the plane and again as the plane took off. The UK flag car was a large, black Austin Princess and, as per protocol, I led the procession of ambassadors on the return to the city. Except that on the way the Austin Princess broke down, and I waved to their Excellencies from a ditch as they drove past!

Part of the delight of the visit was that Kenneth Kaunda had many supporters in the UK who were able to make additional plans for him, building on the state visit after he had said goodbye to the Queen. He ended up staying a week, playing some golf, his favourite game - he had his own private course in Lusaka. Then came the weekend and he was invited to give the sermon at the Sunday morning service broadcast by the BBC from St James's Piccadilly. So there he was, addressing the British nation live from the pulpit in London on the subject that had dominated his life and the life of all the people in his part of the world, the evils of apartheid, its effect on Africa, and the significance of the agreement on Zimbabwe. And he was accompanied at that service by the band of SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) from Namibia and the ANC (African National Congress) choir. I was in Lusaka and I heard it all on the BBC World Service. It was a lovely moment. I received a call from my colleague in the Zambian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who said, 'Robin, I have to telephone you to say how overjoyed I am by the visit of our President.'

Zambia is a beautiful country. It's quite flat, wild, very big and it has some fantastic game parks. We had an Integrated Rural Development Project up in the Northern Province, encompassing a huge area, which broadly speaking was under my responsibility as DHM with a development secretary working full-time on it. That took up much of my time and was of great interest because it got me out into the countryside. I sat around the table with local village leaders where bridges were being built and plans being made. The Integrated Project meant that it didn't concentrate on just one thing, like roads; it tried to get a plan for the development of the area as a whole with the participation of those who lived there. Kenneth Kaunda attempted to get the major donors to take on a province each. We had a team in Northern Province full-time. I remember there was an interesting dispute between the ODA (Overseas Development Administration) in London and our team leader out there, David Pudsey, who refused to come up with a plan of his own that would satisfy London's budgeting requirements. He believed that the plans should be drawn up by the local authorities. When confronted, David Pudsey, for whom I had great respect, simply said, 'You have to understand with this kind of project we just don't know where we're going until we get there.' A perfectly valid insight. The project was still going when I left. As with most aid projects, it achieved a good deal; not everything it aspired to by any means, but bridges were built, roads were built and people became involved. It achieved quite a lot.

The Namibia Institute in Lusaka in those days was the natural centre and source of education for many South African and Namibian exiles, from both SWAPO and the ANC. We got to know some of them, including Thabo Mbeki (Nelson Mandela's successor as President of South Africa) and Hage Geingob (future Prime Minister of Namibia), both of whom I was to meet again later in my career.

Important memories of that time for me focus on two private visits I made to South Africa, purely because I wanted to see for myself what apartheid was like and to understand the politics surrounding it. I did one trip to Johannesburg and one to Cape Town. I went alone and as a private citizen, without contacting the Embassy there.

I'll talk about the visit to Cape Town. I went there on the Quaker net. I had some friends who were Quakers in Lusaka who put me in touch with the Quaker community in Cape Town. I stayed in a modest hotel. On my first day I attended my first ever Quaker meeting, a mixed-race group of around twenty people, mainly white. It was taking place at an important moment because the South African government, under P W Botha, had just destroyed large

parts of the Crossroads township and was forcibly transporting the people living there to their 'homeland' Transkei. This had given rise to a huge demonstration in Cape Town outside the Parliament the previous day and many of those at this Quaker meeting had participated. I remember one woman, who was white, describing how she felt as a citizen of South Africa when the police dogs attacked the demonstrators and knocked her to the ground outside her own Parliament. Afterwards I said to my host, 'I'm here for three, four days. Any chance I could visit Crossroads?' He pointed to someone and said 'Go and talk to him; he's a local guy from that community. He may be able to help.' Well, he did. I explained that I was from the British High Commission in Lusaka but that my visit was entirely private out of personal interest and concern. He invited me to accompany him on a visit the following day when he would be attending a meeting of the Crossroads Committee.

We arrived, the two of us in his VW, to scenes of devastation. A large number of houses had been flattened by bulldozers. Police were everywhere. The operation was continuing in the full glare of television cameras on the edge of the site. People were wandering around in confusion, dazed and homeless. It was like a war zone.

The Crossroads Committee, around 30 people, was meeting in a local church hall. I soon realized that I might well be the only white person there. My guide reassured me as we entered and sat down.

He introduced me as a concerned friend from the UK who happened to be in town and wished to find out what was happening. People were friendly and they began to discuss the events of the previous couple of days. I remained silent, wondering how I had got myself into this situation.

As the discussion developed and the focus turned to what was to be done, I became aware of hostile stares from the only other white person in the room, the Irish priest from the local church. Eventually he could contain himself no longer and interrupted the conversation by saying, 'I am very concerned that we are discussing these matters in the presence of a complete stranger. We do not know who he is, where he has come from or why he is here.' There was a moment's silence and then my guide pitched in with an apology for not introducing me properly and repeated my agreed limited credentials. I realized that the situation could not be salvaged and that there was in fact much at risk.

When he had finished, I said that I felt great sympathy for them in the situation that they faced which, as a first time visitor to South Africa, I wanted to understand, but that it had

never been my intention to come to such an important meeting and if it would make things easier for them I would gladly leave. There was some brief discussion, touched with embarrassment, which concluded with a perfectly friendly decision that that would probably be the right thing to do. 'No hard feelings, but it is just this wretched government that we have to deal with. We cannot be too careful.' And so I left. I avoided the TV cameras and the police patrols and eventually found a taxi to take me back to my hotel.

My guide called me that evening and we arranged to meet the next day. Over breakfast he told me that it was lucky I had left the meeting. It had gone on for two or three hours, and when it was over the police had rounded up a number of those who had attended, kept them in prison overnight and had beaten them to get the names of all those who had attended. He apologized for giving me such a narrow escape. With our Embassy in Cape Town completely unaware of my visit it was indeed a close call.

Later that day I went to the South African parliament and from the public gallery I heard P W Botha defend the action that he had taken in Crossroads.

That was my first experience of apartheid in South Africa. I mention it because it made a great impression on me and became relevant to my appreciation of the situation when I did the Southern African job in London a decade later, precisely at the time of transition in South Africa.

Malawi was always a closed shop as far as foreign journalists were concerned. They were not allowed in. But one time when I was chargé in Lusaka, I received a message from London saying they had received a request from *The Economist* saying that they were considering applying to send a stringer they had in Lusaka to Malawi and could the FCO put in a word of support to help make it happen. London wanted to be helpful but they were anxious that whoever went should be a responsible journalist for this very first visit for a long time which could either open the doors for others or close them. They understood that the Economist stringer in Lusaka was called Merril Stevenson. Could I let them know, in confidence, whether I thought Ms Stevenson would be appropriate for this sensitive mission.

So I sent a telegram back saying something like 'Merril Stevenson is indeed resident in Lusaka. She is a well-respected journalist and personally well-known and I think she would be well suited for the assignment in Malawi. She is also, incidentally, my wife.' She went, and the sky didn't fall in.

Assistant Head, FCO, Western European Department, 1983-85

CM: Three years in Zambia, then back to London in 1983 to Western European Department (WED) where you were the Assistant Head.

RC: Yes, with Michael Llewellyn-Smith as my Head of Department. I've been very lucky with all my bosses in the Foreign Office. Both he and Rob Young, who was my predecessor as Assistant Head of the Department and acting Head until Michael arrived, became lasting friends. Obviously, the main European business was done by the two European Community departments, but we did the bilateral relations, including both East and West Germany, and Berlin.

The East Germans did a lot of fishing off Scotland with fish canning factory ships moored just outside the three-mile territorial waters. They bought fish from local fishermen and fished outside our territorial waters and they did the canning on board. Those ships would often stay there for months on end and their crews would get very bored. Once a month they were allowed to come into the little local port and go to the pub and every now and again somebody, one of the crew, instead of going to the pub; would go to the local police station and say, 'I want to go to West Germany. I want asylum.' Then the crew would go back to the ship, with somebody missing, the captain would ring the GDR Embassy in London who would then ring me and say, 'Hey, we want consular access. This is his name and identification number. We wish to see him.' I would say, 'I've noted the details. I shall try to find out where he is and I will get back to you.' Then I would ring the Home Office and say, 'This sailor has gone AWOL, presumably seeking asylum. Please let me know when he is safely in West Germany and then I can tell the East Germans that he has left the country.' And that's what happened. I would get a call from the Home Office saying, 'He's safe.' I would then call the GDR Embassy and say that we had discovered that he left the country the previous week. This became a routine. It got quite serious when the captain of one of these ships defected and then the Ambassador came and saw me. But it was the same treatment.

I had a curious relationship with someone in the East German Embassy who occasionally invited me to lunch, and once back to his home for dinner (and darts afterwards) so that our wives could meet. Our first lunch was in one of those restaurants on the boats along the Thames round about Temple, off the Embankment. He was very tense and told me that he hadn't told his Ambassador that he was taking me out to lunch and he hoped he wouldn't find

out. I thought this sounded interesting. He'd ordered the meal already and he'd chosen the German wine. We raised our glasses with his toast, 'Bottoms in the air.'

After I left WED and joined the Cabinet Office he continued our lunches, not often, but once every couple of months. As a matter of routine each time I would tip off our security services. All of a sudden they became interested. It was the time of the defection of Gordievsky and he had identified my East German as the GDR's No 1 spy in London, their Head of Station. Their interest was whether he had ever talked about coming over to us. Sadly, if that was his intention, he never expressed it to me.

Around that time I took part in a crisis exercise involving COBR (Civil Contingencies Committee in the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms). It consisted of a supposed high-jacking of a BA plane in 'Ruritania'. For the exercise West Berlin was Ruritania and I and Graham Burton (who was later my predecessor in Indonesia) were sent to West Berlin to negotiate with the 'Ruritanians' to allow the SAS to come and rescue the plane and its passengers. The exercise lasted I think two and a half days, culminating in the plane, a real one at the Berlin airport, being assailed by the SAS. It was enacted and everyone played their parts, including those with whom we negotiated. Graham and I carried with us a little suitcase with Tempest inside, the latest coded communication system of those days, which connected directly to COBR in the Cabinet Office and we used it constantly. Obviously, there was a lot of down time; and one of us had to be awake more or less all the time. But conversation with Graham never flagged. I do rather treasure the moment when, quite late at night, Tempest rang. Graham picked it up and said, 'Chinese laundry here.' There was a pause at the other end, then, 'Denis Healey here.'

Berlin was fascinating. The Quadripartite Agreement and the protocols that flowed from it were extraordinary. I accompanied Malcolm Rifkind, FCO Minister of State, on a visit to the GDR, meaning East Berlin. But we couldn't cross by the Brandenburg Gate because we, the Western powers, did not accept East Berlin as the capital of the GDR and his passport would have been stamped by a GDR official on Quadripartite ground. So we went out of Berlin into the surrounding countryside of West Germany in order to cross a recognized border into East Germany and thus entered East Berlin. There, as part of the official entertainment, we were taken to a Mozart opera. I remember a discussion, hosted by Christopher Mallaby who was minister in Bonn at that time, with an eminent group of Berlin watchers who agreed unanimously that the tablets of stone on which the administration of Berlin was based would

remain in place at least for another ten, probably twenty years. That was in 1985. They were gone in four, along with the Wall.

It was during my time in WED that I was blessed with participation in a two-week summer programme at ENA (Ecole Nationale d'Administration) in Paris aimed at educating a small group of us on how France was governed. It was wonderful, not least because it coincided with a music festival which brought music of every kind to almost every street corner of Paris.

On secondment to Cabinet Office, 1985-87

CM: It was the Cabinet Office next in 1985. What was your role there?

RC: My role was to manage various Cabinet sub-committees, either as Secretary or as Chair of those that were attended at official level. Robert Armstrong was Cabinet Secretary. Christopher Mallaby was my boss and I assisted him in his involvement in the Anglo-Irish Conference, long before the Good Friday Agreement and the Blair negotiations, but an important step in that direction.

My main responsibility turned out, by chance, to be the Channel Tunnel negotiations with the French Government. Round about the time of my appointment Mrs Thatcher had undergone her conversion on the subject. Provided it could be built without using taxpayers' money, i.e. by the private sector, she agreed with President Mitterrand to give it a go. Teams were set up, led by the respective Ministries of Transport, with seven on each side, representing the government departments involved. I was the Cabinet Office representative. We met every week, alternately in Paris and in London.

Our first task was to produce the Invitation to Promoters, a document which was published and set the parameters of the project. The contestants were the Channel Tunnel Group (as we have it now), Eurobridge, Euroroute (part bridge and part tunnel) and Channel Expressway (a drive-through tunnel with tramlines in the road to take trains). Channel Expressway was sponsored by James Sherwood, owner of the ferry company Sealink who quite possibly got into the act to sabotage the whole idea.

The Invitation to Promoters had an introduction which it was the responsibility my French opposite number (a charming and distinguished former permanent secretary of the French Defense Ministry) and me to produce on the political setting of the project and why it needed to be done. We got along very well and working with him was a great pleasure. At the very

first meeting of both teams, the French chairman said, 'Our leaders have decided that this must happen and it is our job to make it happen. That is our commitment. We know that your Prime Minister would like to have a drive-through system; you know that we have an interest in railways. What matters to us is what will work. We need to come up with the best proposal. If at any stage we suggest something that causes you difficulty, tell us about it and we will try to find a way to adjust to your needs. That is the spirit of this negotiation.' And it was like that; it was really like that. To be working with the French for a common purpose in this way was a great treat.

We saw a lot of each other. After the Invitation to Promoters we then had to do the assessment of the bids that came in by the deadline set, and after the choice had been made we had to negotiate the bilateral treaty to make it all happen. During the assessment period we set up what was called the Star Chamber when each of the proposers would come and spend a morning with all fourteen of us, the two teams, and we would question them on the basis of their bids, everything from engineering to finance and traffic assumptions. It became increasingly clear that there could be only one choice, the Channel Tunnel Group, not least because of the security advantage of packaging all traffic in trains at either end and unpacking them at the other. Even so there was a nice French touch at the very last moment, when a private messenger came from Mitterrand to Thatcher, basically saying, 'Can we really not do a drive-through?' Mrs Thatcher said, 'No, we can't do a drive-through. We have to do the train.'

It was pretty obvious once you understood the reasons. Euroroute was rejected as being un-financeable and the Eurobridge was too risky, at the mercy of the waves, the weather and above all shipping. Nicholas Ridley as Secretary of State for Transport was in charge on our side and he seemed determined to drive the hardest bargain possible with the obvious winner by giving the appearance that he was backing Channel Expressway with their drive-through option with tramlines down the middle. He used this position to try to persuade the Channel Tunnel Group, headed by Sir Nicholas Henderson, to undertake a joint venture with Channel Expressway with a drive-through tunnel and with the length of the concession also in the discussion. But this was resisted with a last minute undertaking to give the feasibility of a drive-through tunnel consideration at a later stage if appropriate.

CM: Did you find any differences in French methods of approaching a project like this from British ones? Was there friction about the means, if not the end?

RC: It was a huge undertaking and I had just one small part of it which was entirely on the political side, not on the engineering or the financing, legal or anything else apart from in the broadest terms. There were no great differences; we worked together remarkably well and our meetings were always open to new ideas. When we were talking about border controls on either side, I suggested we should consider having both national border and customs controls back to back on each side of the Channel in order to avoid queues at both ends. The idea found favour and came to be known as the 'juxtaposition' of controls. That's just an example of how easy it was to work together. It was a very positive experience – and this was under Thatcher. I very much doubt it would be possible today.

Both teams were invited to the banquet given by Mitterrand in Lille celebrating the signing of the Treaty. I still have the menu signed by both leaders.

I was Secretary at the Cabinet Meeting when the Channel Tunnel came to Cabinet, which it did a couple of times: one preparatory and one for the final decision. I was only at the table for this one item, but there was some discussion. The person who spoke most sensibly after Ridley's introduction was Kenneth Clark. He had obviously read the brief thoroughly and knew a lot about it and had clear, sensible views. He was Paymaster-General, I think, at the time.

Another memory is waiting for the Cabinet to show up, in the hall the other side of the No. 10 door. There was a doorman who had been there for donkeys' years. l think his name was George. Everyone knew George. While we were waiting for the Cabinet to arrive, I asked George what he thought about the Channel Tunnel. George said, 'Well, if it were left to me, I'd fill it full of Frenchmen and then flood the thing.' Then he opened the front door and the Cabinet started to arrive.

I enjoyed my time in Cabinet Office and learned a lot. It was interesting to see the encounter in a larger forum of ministers and officials, not just one minister as one was used to in the Foreign Office. And to cross paths with the big characters, the Willie Whitelaws, and see the respect that they commanded among other Ministers when they were involved. I was left in no doubt that, ultimately, politics is all about personal relationships.

Economic and Commercial Counsellor, Madrid, 1987-91

CM: After the Cabinet Office it was off to Madrid as Economic and Commercial Councillor in 1987. Are you a Spanish speaker?

RC: Yes, I had a year with VSO in Bolivia and I also had A level Spanish. Both Merril and I were given language training in Santander where we stayed with a welcoming family. It was wonderful. We set off for school each morning with satchels on our backs and had personal tuition.

It's important to catch the flavour of the time. Spain had just joined the European Community. I don't think I've ever lived in a country which took its identity so much from its future rather than its past. The Spaniards felt they had rejoined the mainstream of European development, where they should have been all along, and they were determined to take their place in the vanguard of Europe's future development. The Franco period was hardly taught in Spanish schools. A line was drawn. For the future everything was possible.

For me, as Economic and Commercial Counsellor and Director of Trade Promotion, this meant opportunities and the most interesting job in the embassy. On the Economic side I spent a lot time with people from the Trinidad, the ministry with responsibility for Europe, particularly dealing with the early discussions of a common European currency; and on the commercial side we hosted and organized many trade missions and participation in trade fairs. I had a very good commercial team, mainly local people but one or two from the FCO as well and we worked very hard on all this because there was so much that could be done.

Spain was a country with a great many small family businesses which needed new investment, technology, and modern management to survive and grow. What they could offer new investors was market share. I spent a lot of time back in the UK speaking to Chambers of Commerce around the country with this message: come to Spain. We set up an Embassy list of Spanish companies looking for European partners so that when we had visitors in a particular sector we could say, 'here are four companies you might go and talk to who are looking for a possible foreign investment partner like you'. I remember getting a phone call after this had been in place for a year or so from a British businessman who said, 'You won't remember me, but I came to see you last August. I was looking for opportunities in Spain and you gave me the names of two companies I should look into. I'm just calling to tell you that I've just completed the purchase of both of them.' It was very satisfying. We had offices in Bilbao and in Barcelona which I would visit regularly, but as I say, a good deal of the work was on two-day visits to local Chambers of Commerce in the UK, just saying, 'Wake up. Spain is ready and looking for people like you.'

I think Food was my first major trade fair in Barcelona at which there was a large participation of British Food companies on a large stand which we had arranged. Their top people were there and the first evening I took them all out to dinner. The waiter handed out Spanish menus to all of us and then rattled off the customary list of what was 'fuera de la carta', not on the menu but also available. At the end of this the dozen British gourmets around the table looked at me for advice. Still quite fresh from language training I had not understood half of what the waiter had said, but I had heard one item that I knew and liked very much for a starter which was 'setas', mushrooms. I described how in Catalunia they served mushrooms very big and fried with garlic and they were delicious. Everyone seemed happy so I ordered twelve plates of 'setas'. It was not until they arrived and were distributed that I realized I had misheard the waiter. These were not 'setas' but 'sesos', and 'sesos' were sheep's brains. 'Funny looking mushrooms,' said someone.

We also had, in the same year, a visit by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and a State Visit by the Queen, the first visit by a British monarch since Charles I came looking for a wife. Part of the background to the Prime Minister's visit was the issue of whether or not we would participate in EXPO92, a World Fair, being hosted by Spain in Seville, the home town of Spain's prime minister, Felipe González. This would be the same year that Spain would host the Olympic Games in Barcelona, both concrete expressions of the new Spain. González, a Blair-like figure in many ways, wanted to project Spain both in Europe and on the world stage.

Mrs Thatcher thought World Fairs were a waste of money – and she had a point. There was a school of thought in the Conservative Party that felt we should set an example and just not participate in them anymore. She refused to commit Britain to taking part. The Spaniards obviously wanted a British pavilion to be there and they wouldn't take no for an answer. My job was to quietly negotiate a good spot for a possible UK pavilion at Seville and to make sure it remained available in case she changed her mind. It was felt that Mrs Thatcher had to come before the Queen because there hadn't been a prime ministerial visit either and the business of government had to precede the ceremonial State Visit.

The Prime Minister arrived in Madrid at a time when relations were not good between her and her Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe. The ambassador, Nicholas Gordon-Lennox, and I met them at the airport; he drove into town with the Prime Minister and I followed in a separate car with Geoffrey Howe. I asked him how things were shaping up for the visit. 'I

have no idea. She didn't speak to me during trip over. Her half of the plane was closed off.' So that's what he had to deal with. In spite of that local stand off the visit went well. Mrs Thatcher did a couple of things on the commercial side. She opened an exhibition of British cad-cam (computer-aided design and manufacturing) for which we wrote her quite technical speech. She had a brief look at it, memorized it and then gave it. It was impressive. She also opened a new Marks and Spencer store in Madrid. And at the dinner Felipe González gave for her she announced that Britain would participate in EXPO92 in Seville.

The Queen's State visit was of course a much bigger affair. I was involved in a conference on the role of the City of London, hosted by the Governor of the Bank of England on the Royal Yacht Britannia in port at Barcelona. Because the Queen was otherwise engaged in Madrid with the Ambassador and Lady Nicholas Gordon-Lennox in attendance, Merril and I were their stand-ins at the event on the Royal Yacht. We issued one hundred invitations and we had one hundred acceptances. Space was limited – the same room was used for the morning half of the conference, for the lunch for 100, and again for the conference in the afternoon. A lot of furniture was moved and while it was being moved we were all up on deck - for drinks before and coffee after lunch. It was beautifully done. The Governor of the Bank of England and the Governor of the Bank of Spain were the two main figures and the rest were drawn from the financial sectors in London and Madrid. It made quite an impact.

It was a Christmas tradition in Madrid to put on an Embassy pantomime. We had a good one at the end of that year, entitled 'My Fair Lord' in honour of the much-loved Nicky Gordon-Lennox. It revolved around an imaginary love affair between Margaret Thatcher (played wonderfully by the Naval Attaché) and Felipe González, who was portrayed wandering wistfully outside a dimly lit No 10 Downing Street singing 'I have often walked down this street before'. It included a duet sung by the two of them '… off to Gibraltar to find us an altar, but get us to the church on time.'

CM: This is a slightly odd thing to ask. Are you metabolically suited to Spanish hours? Did you have lunch at two and a period of rest before returning to the office at six?

RC: You grow to love them. Yes. Lunch was usually at three o'clock to five and restaurants didn't open for dinner before nine. We had summer hours for three months when work started work at 8 am and ended at 2 pm. What changed my life personally was having a Vespa. We lived half way between Madrid and the airport and it saved me up to an hour getting to work in the mornings. I always knew how long it would take me to get anywhere

and I didn't need to use embassy drivers. Outside the Ministry of the Economy I would just park my Vespa with all the others. Traffic ceased to be a problem. I could even get home for lunch, although most days lunch was a working event.

We loved Madrid life – the tapas and wine bars, coffee shops and restaurants. People lived on the streets in the warm climate. A favourite of ours in the old part of town was called Café Concierto where if you went at 11:00 pm you could hear a good, quasi-professional, string quartet playing a Schubert or a Beethoven string quartet, one item. And they played it again at 1:00 am and 3:00 am. You could take your pick. No extra charge. There were many places like that with different themes throughout the night. And often traffic jams at 5 am.

I had a visiting trade minister who I discovered had been a song writer for Dire Straits before entering politics. I met him at the airport and drove him to his hotel. He was a bit morose and tired, not hugely engaged. I managed to persuade him not to waste the evening and to come out for dinner during which I told him about the latest craze for Sevillanas, a dance from Seville based on the bull fight, performed by members of the public who dance on the stage to live music, just three or four couples at a time. We got there at about half past twelve or one. I couldn't get him out of there until after 4 am. He was fascinated. A couple of times I reminded him that he had a nine o'clock meeting the next day. He said, 'No, no, no. This is too good'. He was not at his best the next morning but he caught the atmosphere. Spain was infectious.

We had a ball in Spain and we were sad to leave. It was one of those moments in time when everything was positive and forward-looking, a good time to be busy and working on establishing relationships that would lead on to new things. And, thankfully, I had nothing to do with Gibraltar.

Head of Southern African Department, FCO, 1991-94

CM: In 1991 you went back to London and became Head of Southern Africa Department. This is where your experience in Zambia ten years earlier became relevant.

RC: Yes. This was my best and most interesting job in London. Zambia was part of my patch, which was ten of the sixteen member countries of SADC (Southern Africa Development Community).

CM: Mandela was released in 1990 and things were starting to move in South Africa. Was that the big issue of your time in that department?

RC: When I arrived in the job Nelson Mandela had just been released from prison by President F W de Klerk and supporting the process of transition in South Africa was the number one issue. Immediately before starting I attended a ten-day conference at Wilton Park on Southern Africa. Lynda Chalker, Minister for Africa, chaired it. There was representation from almost every country in the region. We had the government of South Africa there as well as the ANC and Inkatha. We had both sides from Angola, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola). We had the FRELIMO (Liberation Front of Mozambique) government in Mozambique, though not RENAMO (Mozambican National Resistance), and we had Zimbabwe, Namibia and others. It was a very lively conference because suddenly the game had changed and we were into a period of transition which emanated from South Africa and affected the whole region.

One of the issues right from the start was violence in the South African townships which was very largely between the ANC and Inkatha, the largely Zulu party headed by Chief Buthelezi. The cost in lives was terrible and Mandela was blaming President de Klerk for stirring it up. It became a serious political issue. One of the ANC representatives at Wilton Park was Joe Modisi who was the head of MK (Umkhonto we Siswe), which was the armed wing of the ANC. I met him one evening at the bar at Wilton Park. He talked to me about South Africa from an ANC perspective. We discussed the fighting in the townships. He said that what was needed was international observers right there in the townships. I asked him what he wanted observers to do - report what was happening to the UN? - and what sort of people did he want? He said, 'We need police. Crimes are being committed and we want people who have experience of scenes of crime and know what to do.' I thought this was interesting. The sanctions against South Africa forbade any police collaboration at all during apartheid and had done for twenty years. One could only imagine what the South African police methods would be in those circumstances.

I came back from Wilton Park with the germ of an idea – to find a way of getting international police on the ground in South Africa. Building on that conversation with Modisi, we worked up an idea, if we could get police in, that they might report to and work within the multiparty internal South African structures which the de Klerk government and

the ANC were beginning to set up. Cyril Ramaphosa, now President, was the ANC chief negotiator. We had the Presidency of the European Union and I used to go to Brussels once a month for the Africa Committee meetings. We worked up a proposal in the FCO to get a team of European police, drawn from a number of countries, who would be clearly identifiable, wearing EU Police t-shirts and they would be inserted into the troubled townships to work alongside the South African police and report to the newly established South African judicial authorities, resulting from the negotiations between President de Klerk's Government and the ANC. Douglas Hurd particularly liked the idea of involving other Europeans, not just British police.

I was in regular touch with the Deputy Head of Mission at the South African Embassy in London, an open-minded guy who had previously been President de Klerk's private secretary. At one of our lunches I put the idea to him, emphasizing that the European police would work within the South African judicial structure and would be nothing to do with the UN. He liked it and put it personally to de Klerk. The next time I saw him was after the South African Cabinet had discussed the proposal in principle. He said it had been one of the longest Cabinet meetings on record, with much resistance but they had finally approved the idea. That gave me the go-ahead to go to Brussels and invite other countries to join. There was an encouraging response from the Dutch and some others and it became an EU project. We provided the most, four or five police, I think, for a six-month period. I found myself interviewing police officers for the role. Lynda Chalker, as Minister for Africa, gave me a lot of scope to run with this. And it worked. They did go out, they did wear the t-shirts and get national prominence in South Africa and they did help to lower the level of violence in the townships, begin to change the ethos of the South African police and help bring some credibility to the rule of law.

There was a side issue to this which was of significance. The experience alongside European police was a total novelty for the South African police who had been cut off from modern policing methods for a generation. One of our volunteers specialized in community policing. He told me that he had been approached by the South African police who had asked if he would give a talk at one of their police academies on modern policing methods. This was still completely against sanctions restrictions at the time, but he did it discreetly and it went down well. He was asked to speak at other police academies.

The relaxation of sanctions was one of the issues we dealt with. During that period things changed fast. Sometimes what was forbidden in the morning became possible by the evening. I also remember the case of a UK company that made ejector seats and wanted to sell them for a Swiss military aircraft that was sold to South Africa. Someone jokily suggested that they should be permitted 'on humanitarian grounds.' Not accepted! The excellent desk officer for South Africa was Rob Fenn, who became a successor of mine in Jakarta later in his career.

I accompanied Lynda Chalker whenever she visited South Africa and I met FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and Chief Buthelezi on several occasions. Things moved quite fast. But then there was a strong backlash to F W de Klerk's initiative and a right-wing challenge from the Conservative Party, which won a string of bye-elections. De Klerk responded by calling a whites-only referendum on whether the country was behind him or not. It was a brilliant move. His policy of negotiation was endorsed and then he had a way through. The Conservative party was effectively sidelined.

I continued to see my contact at the South African High Commission. After the European police initiative was up and running, I told him that the idea had come not from me but from Joe Modisi. He laughed and said, 'I'm glad you didn't tell me that before.' Around that time we were running a training course at the FCO for possible future South African diplomats from the ANC and other parties. I persuaded him to talk to them about the South African diplomatic service as a career. It was a daunting task but he did it well.

On one of my visits to South Africa I met up again with Joe Modisi, the future Defence Minister, and was able to remind him of our meeting at Wilton Park. I also later took him to the Farnborough Air Show and showed him the controversial South African stand there. He was rather pleased and said he thought it was quite right that South Africa should now be represented at Farnborough.

Whenever there is a General Election in the UK it is customary in the FCO (and maybe in other government departments) for two separate sets of briefs to be prepared that can be presented to either a new Labour or Conservative government, based on each party's manifesto during the election, on the day following the elections. On many subjects of foreign policy there is little or no difference and alternative briefs are not required. But ever since the beginning of apartheid in South Africa the subject had been a touchstone of political

difference between the parties, and at every election two alternative sets of briefs were required.

For the 1992 election I was responsible for providing the briefing on South Africa for the incoming Government. I sat down with my team to discuss how our policy towards South Africa would change if Labour were to win the election and form a government. We concluded that, with de Klerk's government having decided to end apartheid and in discussion with Nelson Mandela about extending the franchise to all South Africans, and with our policies all directed towards encouraging and supporting this process of transition, there would be no change to our policy, whichever party won the election. And so, for the first time, I believe, since apartheid was imposed in 1948, for the UK elections in 1992 the FCO prepared only one set of briefs on policy towards South Africa which would be appropriate for whichever party took office. I was rather proud of the unanimity of views which that represented.

Some time later I remember Frank Judd (ex-Labour FCO Minister) coming up to me after listening to a speech which Lynda Chalker had given (and I had written) on the British Government's policy towards South Africa and saying to me 'I could have given that speech.'

Nelson Mandela visited Britain in 1993 before the first universal elections under the interim constitution in South Africa and addressed a joint meeting of both Houses of Parliament. During his visit he also gave a lunchtime talk at the CBI which I attended. He arrived and sat in the front row while the Director General introduced him. Then, amid great applause, he got up, mounted the stage and went to the podium. When the applause stopped, he said that he would have liked to make a speech but the text of his speech had gone missing. While his people looked for it he would tell us some stories about South Africa. It was stated so gently and naturally that everyone laughed. But his team of minders were caught completely unawares and raced out of the room. He told a couple of stories before the speech eventually arrived. But it was quite clear what was happening. He was training his staff. Not a word to them before he mounted the stage, and not a hint of criticism or embarrassment. But you could be sure that his speech would not be left behind again.

The interim constitution provided for a Government of National Unity (GNU) for the first five years and the way this was done was that any political party that won twenty seats in Parliament would have a seat in the Cabinet. The National Party and the Inkatha Freedom

party were the two beneficiaries of this provision although President Mandela included members of other parties also in his GNU. F W de Klerk was one of two Vice Presidents, the other being Thabo Mbeki, who eventually succeeded Mandela.

If that model of inclusion had applied in the first Angolan elections in 1992, when Jonas Savimbi's UNITA agreed to participate, the outcome would have been so different. In a massive turnout, UNITA won 34% of the vote in the Assembly and under the South African system would have had a solid representation in the Cabinet. But Angola had a winner takes all system and as a result another decade of civil war followed. For me one lesson from that period was you cannot move from civil war to first past the post democracy in one step. Power must somehow be shared for the first few years. It puts into perspective the genius of Mandela in seeing what was required and his partnership with F W de Klerk. They were both extraordinary people.

As a parenthesis, after I retired from the FCO I worked for the Global Leadership Foundation (GLF) whose founding Chairman was F W de Klerk with Nelson Mandela as its Patron. Douglas Hurd and Lynda Chalker were founder members and it grew to around thirty former leaders, from every continent and across the political spectrum, of good repute who were prepared to offer advice to today's leaders on a discreet and confidential basis. I took over from John Shepherd, who had helped establish it, and I worked for GLF for ten years: five years with the grand title of Secretary General and, to start with, a staff of one and the other five years as Projects Director. My last project with GLF was in Mozambique in 2016.

I met Jonas Savimbi once while I was Head of SAD. It was during an EU Ministerial Troika visit to Angola shortly before the Angolan elections of 1992. Lynda Chalker had been taken ill in Zambia and was unable to make the visit but the other two EU Ministers (one of them was Jan Pronk from the Netherlands) were there. Savimbi was holed up in Luanda in a barricaded building at the top of a hill given over to UNITA for the duration of the elections. It was an extraordinary experience. We drove up, got through the extreme security, and then sat in his presence for half an hour. He didn't say very much, but I have never encountered such a powerful, intimidating, charismatic personality in my life. It was very strange, but I could understand why thousands followed him.

In Mozambique we had the largest UK military training programme anywhere in the world at this time. We still had control of the Nyanga military base in Zimbabwe where we had a training centre for the Zimbabweans. Nyanga is close to the Mozambican border. We

offered to help integrate the forces of FRELIMO, the Mozambican government forces, and RENAMO, the opposition forces, at Nyanga. As part of the 1992 peace agreement negotiated in Geneva, both sides agreed to send their soldiers out of the bush to Nyanga for integration training. The way the British army did it was to establish regular companies of eighteen men drawn from both sides, and put each company under the command of a British regimental sergeant major. His job was to make life hell for them for sixteen weeks and unify them against him. He put them through long marches, climbing mountains, crossing rivers at four in the morning and they emerged with a hatred of this man that brought them together. That was the intention. My job was to keep this programme afloat vis à vis the Treasury, who were wanting to close it down when RENAMO took their time in deciding to show up. They did, eventually. Lynda Chalker went out for the passing out parade. Driving from the helicopter to the central building, Lynda turned to the driver and said, 'So which side are you from?' The driver drew himself up and said, 'Madam Minister, I am a Mozambican soldier.' So we thought maybe it had worked.

The Portuguese Government became quite upset about our prominence in Mozambique and its Foreign Ministry was convinced that we were trying to get Mozambique to join the Commonwealth. I was despatched to Lisbon to tell them that the Commonwealth had absolutely nothing to do with it. It just happened that we had a post Zimbabwe training camp in the area which could be useful in ending Mozambique's civil war. I think they believed me. But sure enough, Mozambique ended up joining the Commonwealth.

I must tell you about Malawi and Dr Banda and the Church of Scotland. Dr Banda, over ninety years old, was a problem. He was a complete dictator, but his time was coming to an end and everybody wanted to try to persuade him to go gracefully, or if not, at least to hold a referendum on whether the country should have free elections. He wasn't having it. Kenneth Kaunda, who had done the right thing next door in Zambia and allowed open elections to be held and accepted the opposition's victory gracefully, came through London. Lynda Chalker and I met him and she said 'What do we do about Dr Banda? He really should do what you've just done. Can you talk to him?' He said, 'I wouldn't make any difference, but I'll tell you who would: the Church of Scotland. He became a member of the Church of Scotland when he was a GP in Streatham in his youth and he is still a loyal member. Get the Moderator of the Church of Scotland to do something.' So we said, 'How about you asking the Moderator of the Church of Scotland to do something?'

The result of this conversation was that two days later I escorted Dr Kaunda on a flight to Edinburgh. Somebody had to go with him; he'd never held a passport in his hands, let alone an air ticket. We met the Moderator of the Church of Scotland who did send a message and a messenger. It is not possible to make any particular linkages; all sorts of other pressures, such as the suspension of aid by all Malawi's main donors, were being brought to bear as well. But he eventually agreed to hold a referendum on democratic elections, though not without trying to have separate ballot boxes for 'yes' and 'no' votes. We got over that one, a UN monitored referendum was held and, after an overwhelming vote in favour, Malawi did have its first elections.

There are a couple of little annexes to that story. The day trip to Edinburgh with Dr Kaunda involved a very early start for me. The FCO car came to collect me in Emperor's Gate at half past four in the morning before collecting Dr Kaunda and take him to Heathrow. He was staying at his daughter's house in North London. I showed the address I was given to the driver and we arrived outside a semi-detached house with the dawn just breaking on the horizon. I knocked on the door and there was no reply. I knocked again. Long pause, then I heard footsteps coming downstairs; the door opened and a large, bearded, rather unpleasant-looking man appeared in the doorway in his dressing gown. He said, 'What the **** are you doing here at this hour of the morning?' I said, 'I'm looking for Dr Kaunda. Is he here?' 'No,' and he slammed the door in my face. Not an easy situation and I wondered what to do next. As I walked back to the car the door opened again and the man called out, 'Is he a black fella?' I said, 'Yes, he is.' 'Oh, he's next door.' So with great relief I went next door, knocked and the door opened immediately and there was KK, with his two pencils, as always, in his top pocket, all ready.

As part of the campaign to persuade Dr Banda to retire, Lynda Chalker had the idea of asking Lady Macleod to go out to visit and talk to him. Her husband had given Malawi independence when he was Colonial Secretary and she had kept in touch with Dr Banda ever since. We briefed her quite carefully and she agreed to go despite having had polio and requiring a wheel chair. Her visit was further complicated on arrival by the fact that the High Commissioner in Lilongwe who met her had great difficulty in getting the wheel chair into his official car, which then broke down between the airport and the Embassy and she was stuck in a ditch for half an hour. Relations between them did not get off to a good start. She stayed with Dr Banda at his Palace and emerged three days later to be taken back to the airport. She saw Lynda Chalker on her return and was quite angry. 'You've got it all wrong.

Banda is in very good health; his mind is all there and he is absolutely the right person to carry on governing the country.' During her three day stay Dr Banda had managed to talk her round from her mission completely.

I visited Lesotho. Our representation there was from South Africa and Lesotho is surrounded by South Africa. In the little aircraft flying in I was seated next to a nice guy with a pony tail down his back, in jeans and a t-shirt. I asked him what brought him to Lesotho. He said, 'I'm from the Inland Revenue. The Commonwealth Development Corporation is why I'm here. I'm working in the Ministry of Finance.' In my rounds the next day I had a meeting with the Minister of Finance. I said, 'What's with the fellow with the pony tail?' He said, 'He's extraordinary. He arrived. We didn't quite know what to do with him; he was sent from the Commonwealth, so we stuck him in a back room that happened to be empty and told him to do whatever he wanted to do. Within a couple of months we became aware of what he was doing. He did not change any laws or regulations, but simply by seeing where the leaks and problems were and plugging the loopholes, he has doubled our tax revenue for the year.'

I consider that the most effective piece of aid I've ever come across.

We used to hold an annual conference of all the Heads of Mission covered by SAD usually either in London or in South Africa. For old times' sake I suggested one year we hold it in Zambia at the South Luangwa National Park. When we first arrived there, about sixteen of us including Lynda Chalker, there was an elephant flipping through the reception book, turning the pages with his trunk. We all had to stand back until he had wandered off and we could sign in ourselves for our conference. We did game park rides at 6 a.m. each morning; we worked from nine until five and did another game park ride each evening. It worked well.

Ambassador to Ethiopia, 1994-97

Today is 21 June 2021 and this is the third interview with Sir Robin Christopher for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording.

CM: We're starting this interview in the year 1994, Robin, when you were appointed Ambassador to Ethiopia. What a wonderful place to go.

RC: It was indeed; we were very lucky. The circumstances were that we were in London with two children under the age of five. We both had extremely interesting, involving and busy jobs. My Southern Africa responsibilities took me travelling a lot. Merril was Finance Editor at *The Economist*. We were both at full stretch and loving it, but with the

responsibility for two very young children we decided that we should stop and go abroad, at least for a few years. It turned out to be ten. As far as I was concerned, I looked at the job of my Under-Secretary boss Anthony Goodenough. He had personal responsibility for planning and budgets and I, as Head of Department, was responsible for the policy and its implementation. I had been on the crest of this wave of the end of apartheid and all the changes in the rest of Southern Africa; it was a great job and there was nothing above it that interested me. So I told Personnel, 'I've got three more jobs to go and I'd like to stay abroad' and they kindly agreed. They said, 'How about Ethiopia?' I was delighted.

It wasn't part of my African patch, but in many ways Ethiopia is not really part of Africa. It's different in so many respects. It has two thousand years of history going back to the time of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Christianity arrived within ten years of its coming to Rome via two survivors of a shipwreck in the Red Sea; but centuries later the country was cut off from the rest of Christendom by Islam for a thousand years. As a result the religion of today is not dissimilar from what you might have found on the road to Santiago de Compostela in the fourteenth century.

Ethiopia is often described as the only country in Africa that was never colonized by Europeans which was why Addis Ababa was chosen as the headquarters of the old Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU). The second largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia had its own long imperial history and, as a result, it is made up of about eighty deeply seated ethnic groupings. The traditional leaders were from the Amhara region, but the largest group are the Oromos. The Somalis are in the south-east Ogaden region, the Afars on the eastern coastline with a multitude of smaller ethnic groups in the Southern Region. The Tigrayans are in the north with their own language and a long history going back to the Aksumite Kingdom in the first century AD. They dominated the transitional government in power when I arrived and saw themselves as having lived under Amhara domination in the Ethiopian 'Empire' since the end of the nineteenth century. Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam were but the most recent manifestation of this colonisation, the latter inflicting on the country an unprecedented order of terror, death and destruction.

Ethiopia has its own, difficult, national language, its own calendar and its own very distinctive food. I remember going to an Africa Union festival at which every country produced its typical food. You could tell if a country had been colonized by the French or the

British just from the food, with one exception, Ethiopia, whose food was unlike anything else.

CM: Those funny rolled up towels.

RC: Yes, injera, semi-fermented millet made into giant pancakes which everyone shares. Yes, we grew to love it.

Again we were very lucky with our timing. When we arrived in the spring of 1994 Meles Zenawi and the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) were leading a transitional government (TGE) which was taking the country through a transformation unlike anything in its history. With no national experience of accountable government to speak of, Meles's government was planting what it regarded as the seeds of democratic institutions by holding three elections in three years (for regional government in 1992, for the Constitutional Assembly in June 1994 and for a National Parliament in May 1995).

Meles Zenawi was a remarkable man in many ways who led his country out of extreme poverty and through a decade of relative stability and with the highest growth rate in Africa. He recognized that governing such a diverse country required a fine balance of ethnic recognition and representation and firmness of central authority. But he made ethnicity fundamental to politics and each political party was defined ethnically. Many leaders of the non-Tigrayan parties were in exile or prison. The tool of government would be an ethnic coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), but this was in fact controlled by the Tigrayans. For all the talk, it was really a one party state. To add to the complication, Addis Ababa, as the historical capital of the Amhara state, was enemy territory for Meles and his party the TPLF.

Meles Zinawi and his team had left school or university to fight Mengistu and the Derg. When they came to power, they wanted to take their truncated education further and they approached the British Government who arranged for the Open University to set up a three-year MBA programme for the whole Cabinet, including President Meles and his Prime Minister. (Later Meles became Prime Minister under the new constitution.) The Embassy was not involved in running the programme. Teachers came out regularly for tutorials with their students and they took their exams at the British Council offices. When they graduated, on 4 June 1995, the Vice Chancellor of the Open University came out to present the degrees at a private ceremony, which we attended, in their Cabinet Room. Meles Zinawi, then aged 40, achieved three successive distinctions, almost unheard of at the Open University, in his

third language and while running the government. That evening the students (i.e. the Government) invited their teachers, and Merril and me, to a bring-your-own bottle party, dress code: jeans. At the end of the evening as the teachers bade farewell to their students and left for the airport for the last time, I remember one young female tutor embracing the President and saying "Well, Meles, it's been real!"

I had great respect for Meles and I saw him quite often, particularly when I became Chairman of the Donors' Group of ambassadors. He was always generous with his time. We had quite a large aid programme in Ethiopia and the FCO, particularly Lynda Chalker, as both Minister for Africa and Minister for Development, was interested in the UK doing whatever we could to support Meles's government.

The transitional government decided that they needed a more open election than that for the Constitutional Assembly to give legitimacy to the new parliament and the EPRDF government that would follow. President Meles and his Foreign Minister, Seyoum Mesfin, entered into discussions with the Donors' Group of ambassadors which revolved around two main issues: participation of the opposition parties and some form of international observation of the elections. I found myself quite deeply involved in both.

Initial contact with the four main opposition parties was facilitated by the Americans in Washington under the auspices of a Congressional Subcommittee on Ethiopia in February 1995. Washington is a particular stronghold of the Oromos (a high proportion of DC taxi drivers are Ethiopian Oromos) and the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) leadership was joined by the Southern Coalition, led by Dr Bayene Petros, plus an Amhara group and a group from Addis Ababa/Washington. Meles sent his own representative, Dawit Johannes, Speaker of the interim Parliament. The US ambassador Irv Hicks and I, as chairman of the Donors' Group, also participated. It broke the ice on contacts between the transitional government and the opposition but only Dr Beyene Petros showed any signs of taking the next step towards participating in the elections. It was agreed that talks with him would continue on our return to Addis.

Dr Beyene Petros was a decent, courageous, straightforward man, and on our return he and Dawit Johannes met with US ambassador Irv Hicks and me in attendance. We met every week for a month but with only limited progress on the conditions for election participation. Dr Beyene's initial enthusiasm was being reined in by his supporters and it was clear that he just didn't trust the Tigrayans. I asked him, 'What would bring you in? Here you have an

opportunity to get a foot in the door of power by participating in the first democratic election in Ethiopia and getting national recognition and representation in Parliament. There will be international observers and there will be freedom of expression guaranteed. What are your real conditions for participating?' He said, 'There are a number but the most important is the release of political prisoners. Without that, there's no way.' Dawit said, as usual, there were no political prisoners. So I asked for a list of those whom Beyene claimed were political prisoners. At our next meeting he came up with a list of thirty names including two judges who, he said, were all held in prisons in the Southern Region. So I told the Donors' Group of ambassadors, and six of us agreed to charter a plane and fly down to a small town called Jinka where the largest group of eleven were supposedly held and try to see them. We told the Government and it was all above board. We stopped off at the southern regional government and met the local authorities. Jinka was still a long way, right out in the sticks. The runway ended virtually in the town square. We were met by the local mayor who was very polite and took us to the prison and agreed to remain outside himself.

So the prison gates opened and we went in and met the prison governor. He said, 'Who do you want to see, the criminals or the politicos?' I said we had come to see the politicos and I gave him our list. We spent the day interviewing them one by one, their circumstances, what had led to them being in prison and also how they were being treated. In their cases there was only one sign of maltreatment. These were all intelligent local people of importance and with a clear sense of their own political identity, which was obviously opposed to the EPRDF.

Then we went home. I saw Meles and told him about our visit to Jinka prison. I told him that the opposition would not consider taking part in the elections unless political prisoners, some of whom we had met, were released. He said, 'But we don't have political prisoners.' I said that he had six ambassadors, representing his major donors who were supporting this election, who believed that he did. He said, 'They're at perfect liberty to get lawyers and go through the courts and get themselves out.' I said, as politely as I could, that time was short and he needed to have them released. It took a long time. I suspect Meles couldn't swing it with the rest of the TPLF leadership. But, rather graciously, he did finally acknowledge, at a long meeting with the ambassadors who had visited Jinka, that something had gone badly wrong there and the local administrator had been arrested and two judges had been freed. The other prisoners we had met were eventually released, but not in time to get the opposition to take part in the elections.

The elections were going ahead anyway and we had meanwhile set up the Donors' Election Unit (DEU), staffed by an independent political adviser and three election experts who would run the election observation using as observers embassy personnel of the main donor countries already there. Meles would not agree to any NGO participation. In the end we had about forty people with some understanding of election observation, who were able to visit anywhere in the country from up to two months before the elections. Something like this had never happened in Ethiopia before.

The observer activity on election day focussed on localities where there was going to be a challenge. While only one small opposition party participated (fielding 85 candidates and having just one elected) there were many courageous independent candidates who stood against the EPRDF candidates in their constituencies. I decided to sign up as an election observer in a constituency up in the northern Amhara region which I had visited where there was a farmer whom I had met on a visit to a project who was standing as an independent. Merril was also an observer in the Bale mountains and did a pre-election visit in the Afar region. Distances were huge and I dropped off at one or two places along the way. It was looking so-so with stories of compulsion to vote. With no organised opposition on the ticket, turnout mattered. We got to my village and the election happened. I was there at the voting and at the counting. It was well done, and transparently done. My independent farmer was on the ballot paper and he won. There was great jubilation.

Driving back afterwards I thought this is a good sign. If this has happened in even a handful of constituencies around the country, it will have demonstrated to the opposition that they should have participated. Well, I got back and discovered that my guy was one of only two non-EPRDF candidates in the whole country to be elected. And it rebounded against me because the government took it into their heads that he had only won because I had been there and had probably fixed it. It was seen as a stain on their victorious record throughout the country. Added to this the DEU report on the elections, which the donor ambassadors all signed, while it went out of its way to praise what it could by way of the organization of the elections and their significance for 'the development of democracy', could not say the magic words 'free and fair', not least with none of the main opposition parties participating and only two non EPRDF candidates ending up in parliament (where neither of them lasted very long). The report was presented to the government and unfortunately leaked - though it was bound to be published eventually. So the government didn't speak to me for some months. I was in the doghouse.

Distrust is a big issue in Ethiopia. It is understandable given their long and turbulent history, their strong sense of identity and the depth of their ethnic divisions. And Government distrust of foreigners, particularly NGOs, is strong and difficult to deal with. There is a story that they tell about themselves which I came to feel offers an insight into the Ethiopian character. The Archangel Gabriel comes down from heaven, visits an Ethiopian and says, 'I will give you anything you want, on one condition: that your neighbour has it in double measure.' The Ethiopian thinks for a while and replies, 'Blind me in one eye.'

Here is another perspective on Ethiopian history. There is normally a famine in Ethiopia every ten years. Wollo is a part of Ethiopia about the size of Wales, cut off from the rest of the country behind mountains, which is always worst hit whenever there is a famine. There was a big NGO conference in 1994 when famine loomed and the focus was on the need to build roads into Wollo. A speaker at the conference from Oxfam described how he had been the first person to deliver food aid to Wollo back in 1974. When he got there, he'd seen some large, old granary stores and he asked what they were. He was told that the local people had built them at the time of the famine in 1964. 'But', he said to them, 'there wasn't a famine in 1964 in Ethiopia.' They told him, 'There was in Wollo.' He said to the conference 'There you have forty years of Ethiopian history: 1964 when there was a famine in Wollo and nobody outside Wollo knew; 1974 when there was a famine and people did know and a few people like me arrived to deliver some food aid; then there was 1984 when the whole world knew about Wollo, because of Bob Geldof and Live Aid, and here we are in 1994, finally putting roads into Wollo. Forty years of Ethiopian history'.

When I realised that, after a reasonably promising start, I had ended up in the government's bad books I turned to public diplomacy and the opportunity offered by the centenary of the British Embassy estate, the greatest asset we have in Ethiopia. Tradition has it that in 1896 Emperor Menelik II, a few months after defeating the Italians at the battle of Adwa, gave one gasha (about 90 acres) of land outside his new capital to Queen Victoria for the establishment of a permanent British Legation. There is no record of this gift, but in acknowledgement of it the Ethiopian Embassy in London is the only foreign embassy whose rates are paid by the British Government.

For the first few years there was only a tented camp on a barren piece of land. In 1900 the first Legation buildings were constructed in the Ethiopian thatched 'tukul' style. In 1910 a fine residence was built. A century of landscaping, planting and care had transformed the

area into one of the loveliest properties we have anywhere in the world, with indigenous trees rising up the hillside and every kind of bird. It also had the only golf course in Ethiopia, six holes, which you went round three times and was the home of some thirteen giant tortoises (all numbered) which our daughters used to ride. In winter we grew the golf course grass which we then cut for hay for the horses which were kept in stables on the Embassy grounds. At weekends we would ride out of the gates and go for picnics in the hills. It was the stuff of dreams.

In a posting like Addis Ababa you have a relatively free hand to come up with ideas and, working with my excellent team, particularly Jeremy Astill-Brown, we set up a programme of events for the Embassy Centenary which spread over eight months with something every month. There was an important archaeological dig taking place in the north in Aksum led by Professor David Phillipson from Cambridge University who kept his buckets and spades at the Embassy when he wasn't there. To open the Centenary programme he gave a lecture at the Residence on the history of Aksum and its archaeology.

Sir Wilfred Thesiger, the explorer and writer, who was born in the Legation tukuls in 1910 when his father was Minister there, came and celebrated his 86th birthday in front of them, with an exhibition of his own photographs of Ethiopia inside them, surrounded by 400 Queen's Birthday Party guests. Having lived in Ethiopia during the reign of Haile Selassie, he had always refused to go back while the Derg and Mengistu were in power. I went to see him in London and invited him to come and stay with us as part of the Centenary programme. He was quite old by this time and he came with Pamela Egremont as his delightful companion, and they stayed with us for the first two weeks of June. We put out the word that Wilfred Thesiger, of considerable local renown, would be in the tukul where he was born with his photographs during afternoons while he was staying with us. Over a cup of tea he would talk about the past and his life and time in Ethiopia. We had a good turnout of Ethiopians, people from government, international organisations and other Embassies - 15/20 people each day, and press coverage. It was very informal and those who came seemed quite entranced.

I commissioned a history of Anglo-Ethiopian relations from a local historian, Professor Richard Pankhurst, 'Britain in Ethiopia', which was widely circulated. A local theatre company put on A Midsummer Night's Dream in the wonderful grounds of the Embassy, and there were two trade fairs which were well attended. A chance meeting on holiday in

Ullapool on the west coast of Scotland at a Saturday evening ceilidh brought me in touch with a young violin/fiddle player of exceptional talent. After hearing him play I asked him if he would come and play in Ethiopia for a few days as part of our Centenary celebrations if I provided the airfare but no fee. And he could stay with us. Paddy Duncan was his name. He had never left Scotland in his life but he came and did a great job – and had a great time. He played at a couple of embassy functions and he visited the local music and other schools, met the students and introduced them to Scottish music.

Colonel John Blashford-Snell, who led the 1968 expedition down the Blue Nile, gave a talk and Antony Peebles gave a piano recital. And we had the very great pleasure of having an 'Artist in Residence' with us for a month. He was royal academician Anthony Eyton, who painted a number of glorious pictures of Addis Ababa, the people and the surroundings and one of the Residence. I always expected that would be the one which would be chosen by the FCO art department to be hung in the Residence to commemorate the Centenary. But they chose a different painting and so I am happy to say that I was able to purchase it myself.

We ended the centenary programme with a visit by the band of the Royal Marines. There was a well-known choreographer, Royston Mulldoon, who specialised in turning a hundred street kids in the slums of big cities into a dance company in just thirty days and getting them to perform in public. He'd done this in Naples, Durban and in Glasgow. He came to Addis Ababa, and for the climax of our Centenary celebrations in November we arranged an evening event in Mescal Square, the huge main square in Addis Ababa in the shadow of a big castle with terraces overlooking it. The 'Centenary Spectacular', which Lynda Chalker loyally attended, consisted of a ballet danced by 100 Ethiopian street children to the music of Carmina Burana and a performance by the marching band of the Royal Marines ending with Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture as the magnificent, locally funded, fireworks display began. It was watched by over 50,000 people and was a huge success. And it helped to bring me in from the cold.

The other centenary was of the battle of Adwa on 1 March 1896, when the Ethiopians defeated the Italian attempt at colonization from their base in Asmara, now Eritrea. Ambassadors were invited to travel far north to the battlefield for the official commemoration of the battle. The Italian Ambassador was a good friend. This was not an easy occasion for him so he sent his Defence Attaché to represent him. He and I shared a Jeep for the battlefield tour. In the front was our guide, a lady from the village of Adwa. She told us the

full story of the battle in which her grandfather had fought, to which the Italian Defence Attaché replied 'So did my grandfather!' It made the tour quite poignant, the battle of the grandfathers, out there in the desert for the centenary of the event. The two of them embraced.

The historic Magdala expedition of the 1867-8 was the 19th century equivalent of the Falkland Islands War. Its origin was a message from Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia to Queen Victoria, as one Christian Emperor to another, asking for assistance in fighting Islamic encroachment. This went back via the consul in Asmara, but the Foreign Office did not look favourably on supporting Tewodros' 'crusade' while Britain was closely engaged with the Ottoman Empire and the message was not answered. To catch Queen Victoria's attention Tewodros took the British Consul in Asmara hostage. That did result in a message delivered in person by an emissary from the British government saying, 'Release my consul.' The messenger was taken hostage. This began to focus minds in London. Then Emperor Tewodros rounded up a random group of a dozen Europeans who happened to be in Ethiopia at the time and imprisoned them in a mountain fortress at Magdala. There were various other increasingly frantic attempts to persuade him to release the hostages, but it didn't happen. Finally, the British Parliament authorised the Magdala Expedition, commanded by Lord Napier, to go to Ethiopia and free the hostages.

The expedition all came from Bombay, 13,000 men, 26,000 camp followers and 44 elephants. They landed in what is now Eritrea, built a railway line for logistics twenty miles inland and set off for the interior with the elephants pulling the guns. They fought the battle of Magdala just before they reached the castle. As the English troops climbed over the ramparts of the castle, Emperor Tewodros shot himself, using a pearl encrusted pistol which had been given to him on his coronation by Queen Victoria. His final instruction to his wife was to bequeath his two-year-old son to the safe keeping of Lord Napier, because he would have been killed if left to his Ethiopian rivals. Lord Napier occupied the castle, took all the paintings, the holy relics, the books and bibles which mainly ended up in the Victoria and Albert Museum. They took up the twenty miles of railway, boarded their ships and left. All this was at the height of the scramble for Africa, when the Belgians and the French were grabbing territory and we were doing much the same further south. Tewodros's son was brought up in Windsor Castle in the entourage of Queen Victoria and died of influenza at the age of nineteen. He is buried in St George's Chapel at Windsor. A statue of Lord Napier on horseback is today at the entrance to Hyde Park.

Michael Sargent, my dear friend who was the Head of the British Council, organized an expedition to walk the Magdala expedition route. It took them three weeks. I wanted to participate fully, but I couldn't disappear for that long and there was no reliable way of communicating while on the expedition. I joined them twice, at a half-way camp for a couple of days and nights and at the Magdala fortress itself. Among the group of people that Michael had got together was Susan Belgrave, then in her seventies, whose great-grandfather had been second in command to Lord Napier. Every evening of the Magdala expedition he had written letters to his wife back in England, describing the scenery, what they were doing, the duck shooting and what was happening in the local village. Susan Belgrave had brought copies of the letters with her. They were all dated and Michael's expedition followed the route and camped on the sites where the Napier expedition had stopped on its way to Magdala. Each evening Susan would read out the letter that her great-grandfather had written from the exact spot where we were camping, describing the scenery a hundred and thirty years before. Merril and I went together to Magdala for the final 'assault' and we camped for a couple of nights on the top of the Magdala fortress, which remains very much in the wild.

The African Union held its meetings in Addis Ababa at its headquarters and once a year there was a Heads of Government meeting. One year President Mubarak was coming from Cairo and he decided at the last moment, literally the night before, that this might be a difficult trip and he'd take his bullet-proof car with him. That involved another plane. He arrived at the airport and on the way into Addis he was ambushed, big time. His life was saved by his bullet-proof car which turned around and went straight back to the airport. Mubarak flew back to Cairo without attending the meeting.

There followed the hunt for the assailants which went on for a few days. Then at the weekend we heard shooting, just down the road from where we were, a mile or so, quite a serious exchange of gunfire and I concluded they must have found them. It went on for three or four minutes and then silence. That night when we put the children to bed, on their bedroom floor I found a bullet. I looked up and there was a small hole in the corrugated roof of the residence. A mile away during the exchange a bullet must have been fired up into the air then fallen through our roof. Our younger daughter had nightmares for a week afterwards.

I always flew Ethiopian Airlines to and from Addis Ababa whenever possible. It was a good airline, comfortable, friendly and generally on time. In those days when an ambassador flew out to post for the first time he would fly first class. We flew Ethiopian.

Earlier on the day of departure we had deposited our springer spaniel puppy, Jessie, at Heathrow airport. She was coming with us, much to the excitement of the two girls, then aged 5 and 3. When we boarded the overnight flight we discovered that we had the first class cabin to ourselves. As we explored the gadgets, the lights, the seats that went completely flat, the screen and film choices, the captain entered the cabin from the cockpit, introduced himself and asked if we were comfortable. Then, with a big smile, he turned to the children and said "I want you to know that Jessie is safely on board and she is very well".

So of course I always travelled Ethiopian.

There were occasions, however, when flights were not on time. One flight I took back to London was three hours late in leaving Addis. I fell asleep in the comfortable airport VIP lounge and had to be woken when it was time to board the plane. Once I was installed (not in first class) the captain came through to apologise and to ask whether, as compensation for the delay, I would like to join him in the cockpit for take-off. I accepted with pleasure and accompanied him back to the cockpit of the big Boeing. I strapped myself into the jump seat between the pilot and co-pilot and kept silent while they went through their routine preparations for the flight. It was late on a beautiful afternoon when we took off and the sky was magnificent with the setting sun. It was quite a thrill.

Once above the clouds and settled into the flight the pilot switched onto auto-pilot, undid his safety belt and turned around to face me. 'Welcome aboard, Ambassador. I'd like to discuss my father's visa application to visit the UK.' I told that story to Meles. He was much amused.

There is a lovely story of one of my predecessors, perhaps in the 1950s, who invited his newly arrived deputy to go shooting with him in the hills behind the Embassy. The new arrival knew nothing about guns and somehow managed to shoot his boss in the backside in the course of the afternoon. The ambassador was taken off to hospital, not critically injured, and his new deputy sent a telegram (a rare thing in those days) back to London which read: 'Have shot ambassador and assumed charge. Letter follows.'

I was also accredited to Eritrea and Djibouti and I had a 'droit de regard' over Somaliland, whose independence was not recognized. This brought me in contact with two remarkable characters, President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea and President Mohamed Ibrahim Egal of Somaliland.

Afwerki was an autocrat with Napoleonic pretentions who became a tyrant. He joined hands with Meles Zenawi to defeat Mengistu in Ethiopia but then, shortly after my time, fought a terrible border war with him. In fact he managed to pick a fight with all four of his neighbours in the first few years of Eritrea's independence. I visited quite frequently, including to celebrate the Queen's Birthday with the British community, consisting mainly of VSO volunteers on a programme which I had helped to establish. I arrived with a large quantity of stilton cheese and strawberries.

The ODA ran an aid programme in Somaliland in the capable hands of David Hill. Egal was an entertaining character whose theme was never far from his quest for recognition. I still have a letter from him in which he says, '… I am truly looking forward to see you personally and bomblast you as Her Majesty's envoy. Come please.' He told me how he had once said to Issaias Aferwerki that the difference between the two of them was that Issaias had a patron (i.e. Meles Zenawi) and that was the reason for Eritrea's independence and recognition. He said Aferwerki was furious, and replied 'What do you mean, patron? I told Meles that if he did not give me independence, I would fight him and he knew I would win.'

HMA to Indonesia, 1997-2000

CM: The next stage is in 1997. You were in Ethiopia for three years. The Foreign Office kept its promise to let you stay abroad and sent you to Jakarta. This was a new area for you.

RC: It was Rob Young who rang me and said, 'How about Jakarta?' It was a new part of the world for me although I had passed through it on my way home after India years before and taken a motorcycle around Bali. Jakarta is not a wildly enticing city, but the country is wonderful, and for me potentially very interesting. Suharto had been in power for thirty years and there was just a chance that things might change. I have always regarded the well-known Chinese curse 'May you live in interesting times' as a blessing, and if you're in the business of diplomacy and have the chance to live anywhere in interesting times then you should go for it. So I said yes, and was I right. My three years saw a financial crisis, revolution, three Presidents and the birth of the nation of Timor-Leste.

Indonesia is an archipelago of over 17,000 islands of which around 6000 are inhabited and 5 have significant populations. It is the world's fourth most populous country. 'Pancasila' (five principles) was President Sukarno's way of including religious tolerance in Indonesia's founding constitution. I think it was Voltaire who said, 'One religion is a dictatorship; two religions is conflict; three religions is harmony.' Indonesia has the largest Muslim population

of any country in the world but it is not an Islamic state. It is a secular state which recognises six religions. I always had the impression that culture trumped religion, not the other way round. Bali is predominantly Hindu. Around 10% of the population are Christian, the largest proportion of whom are the economically powerful Chinese minority. Chinese business supported Suharto and was largely responsible for the country's remarkable economic growth. The bulwark against political Islam was the military. By and large it served Indonesia well on this score, if not on others.

Suharto was very much in the saddle when I arrived in March 1997. He presided over a strong, centralised and military dominated government which was able to maintain stability over Indonesia's vast, sprawling and diverse archipelago. Having come to power as an anti-communist military dictator, his record on development, particularly in terms of education and literacy, was impressive. He did some good things, despite the repression. But the invasion of East Timor in 1975 would be a thorn in the side of his country's foreign policy for the rest of his life. It was never accepted by the United Nations.

The 1997 General Election in the UK a month after our arrival, which Labour won, put the bilateral relationship with Indonesia into question. Robin Cook became Foreign Secretary with a much trumpeted 'ethical' foreign policy in which the considerable arms sales to Indonesia, in particular BAe's Hawk aircraft and their suspected use in East Timor, figured prominently. Indeed, on the Labour Government's first day or so in office the British press featured coverage of the AGM of British Aerospace at which the board had been pelted with tomatoes in protest against these very sales. The Indonesian government was uncertain what to expect from the new UK government and I reflected this in my messages to London. Robin Cook, quite courageously, decided to make a visit to Indonesia his top priority after he had completed his initial European and US visits.

Then the unexpected happened. Robin Cook's affair with a member of his staff, Gaynor Regan, hit the British press. He received a phone call from Alistair Campbell in No 10 on his way to Heathrow on holiday telling him that he had to decide immediately whether or not he would be divorcing his wife. He issued a press statement to this effect at Heathrow airport. A few days later I received a personal message from him saying that he was somewhat overwhelmed and asking whether it would matter if he cancelled his visit to Jakarta. I replied that I thought it would matter, that cancellation after such a build-up of expectation would be open to misinterpretation. He agreed to come as planned.

When he was on his way, I received a call from the FCO saying that that they had done as much as they could to prepare him and put him in the right frame of mind for the visit, but the Labour party conference later in the year was very much on his mind and there was much press speculation about the Indonesian visit. I was told that there was still work to do.

In the event the visit, in August 1997, went rather well. Robin Cook proved to be more open minded, flexible and sensitive than I had expected. We began with a long private dinner at the Residence with a few key members of the Embassy team. The positive achievements of President Suharto's dictatorial rule in Indonesia, the extraordinary rise in literacy rates and living standards and the general modernization of the country, were new to him. I mentioned in an offhand way that Suharto liked to be known as the 'father of development' in his country. He was also impressed by the importance to the Indonesian Government of their relationship with Britain.

The following day his programme would have three main elements, calls on the long-term Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and on President Suharto and on the Head of the Human Rights Commission. This was a genuinely independent body, headed by someone who would become Law Minister in the post Suharto era, which did good work in blunting and bringing to account many of the grosser abuses of the dictatorship.

There were three outcomes of the visit. Cook was able to offer tangible support for the Human Rights Commission in the form of significant additions to their library and a commitment to remain engaged. On arms sales, whose reduction I had already advocated to London (much to the disgruntlement of my Defence Attaché), I asked the Foreign Secretary not to make any surprise announcements, privately or publicly, that could be regarded as hostile during his visit, and he didn't. On the issue of East Timor, I suggested that he could be as outspoken as he liked, it was expected. And that was how he played it, despite the best efforts of John Humphries in a live interview for the BBC's Today programme to get him to say more. At his meeting with Suharto, to my great surprise, he even referred to the President as the 'father of development' of his country. That went down well.

He left, after really quite a good visit, no harm done. I discovered that the key to a local head of mission's influence is in the car in a traffic jam. If you get stuck in a traffic jam with your Foreign Secretary, and the head of news department is in a different car, as Nigel Sheinwald was in Jakarta, you can say what you have to say without fear of interruption. And he listened. Many people didn't get along with Robin Cook, but that visit was my main contact

with him and I liked him. In the back of the car he wrote a post card to his Mum who was in a care home in Eastbourne or somewhere. He gave it to me and said, 'Please could you put this in the bag and make sure it is posted? I send her one from every city I visit.''

One thing that was happening in Jakarta in those early days was that refugees from East Timor were climbing over the walls of embassies, seeking diplomatic asylum and asking to be taken to Portugal. It seldom worked and they often ended up trapped. The Austrian Embassy had to house and look after an asylum seeker for nine months. Our Embassy wall was covered in razor wire just to prevent this. My nightmare was that this would happen to us while Robin Cook was visiting. We were such an obvious target and it would have been quite a difficult situation to handle. So there was some relief on that count at the end of Robin Cook's visit.

We then went off for a weekend to recover and we were on the beach when I got a phone call saying Princess Diana had died in an accident in Paris. We returned at once, prepared a condolence book and opened the Embassy gates wondering what would happen. For a whole week we had queues around the block. We had to put out many condolence books. I used to go round, morning and afternoon to have a chat with people in the queue who were waiting for two or three hours in the heat of the day to sign. Diana had once visited Jakarta and she was remembered with affection. By the end of the week we had ten thousand signatures of people who had come through the open gates of the British Embassy, and not one of them had sat down and said, 'I'm from East Timor and I want asylum and to go to Portugal.'

We spotted in the *Jakarta Post*, an English-language newspaper, a notice that the Indonesian Christian Women's Association were holding a memorial service for Princess Diana in the cathedral. The cathedral was quite large, opposite the main mosque. So Merril and I thought we should attend. There was no invitation. We went and were recognised and escorted up to the front row. The cathedral was full, ninety percent women. The service was partly in English, but mainly in Bahasa Indonesia which I didn't really speak. I was on my knees when other people were on their knees and I got up when they got up and then there was a silence and the nice lady next to me pointed to the pulpit and said, 'Now, please, Mr Ambassador, will you give us the eulogy to Princess Diana.' Thank heavens for the time I'd spent with all the condolence book-signers outside the Embassy, when I'd picked up the themes that interested them and so had a few things to say. That was a surprise.

One of the duties of a new ambassador is to call on individual members of the government personally. It is a time-consuming business but it is often useful. It can also deliver special moments. I arranged to call on Suharto's Minister for Religious Affairs who was a woman. I boned up on current religious issues in Indonesia and on the role and status of women. I quite looked forward to hearing her views on both. And so I arrived and was escorted up to her ministerial office and we sat down together. But it soon became clear, due to the brevity of her replies to my questions, that she was not interested in discussing any of the issues I raised. There was a pause while I racked my brain for more. And then she leant forward quite earnestly and said 'Ambassador, there is really only one question I would like to ask you. Will Camilla be Queen?'

Indonesia under Suharto was very corrupt. I began to understand the meaning of this at my first meeting with the Consul in our Embassy, a redoubtable Scottish lady. I asked her how many Brits were in prison at the time. She said there were seven, all drugs related. I asked what we could do for them. She said that what would happen to them, including the length of any sentences, would depend entirely on how much money their families back in the UK could raise to bribe the judge. What we, the Embassy consular service, could do to help them was to find them a lawyer who would actually pass the money on to the judge and not keep it themselves.

When I arrived, there was a delightful banned novel about Indonesian corruption doing the rounds in Jakarta as samizdat called Doing the Business. I was given a copy by the jokey New Zealand ambassador on my introductory call on him, but he signed it as 'A gift from the Australian ambassador'!

The Asian financial crisis began in the summer of 1997 in South Korea and Thailand and it soon had a profound effect on Indonesia. The IMF showed up and insisted on tough measures, including the closure of sixteen banks and a rise in the price of petrol, in return for support. Suharto signed and left for a meeting in Malaysia. His notorious banker son, Tommy, called a press conference and said he had three things to announce, 'First, my father didn't understand a word of that document he just signed with the IMF; second, anyone who is a friend of the Finance Minister is no friend of the first family; and third, I'm suing the Government'. The corrupt vested interests were fighting back.

The economy began to collapse and unrest grew. There was a story going around Jakarta at this time - the Indonesian word for the financial crisis was 'crismon', monetary crisis – that

God calls a meeting of the three most important people in the world: Bill Clinton, Jiang Zemin, President of China at the time, and President Suharto. God says, 'I've called you together because I have to tell you that the world is going to end in three days and you must go home and tell your people.' Bill Clinton goes home, goes on television and says, 'Fellow Americans, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that I met God and God said 'God bless America'; the bad news is that the world's going to end in three days.' Jiang Zemin goes home and says, 'Comrades, it's all bad news. First of all God exists, and secondly the world is going to end in three days.' Suharto goes home and says, 'My children, it's all good news. First of all, God summoned the three most important people in the world and he included me; and secondly 'crismon' will be over in three days.'

It was 'crismon' that finally brought Suharto down. He was coming up for 're-election' as President in February 1998. The crisis hadn't peaked, but it was getting serious. He chose as his Vice-President an extraordinary personality, B. J. Habibie, five foot tall, a brilliant aeronautical scientist, who had lived in Germany most of his life and worked for Messerschmitt. He never stopped talking and was effusive about everything. He was attempting to set up an aerospace industry in Indonesia and was a great favourite of Suharto's. The military didn't want Habibie, the ruling party didn't want Habibie, but Suharto wanted Habibie. In February 1998 he had his way and Suharto became President again with Habibie as his Vice-President. By May Suharto was out. He had absolute power in February and by May he was history.

In April things started to fall apart with the consequences of the collapse of the rupiah. Various factions of the military could be seen at night stalking each other in tanks around the streets of Jakarta. There were a million people on the streets and the Parliament building was occupied twenty-four hours a day with people even sleeping on the roof. It was chaos. The immediate cause of the riots was police firing on protesting students, at least two of whom died. The main shopping centres around town, which were Chinese-owned, were in flames. It became quite dangerous. The British International School (BIS) had a bus service to take children to school. It was on the other side of town from us and it normally took an hour and a quarter to get there every morning. At the height of the troubles they rang one day to say, 'It's got so bad that we're not going to use buses tonight. The children can stay here or you can come and collect them yourself.' Merril went off with our wonderful driver - her parents were with us at the time and her elderly Dad went too. It was many worrying hours before they returned having encountered numerous flaming road blocks, reaching the school and

bringing the children home. That evening I had a call from the headmaster of BIS saying that the mob was getting close to the school and a number of teachers and children were spending the night there. He was concerned. What should he do? I told him to turn all the lights in the building on and to make as much noise as possible to indicate it was full of people. I would call the local military authorities, which I did. And I think they took prompt action. For whatever reason the mob stayed clear of the school, which then closed for a while.

It soon became clear that Suharto was not going to survive and I sent a telegram to London to that effect. What finally did it was when he held a press conference at which everyone expected him to resign and instead he said, 'I'm going to reshuffle my cabinet.' His entire cabinet refused to serve and it was over. He resigned on 21 May 1998.

Habibie took over and by this time we were evacuating the British community. I had to personally call in three jumbo jets, one of which I, rather curiously, signed for. I encountered a great weakness in our Warden system. In the communities of British people around the country, where there is a cluster somebody is appointed Warden, who is the contact for the Embassy when it needs to spread advice in time of trouble. In a crisis the Consular Section is in touch with the Wardens every day. It reached the stage that for ten days we kept the Embassy open twenty-four hours a day with shifts through the night and people sleeping in their offices. The trouble was that many of the Wardens were leaders of the British business community representing major companies who took their people out of harm's way at the first sign of trouble. I remember ringing one of the Wardens and getting a recorded message saying, 'I am afraid I have gone to Singapore, but if you're looking for the British Embassy's advice, it is keep your head down and don't go out too much.' It was a week old. That wasn't the advice; the advice now was get the hell out of here and we've got planes laid on. London helpfully sent me a message saying it was time for all non-essential staff to leave. After consulting my staff, I replied 'I have none'.

We had meetings of European ambassadors every morning for twenty minutes at our Residence, because we had the EU Presidency. We had a three-point agenda: what happened last night, what's expected to happen today, and whose national airline has any empty seats for that evening. There was good EU co-ordination and it was very useful. But getting to the airport was a highly risky business. The American Ambassador, Stapleton Roy, had the house next door to us and we worked closely together.

Habibie took over and managed to ride the wave for a year, but it was very unstable. I remember some of my reporting at that stage. The head of the military was General Wiranto. There were certain days of the week when, if he wanted to, and it was quite possible that he did want to, Habibie could have sacked him and survived, and there were other days of the week when no way could he sack Wiranto, he was totally dependent on him. It was an extraordinary relationship between the head of the army and this moderniser midget, the relatively unknown Habibie, who was trying to steer the ship through troubled waters. But the institutions, such as they were, held and Habibie took the initiative of going himself to the Parliament (which Suharto seldom did other than on pro forma occasions), telling them his plans and promising elections within a year. He was an extraordinary person who, one could see, irritated everybody, but he handled it well. (I took one senior visitor from the UK to see him who, having failed to get a word in edgeways for forty-five minutes, scribbled me a note in desperation saying 'How the hell do we get out of here?') When asked by a journalist for his reaction to the news that Transparency International had classified Indonesia as the most corrupt country in the world, he replied 'Well, at least we are best at something!' I knew him quite well. He once likened political management in a crisis to the aerodynamics of an aeroplane in flight – the need to be able to stay in the air while moving forward. He asked me to come and see him one evening at nine o'clock at night because he just wanted to tell some foreign representative that the previous night there had been a coup attempt and his house had been surrounded by a military faction. They had demanded that he resign. He'd refused and they'd left.

Today is 28 June 2021; this is the fourth interview with Sir Robin Christopher for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording.

CM: Robin, we finished last time in the middle of your three dramatic years in Jakarta and we were about to talk about the question of East Timor. Would you like to pick up there?

RC: Yes. East Timor, or Timor-Leste as it is now called, came to play a significant role in my life during my three years in Indonesia, and later after I retired and was working for the Global Leadership Foundation (GLF).

After the Carnation Revolution of 1974 in Portugal four years after the death of President Salazar the new Portuguese government withdrew from all its overseas colonies, including East Timor. The self-determination movement in East Timor, led by FRETILIN

(Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), declared independence in November 1975, causing concern both in Jakarta and in Washington. President Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, regarded the spectre of another Cuba arising in an island in South East Asia, so shortly after American withdrawal from Vietnam, with concern. So when President Suharto informed them that he would not allow the self-declared Marxist FRETILIN to take over and that he intended to occupy the half-island state and incorporate it into Indonesia, Washington agreed to look the other way.

A quarter of a century of brutal occupation followed. With the exception of Australia and countries of ASEAN, the rest of the world refused to recognize Indonesian sovereignty in East Timor. The issue became a seriously debilitating thorn in the side of Indonesian foreign policy. There were frequent talks with the Portuguese but they got nowhere. Portuguese governments, disturbed by feelings of historic responsibility, supported East Timor´s right to self-determination. Indeed, they were the vocal lead within the EU. By the time I arrived in Jakarta in 1997 it was a matter of EU policy that no EU ambassador to Indonesia should ever visit East Timor. Embassy staff were permitted to visit, and mine did, but not Heads of Mission.

In the turmoil that followed President Suharto's fall in May 1998, the demand for a referendum on independence arose in East Timor and was taken up by Portugal, so vociferously by their Chargé d'Affaires in Jakarta, Ana Gómez, that she was almost expelled.

By chance the UK held the Presidency of the EU for the first six months of 1998. Having visited Jakarta the previous year, Robin Cook was responsive to the idea that we should use our EU Presidency to break the mould and arrange a visit to East Timor by the EU Troika ambassadors, comprising the UK as leader together with the previous and subsequent holders of the Presidency. We had to persuade the Portuguese that the time had come to end the embargo on ambassadorial visits but that was easily done. And the Indonesian Government could hardly refuse since they had always wanted us to visit officially, thereby implicitly acknowledging the territory as part of Indonesia. Foreign Minister Ali Alatas insisted that any visit take place before the end of June 1998 since they preferred the prospect of it being led by the UK rather than by Austria. While he could not say no, privately Alatas told me he was strongly opposed to any such visit which he predicted would stir things up dangerously in East Timor. He was right, it did.

Our delegation, consisting of the UK, Dutch and Austrian ambassadors, the EU Commission representative in Jakarta with one from Brussels plus a member of my staff, was greeted on arrival in Dili by a pro-Indonesian Government demonstration organized by the provincial Governor. But when we called on the Governor later in the day, we began to see what the real state of play was. Despite the best efforts of the police and the Indonesian security forces, a large crowd had assembled outside his office shouting for independence. During our meeting in his office a stone smashed his office window and some demonstrators managed to force their way into the building. We were locked into the Governor's office, with the Governor, for our safety. Once order had been restored and we left, we found ourselves escorted back to our hotel at snail's pace by a large crowd that seemed to want to carry our minibus. We had expected our visit to be welcomed, but not quite like this.

The following day was Sunday and our programme envisaged attendance at the 8 a.m. mass at the cathedral and a meeting with Bishop Belo. In anticipation, crowds started assembling at the cathedral two hours beforehand and we were told that it would be too dangerous to go. So we arranged for some of the meetings we had planned to be brought forward and be held in our hotel. It was not long before the crowd at the cathedral learned that we were not going to show up there and set off on the two-mile walk to our hotel. My first realization of what was happening was when I looked out of the hotel window during a meeting with student representatives and discovered that our hotel was surrounded by heavily armed police and that half a mile away a very large crowd was slowly making its way towards us.

To prevent a possibly catastrophic confrontation we decided to go out and meet them before they reached the police. At least the police would be less likely to open fire if we were in the front line. We hurried downstairs and out onto the street, pushing our way through the rather surprised lines of police and on towards the advancing crowd. Once they understood who we were, thanks to the student representatives whom we had been meeting who ran ahead of us to tell the first wave of arrivals, we were greeted like heroes and escorted back to our hotel through the baffled security forces. A large crowd congregated outside our hotel. We assembled on the steps of the hotel and, with the help of one of the student leaders as interpreter and a loud hailer, I told them the fact-finding purpose of our visit, our wish to speak to as many people as possible, our understanding of their situation and our desire to learn more and to report back to our governments. Now that they had delivered their message to us so effectively, I encouraged them to go home peacefully.

As I delivered this message the branch of a tree in the middle of the crowd, on which at least six people were seated to get a better view, broke and they all fell to the ground amid much laughter and general good humour. That eased the tension. We had a full but chaotic day of meetings in Dili with the crowd surrounding our minibus wherever we went. At one point the EU Commission representative leant over and whispered in my ear that he thought I ought to know that he had a heart condition!

We made our one excursion outside Dili to the small town of Baucau about one hour's drive up the coast. The local bishop was a significant figure whom I wanted to meet and we also needed to see how things were outside the capital. We received a briefing from the Indonesian military on the outskirts of the town and were told that everything was quiet and peaceful, nothing like Dili.

So our little procession of minibus, security cars with armed soldiers, various local officials and assorted press including BBC and CNN, proceeded over the hill and down into the town. We were met half way down the hill by another large crowd who had come to meet us and escort us to the cathedral where we were due to meet the bishop. On arrival the gates to the cathedral were opened for our minibus and closed behind us and we went into the building. Behind us the first security car found itself shut out of the cathedral grounds. When the driver tried to insist that he be allowed to enter he was told that military vehicles were not permitted on church grounds. An argument developed, the crowed became angry and began to bounce the car, which was by now isolated from the other official cars. Things got out of control and a young soldier in the back seat panicked and fired his gun out of his window, killing one of the demonstrators.

We heard the shot and the subsequent uproar as we sat down with the bishop in his private rooms. We were there for a couple of hours while order was restored (without further bloodshed) and then returned directly to Dili where we called on Bishop Belo. We cancelled a dinner with the Governor.

We were due to leave around midday the following day. But later that night we were informed that, due to concern about a possible confrontation of pro- and anti-government demonstrations at the airport when we left, the Government in Jakarta had decided to take us out early by military plane. So, sworn to secrecy, we left our hotel at 5 a.m. for the airport unaccompanied by any crowd.

Apart from the tragic death of the young demonstrator, the visit achieved its aim of putting Timor-Leste's future further up the list of President Habibie's priorities. In January 1999, provoked by a letter from the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, representing a change in Australian policy and suggesting autonomy with the possibility of independence further down the road, Habibie persuaded his Cabinet (six of whom had military backgrounds) to agree to a referendum being held under UN auspices in Timor-Leste on a Government offer of autonomy within Indonesia.

The referendum finally took place, presided over by UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor) on 30 August 1999, fourteen months after the Troika visit. During that time I visited East Timor a number of times, because it was now very much centre-stage in the job. There was much interest in London and Derek Fatchett, the FCO Minister of State, visited and was personally very engaged up until his very sad death. The Troika visit had awoken people to the situation and there was continuing interest in how this story would emerge from the Indonesian revolution in the new post-Suharto era. This interest translated into a significant UK presence at the referendum.

UNAMET was headed by Ian Martin, a former (British) head of Amnesty International and a UN representative of great courage, intelligence and determination. He had a tough and dangerous job establishing the conditions for the referendum to take place. At one point following the referendum the Indonesian military-inspired local militias were throwing hand grenades into his UN compound in Dili. He refused to be withdrawn.

I was an observer at the referendum and I chose to stay with a group of British police who had been sent out by DfID to support the process. The experience is worth recording because it was unusual.

The British police contingent had been there a week or so when I arrived and had a rough idea of the lie of the land and where on the island the militias were in control. One of them had been on an early morning patrol in the countryside in his Land Rover when he was stopped by a villager who asked him what he was doing. On hearing that he was there to support the referendum and to help ensure that all those who wished to could vote, the villager asked him to return to the same spot at the same time the following day. This he did, and the villager climbed on board and directed him up into the hills for three or four miles. The policeman's concern that he was about to be taken hostage disappeared when he found himself in one of two or three villages which he didn't know existed and a big crowd waiting

for him. They had heard about the referendum, but the referendum hadn't heard about them. They wanted to have a polling station in their village since the nearest town for which a polling station was planned, named Liquica, was down in the valley and was controlled by the pro-Indonesian militia. In their mountainous location they felt less threatened. So he arranged it and I went with him on referendum day as the international observer for their polling station.

Polling began at 8 a.m. We arrived around 6 a.m. in order to ensure that everything was in order. Even at that hour we passed a long queue of people waiting patiently to cast their vote for the very first time in their lives. They knew they had to vote "no" to autonomy and they knew that "no" meant the possibility of independence. They did so with smiles on their faces and in an atmosphere of pure joy. After voting they would burst into song and dance. The entire community of around five hundred people had voted by midday.

Having nothing further to do at that polling station I visited Liquica during the afternoon, down in the valley. Liquica had become infamous recently for intimidation and killings by the militias. There I found a completely different scene: queues just as long, waiting to vote in the main square in the heat of the day, but in sullen silence. There was a strong, visible UN presence along with various international observers and press. But the military-backed militias were also there, armed and wearing their distinctive red headbands, patrolling with an air of menace, as close as they were allowed to get to the people waiting to vote. There was an extraordinary atmosphere of intimidation, fear and defiance. Voting continued late into the evening. The people doggedly stood there for four or five hours in absolute silence, until every single one of them had voted, then clustered together for safety as they went home afterwards. I'm sure there would have been reprisals in some cases for having voted. It was just such an extraordinary contrast with what I had witnessed in the hills in the morning.

I returned to the house of the British police (as it had become known) where I was staying and we spent the evening sharing our experiences of the day. A young police sergeant arrived late in a state of exhilarated exhaustion. He had spent the day providing security for the ballot boxes collected from around the country by helicopter. In one place the polling station had been in an open field. He jumped off the helicopter when it landed and as he was loading the last of the ballot boxes the helicopter came under fire from the woods around the field. He was told to jump on board immediately, which he did but lost his grip on the last ballot box which shed its load of voting papers across the field. The chopper took off safely

and was undamaged. His comment on his experience of the day was, “This doesn’t happen in Hastings!”

Along with most other international observers I left a day or two later. Before I left, I attended a meeting with the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative for Timor-Leste, Sergio di Mello (who was killed a few years later when he was SRSG in Iraq). At this meeting he told us of disturbing indications that preparations were being made by the Indonesian military and their collaborators in case the result of the referendum rejected “autonomy”. It seemed that people in the countryside were being moved, possibly in large numbers.

I returned to Jakarta and a day or two later Kofi Annan, from New York, announced the result of the referendum: an overwhelming rejection of the proposed autonomy. This meant a vote for independence. I had been allowed to visit Xanana Gusmao the East Timorese guerrilla leader, in prison in Jakarta once or twice after Suharto’s fall and had arranged his first ever press interview, held with Derek Fatchett who was visiting from London, in the prison, with the BBC. Now he had been transferred to house arrest and I was able to call on him without difficulty. Paula Fernandes, his Anglo-Portuguese assistant, married to Rodrigo, one of his close followers, was with him.

I congratulated him on the result and gave him my personal impressions of the referendum. I told him of my concerns that all the international community that had assembled for the referendum had now left and East Timor was, for the moment, back in the hands of Indonesia and its military-sponsored militias. The signals coming from Dili were not good. The signs of possible danger that Sergio de Mello had told us about had grown into graphic reports of villages being destroyed and large numbers of people being driven out of their homes and across the border into West Timor. Xanana said he was hearing the same disturbing stories. I asked what his plans were. He said he wanted to get back to Dili as soon as possible.

When I arrived at where he was being held, I spoke to Paula before seeing Xanana. She had told me of the great concern of those close to him, and of his Australian wife Kirsty, that the Indonesian government would now fly him back to Dili where he would be in grave danger of being killed. Law and order had broken down in the few days since the referendum and the Indonesian controlled militias now roamed Dili and much of the territory taking revenge against the population.

While I was with Xanana his mobile phone rang. He spoke animatedly in Portuguese for about five minutes and then the phone went dead. He looked shocked. He said that it had been his field commander, known as TMR, on the phone. All his troops had been placed in secure cantonments in the hills for the duration of the referendum. TMR told him that people were coming up from the villages to his cantonment crying for help as they were being attacked and their houses burned and women raped. TMR said he could not stop his troops from going to help their people. Xanana told him it was a trap, they must not go. It would lead to resumption of the war. TMR repeated that he could not control them. "And then my commander hung up on me," Xanana said, visibly shaken.

A few minutes later his phone rang again. This time it was a priest in the distant little town of Swai, far from Dili. He was in the local church with two other priests and a congregation of local people, and they were surrounded by militias who were about to burn down the church. He and those with him in the church wanted to speak to him before they died and to tell him, their leader Xanana, personally that they would die as free men and women.

The emotional impact of this call was huge on the three of us in the room. I felt that it was time for me to leave so that he could deal with it with his own people. But as I left, I said I wanted to leave him with two thoughts. First, that he had won his fight for independence and his victory was now recognized by the whole world, through the United Nations. He must remain a man of peace and not return to fighting. Secondly, he must stay alive. He was all his people had.

I returned home that night in an emotional state and stayed up late, going over the extraordinary events of the day. At 1 a.m. Paula rang me to say that, after I had left, Xanana had received a call from the Indonesian authorities to say that they were planning to release him in a couple of days and fly him back to Dili. He had given much thought to what I had said as I left and he had told the Government that he was not ready to go back. He wondered whether he could come and stay with me for a few days when he was released. I said of course he could. I would have to clear it with Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and the Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, but I thought there would be no problems.

And so it happened. Robin Cook was only too pleased to have a British Embassy giving safe haven to the world's latest international hero, especially shortly before a Labour Party Conference, and Ali Alatas was thankful to have the responsibility for the safety of Xanana,

in the hostile environment of Jakarta, taken off his hands. In fact, he later wrote a letter of thanks to the British Government.

Having a prominent rebel, fresh out of prison, in Embassy custody during a political crisis is an interesting challenge for any Embassy and its Head of Mission. Once I had received approval from London, I notified the Indonesian Government of Xanana's request and worked with the new Law Minister Muladi, appointed by President Habibie, on the modalities of his transfer to our Embassy. The FCO quickly arranged for a Special Forces unit to be sent to Jakarta to assess and tighten the security of the Embassy and to remain with us for as long as Xanana stayed with us (which turned out to be two weeks). The Embassy was situated in the main square of the city and was overlooked from all sides by hotels and tall office buildings. To protect Xanana from any potential sharpshooters from the Indonesian army, large screens were erected covering the Embassy grounds.

The transfer took place within a week of the referendum result being announced by Kofi Annan in New York. Xanana arrived with an escort of around thirty soldiers. We had converted a room on the ground floor of the Embassy which had privacy and was secure, but also accessible for his own staff of three as well as the many visitors who needed to see him. I told him he could stay as long as he needed while he decided what his next move should be.

Meanwhile in Timor-Leste the Indonesian army and its local militias were continuing their destructive mayhem of retribution. It was estimated that one third of the population was forcibly removed to Indonesian West Timor and almost all the electrical infrastructure and most significant buildings within East Timor were destroyed. It was during this time, on 21 September, that a young Dutch journalist covering the East Timor story for the Financial Times, Sander Thoenes, was shot and killed by the Indonesian military while riding a motor cycle in Dili.

Naturally there was great excitement, and indeed anxiety, among the sixty or so Indonesian members of my staff about having Xanana on the Embassy premises. I realized that they needed to meet him. So I arranged a lunchtime gathering in the Embassy bar and when they were all assembled I told them the purpose of the occasion. I then went to his room and escorted him back to the bar. He entered the door to the silence of curious anticipation. As he began to shake hands with the staff, with his friendly big smile and good humour, the atmosphere rapidly changed until finally he was being greeted like a rock star. The female members of staff in particular were clearly star struck and were fighting for access to him. It

was a pleasure to watch. Indonesia as a whole had just come out of thirty years of Suharto's dictatorship and was revelling, in somewhat chaotic fashion, in its new found freedoms, and here was a man who had led his own people to victory against that same dictatorship.

At the end of each day Xanana was with us I would spend time with him, discussing his plans, giving him news and listening to his stories of his times as a rebel. When he had broken with the Marxism of FRETILIN he had taken to the mountains to fight rather than joining the FRETILIN government in exile in Mozambique. But he was not the image of a guerrilla fighter. He was something of a poet, at least before he joined the struggle, with a ready sense of humour and a touching gentleness. Above all he faced the future on the fundamental basis of reconciliation and magnanimity and in this he reminded me of Nelson Mandela, whom I had met when working on South Africa. I was not alone in making this comparison.

I once had to tell him that it was being reported from Dili that his mother and father had disappeared and were thought to have been killed by the Indonesian military. The following day I was able to tell him that they had been found safe and well. We celebrated.

The UN Security Council was seized with the chaotic developments in Timor-Leste following the referendum and decided to send a top level Mission of four ambassadors to Jakarta. Among them was Jeremy Greenstock, the UK Permanent Representative. The Indonesian government meanwhile was saying that it had everything under control. But they could not refuse to receive the Mission, and once it had arrived it also became clear that the Mission would have to be allowed to visit the Timor-Leste capital, Dili. To keep an eye on them and to back up the Indonesian claim that everything was under control, General Wiranto, head of the army, would go with them. And to make sure that the world would know exactly what was really happening I was able to ensure that the BBC was allowed to go too.

During its stay in Jakarta the UN Mission generally got together at the UK Residence. They had meetings with Xanana, with Ali Alatas and with the US, Australian and Portuguese ambassadors before their visit to Dili and on their return. The main drama of the visit was the apparent shock reaction of General Wiranto when he saw for himself the destruction which the Indonesian army had wrought on Dili. He was interviewed on television standing in the middle of a burnt-out building, admitting that things were indeed not under control. That had a sobering effect on the government and prepared the way, on the return of the Mission to

Jakarta, for discussions to begin on a UN Peacekeeping force, the very idea of which had been vehemently resisted by Ali Alatas.

The Australians were rather over-anxious to play a leading role, particularly in a military capacity. This was not appreciated by the Indonesian government who saw Howard's interference as having contributed to the loss of East Timor. At one point, when we were discussing the possible composition of the peacekeeping force, we needed to have an informal reaction from Ali Alatas before anything was announced. I telephoned him and explained the situation. He accepted, reluctantly, that it would be impossible to refuse to agree to a peacekeeping force if the Security Council demanded it but made one appeal, namely that the first UN soldier to step onto Timor-Leste soil should not be Australian. My Australian colleague, and friend, John McCarthy, had a difficult few months at that time which included the bombing of his Embassy in Jakarta.

It is worth recording that the UK stepped up in a significant way with £3.2m assistance for Timor-Leste following the referendum. It was DfID that was credited with having "turned the lights back on" in Dili and we became the largest bilateral donor to the reconstruction.

Merril and I returned to Timor-Leste a few months later. We visited Suai and saw the burned-out church where the telephone call to Xanana had come from. All the people in it had been killed. Some 350,000 people had been shunted across the border into West Timor and it would be at least a year before they were able to return.

After Xanana had been with us for a couple of weeks he told me that it was time for him to leave. He would go first to Australia and then to the UN, where he would speak to the General Assembly. We agreed that details of his departure had to be kept to as few people as possible. There was no doubt that he was targeted.

I asked Law Minister Muladi, with whom I had negotiated the arrangements for Xanana's transfer to our Embassy, how much notice he would need to provide an armed escort to the airport. He said he would need two hours' notice. Xanana told me his preferred date and flight on Qantas to Darwin and I spoke in confidence to the excellent BA airline representative (BA and Qantas being partners), Claire Hatton, who made the reservation for the night flight for Xanana and his party under an assumed name. (The flight was full and to do so she had to transfer about a dozen passengers to other flights). I told the head of the small group of UK personnel who were providing his protection and a few of my close staff were also in the know.

Late afternoon on the appointed day I phoned the Law Minister and said 'two hours'. He said 'OK, I'm coming too,' and rang off. He arranged for twenty soldiers to be isolated without their phones and at the appointed time put on a truck and sent to the British Embassy. He arrived driving his own car. Meanwhile the UK had prepared bullet proof vests for the four of us who would be in the flag Jaguar – Xanana, the Law Minister, my driver Mournan and myself. All Embassy staff had by this time gone home and it was dark. Merril and the girls saw us off. Xanana's team were already at the airport. I put Xanana and the Law Minister (who had been the one who first allowed me to visit Xanana in prison and had always been sympathetic) in the back seat and I sat in front, enjoying this remarkable moment both in my life and in the life of our Embassy. Behind us came the armed escort and, somewhere, the UK men in black. We arrived without incident at the VIP area of the airport, but were told that while we were on the road the telephone lines to Qantas had suddenly burst into life with enquiries about who was on the flight. Word had somehow got out. I escorted Xanana onto the plane and bade him farewell. He was a remarkable man whom it had been a privilege to get to know.

Muladi and I drove back to the Embassy together and I told him how I would always remember his gesture of support in putting on the vest and joining us on the adventure.

One story from that time about José Ramas Horta, whom I subsequently came to know well. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with Bishop Belo. He was Timor-Leste's first Foreign Minister, then Prime Minister and ended up as President when the constitution was changed and he and Xanana swapped jobs. He was a firebrand and had been a firebrand all his life. He had been the international face of East Timor for thirty-five years before independence was achieved.

There was a time shortly after Habibie's successor, Abdurrahman Wahid (known as Gus Dur), had been elected President when the Indonesian military were still being nasty in East Timor and were refusing to allow those they had driven to West Timor to return. They were, in effect, holding the Timorese hostage. Something had happened that had brought this into the news. On one of my visits to Dili I had arranged to meet José in what called itself the Burned-Out Café, which was the remains of a building of a burned-out restaurant in Dili which had been left as it was, charred and blackened, with tables inside. It was famous; for all those who descended on East Timor to help put things right the Burned-Out Café was the place to be. We met there and José turned up full of fire and loathing for Indonesia. He said

that, in the light of this news about the hostages in West Timor, he was going to call a press conference the next day to demand that the international community and the IMF stop all assistance to Indonesia, and impose sanctions against the government instead. 'Things have got to change and we've got to confront it,' he said. I said, 'José, don't you realize that Suharto is no longer there? Gus Dur is there and he's on your side. He's fighting the Indonesian military as well; that's his problem. Do you think a press conference with you denouncing him is going to make it any easier for him to get his military into line?' 'Bah! I'm going to do this.' I said, 'Listen. Think about it. Why don't you write him a letter? Tell him these are our main problems; this is what you can help with. This guy is receptive to what you have to say. Don't do it publicly; write him a letter.' 'No, I'm going to do my press conference.' Anyway, we ended like that.

That evening I went back to my hotel room and there was a letter under my door which I took back and gave to Gus Dur. And José Ramos Horta didn't hold his press conference. Years later, following several GLF projects in Timor-Leste, he became a Member of the Foundation and remains a friend to this day.

In the years following my time in Jakarta Indonesia became quite dangerous, culminating in the Bali bombings by jihadis. The Embassy moved from the rather ramshackle building in the heart of town on the equivalent of Trafalgar Square, where it had been when I was there, to a safer diplomatic part of town. I later visited the new Embassy and was delighted to see that it has a 'Xanana Room'.

CM: So how about your third Indonesian President?

RC: Now we move on to President Abdurrahman Wahid (known popularly as Gus Dur). Habibie managed, as I think I said last time, to ride the wave of the revolution and the political institutions, such as they were, held the ring. The transition was by and large peaceful. There was a genuine election for a new Parliament, the first free election for over 30 years (at which the universities around the country took on the responsibility of election observation), and it would be the new Parliament that would elect the new President. It was clear that they needed a lot of assistance and there were many donors wanting to help, including the UK who became the largest contributor. The Indonesians never liked the UN because it always dumped on them over East Timor. But they eventually decided that outside assistance for these elections would be acceptable provided it was all channelled through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

There was sufficient interest in London to extend an invitation to Abdurrahman Wahid to visit the UK in February 2000 and I came back too. Gus Dur was an extraordinary figure. He was the leader of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), the largest Muslim organization in the world. He was a great public figure; he was open minded and had a wicked sense of humour. He was blind and he'd had a stroke, but that didn't stop him. He later described the three Presidents who followed Suharto as the Deaf (Habibie, who never listened), the Blind (himself) and the Dumb (Megawati, who never spoke). In London I accompanied him, including at his meeting with Tony Blair.

The Prime Minister was deep into Irish affairs and it was clear that there was something else on his mind when we all called on him at No. 10. He said something like, 'Tell me about yourself,' and Gus Dur started talking about his childhood and how he'd grown up with schoolmates who were Christians; they'd all played together in the churchyard next to his house. This was his life. 'But that background didn't prevent me from ending up leading the largest Islamic organization in the world.' Blair suddenly focused and took him seriously. He replied 'I was reading the Koran on holiday this summer,' and the discussion got underway.

A couple of months later, shortly after the appointment of Gus Dur's new Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab, I received a rather nervous message from London saying that, in light of the continued role of the Indonesian military in West Timor, where they were still holding hostages, and in Aceh (the scene of military repression of a secessionist movement) the British Government needed a personal assurance from the new President that British military equipment would not be used inappropriately. I gathered that this included concern that water cannon might again be used by the military against students or other peaceful protesters. I had not yet met Alwi Shihab, who was an academic and a friend of the new President. I rang him, introduced myself on the phone and asked if I could come to see him. He said, 'I'd rather we didn't meet at the Ministry. Could we meet in a coffee shop?' He named one. I went to the coffee shop. It was pitch dark and there seemed to be nobody there. I looked around and in the far corner there was one guy in heavy dark glasses seated at a table. I went up and said, 'You're not by any chance the Foreign Minister, are you?' He said, 'Yes, I am. And you are the British Ambassador? Sit down.' I explained the situation and my need for a personal meeting with the President. He said he would arrange it and called me later that day. He said, 'Tomorrow morning, nine o'clock, at the Palace. I'll be there.'

I went along. With the President were the Chief of the Armed Forces, the Chief of Police and the Foreign Minister. Gus Dur was very tired and his concentration was not always on the conversation. I said the situation in East and West Timor was causing concern in the UK Parliament and it had reached the point that I had received instructions to request his personal assurance that British military equipment would not be used inappropriately by the Indonesian armed forces. There was a silence. Then there was a snore from Gus Dur, and another. I looked around at the Chief of the Armed Forces and the Chief of Police and asked 'Can I take that as a yes?' They both nodded and said, 'Yes, you can take that as a yes.' I reported back to London accordingly.

During my last year the radical Islamic element of Indonesian politics was growing. Control from the centre was weak and there was inter-religious conflict in Maluku where there were the most Christians. Following a meeting between an organization working in Northern Ireland and Mrs Wahid, the new President's wife, during Gus Dur's visit to London, the British Council facilitated the involvement of the mediators from Northern Ireland in Maluku to work on reconciliation. A group of leaders from both communities in the area that had been affected were invited to a hotel in the hills of Bali with the small team from Northern Ireland. I went and spent a few days with them. It was quite an experience just to see how the Northern Irish team went about it. The first thing was to get them all to sit around the same round table together, then to tell their individual stories. There were an equal number of Christians and Muslims. Both communities had suffered. Among them there were a couple of nuns and one recounted how she and a friend had been taken into the woods and raped. A Muslim girl followed with a similar story. Gradually everyone volunteered their stories. There were many tears. The mediators from Northern Ireland were magnificent; they were so gentle. They ended every session by saying, 'We'll now sing a song. You choose a song that you all know and we'll hold hands and sing it together'.

Even in the short time I was there I could see this group of community leaders, who had suffered so much and on arrival had refused to speak to each other, beginning to relax in each other's company and talk about what they might do on their return home. It was a very moving experience and the British Council deserved great credit for taking the initiative. I gave an account to UNDP and other donor representatives on my return to Jakarta and UNDP followed up the programme. My experience of the British Council everywhere I served was always very good.

The Jakarta Chamber of Commerce gave us a farewell party. They were for the most part a bunch of rogues but the heart of the economy of Indonesia. As is customary in Indonesia at these events there was a karaoke session and I was pushed up on the stage to sing something. Merril was there so I sang a great favourite of mine by Eric Clapton called 'Wonderful Tonight'. It's a lovely song, but I couldn't remember all the words. No problem. I was up on the stage, singing this romantic song to my wife down in the audience while the bass guitarist was whispering the words into my ear line by line. That was a weird but nice moment.

The greatest surprise was just before we left. We'd packed up and were due to go in two days. I'd said all my goodbyes and done the rounds, including to President Gus Dur. Then the phone rang and it was the President who said, 'Robin, I gather you're leaving.' I said, 'Yes, Mr President, I came and said goodbye last week.' He said, 'Can I come to supper tonight?' I said, 'Yes, of course. Our suitcases are packed but we have Embassy china, so come.' He said, 'I'll bring my wife and my daughter.' So they showed up the night before we left. His wife was paralyzed after a car accident and was in a wheel chair. He was blind and, since his stroke, walked with difficulty with sticks, supported by his daughter. At the meal, his daughter fed him. The three of them sat on one side of the table and Merril and I and Andy Sparkes, my deputy, on the other side. No politics, it just didn't come up. He was a great talker, but what he really liked to do was to tell jokes. There came a point when the ladies got up and went for coffee next door so that they could have a chance to talk to each other. That's when his real interest came to the fore, which was well below the acceptable level of dirty stories. He loved them. He kicked off with one about Robin Cook in the men's room in the House of Commons. I have a fair store of such stories but I found myself scraping the barrel. This Muslim cleric, a good man and leader of millions, was just rocking with laughter and telling jokes back. It was bizarre, but strangely wonderful. That was our farewell to Indonesia.

Ambassador to Argentina, 2000-2004

CM: We are now in the year 2000 and you are posted to Argentina.

RC: I was delighted to go to Buenos Aires because it was a return to Latin America where I began my wanderings as a VSO volunteer back in the early 1960s in Bolivia. It was also a chance to use my Spanish again after the four years in Spain. And though Latin America has

always been a place of adventure and interest for me, I'd never actually been to Argentina. We had a great time and enjoyed it immensely.

Obviously, there is one big issue in Britain's relations with Argentina and that's the Falkland Islands. Following the war in 1982, Humphrey Maud had been the first ambassador after the restoration of relations in 1990, followed by Peter Hall, both of whom I'd worked with in Financial Relations Department, Humphrey as Head of Department, Peter as Assistant Head of Department and me as the desk officer, years before.

Looking back, I think there were three elements to my time in BA. One was the Falklands, in particular how the three different governments with which I had to deal approached the issue and by extension our bilateral relations; another was the collapse of the Argentine economy, financial disaster, and the impoverishment of much of the middle class; and the third one was the Embassy Residence. Those were the themes.

When I was posted to Buenos Aires I decided that, if I was to understand things properly, I should visit the Falkland Islands first. Apparently, this hadn't been done before. The former Argentine Foreign Minister, Guido di Tella, who had negotiated the resumption of relations and was now at St Antony's College in Oxford, supported the idea but cautioned me. 'It's brave,' he said, 'but they won't like you for it.' Di Tella was a wonderful man, highly intelligent and far-sighted. He had one or two friends who were still in the Foreign Ministry when I got there. In the event my prior visit to the Islands didn't matter a bit, mainly because the Peronists, no longer with the open-minded leadership of President Carlos Menem and di Tella, were out of office and the Liberal government of Fernando de la Rua was actively pursuing good relations with the UK and taking the di Tella line. Indeed, my personal acquaintance with the Islands proved to be a great help to me.

The agreement which, under Menem, restored bilateral relations with the UK in 1990 provided for an 'umbrella' which stipulated that any bilateral dealings that took place beneath it did so without implications for our respective positions on the Falkland Islands/Las Malvinas. De la Rua's government, including the Foreign Ministry, were very open to working under the umbrella and so business was conducted normally, and indeed quite productively. I was able to sign three agreements which affected the Falklands: one on de-mining; one on the delineation of the sea bed for the Law of the Sea Conference; and one on fishing. There were also fishing negotiations each year. Considering there was no High Seas

Agreement governing the South Atlantic because of our disagreement over the Islands, this represented substantial progress.

There was however one close call. Back in the early 1970s a consignment of seed potatoes from Scotland arrived in Argentina and were found to be rotten. So the exporter offered to add some extra on to all the next ten consignments and the issue was considered settled. But then the Argentine importer noticed that the bag of potatoes had a certificate of good health from the United Kingdom Ministry of Agriculture on it. He dropped the deal for the addition to future consignments and decided to sue the UK Ministry of Agriculture, thinking he would get more as it would go through the Argentine courts. It did go through the courts, but lay dormant for a decade during the Falklands War in the '80s and the break of relations. When I arrived, it had been revived and had reached the High Court just one stage before the Supreme Court. With interest accrued over thirty years and with anything else they could think of to pile onto the case, the suit was now for over US$300 million, almost a third of a billion dollars, against the British government. This was endorsed by the High Court and so, all of a sudden, the UK Ministry of Agriculture took notice.

We had an honorary Legal Adviser, as all our Embassies have, who, unlike his elder brother, had been just too young to fight in the Second World War. He saw it as his duty towards Britain to be lifelong honorary Legal Adviser to the Embassy. But this case was really above his capacity and I had to tell him that the Ministry of Agriculture had decided to appoint somebody else to deal with this potentially very serious issue. Deeply offended, he insisted on handing back his OBE to me. He died a year or so later and I wrote an obituary for him in the Buenos Aires Herald.

I went to a senior friend in the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs and told him the full story of the seed potato case. Three hundred million dollars! And, together with it, an order for the impounding of British government property up to this amount. I said, 'This is plainly ridiculous. Can't you go to the court as the government and claim *raison d'état*, and call it off?' He laughed. 'This is not like Indonesia. Quite the reverse. We have an independent judiciary and, take it from me, if we went to the courts that would only make matters worse. It would make the judiciary want to assert themselves, particularly with the UK involved. I agree with you. This is a nonsense and when the history of Argentina is written this story of the seed potatoes should be writ large as indicative of the state we've got ourselves into. But there is nothing that we as the government can do.'

I realized that, among other things, we had a friendly naval ship's visit coming up. A frigate was about to arrive and fraternize with the Argentine navy, all part of the post-Falklands love-in. We got to know exactly what the intentions of the people behind the case were and I had to cancel the visit. There might well have been a court order to take over the ship. Anyway, the case went to the Supreme Court, three of the Supreme Court judges considered it and decided, by two to one, to drop the case.

The Argentine peso had been linked to the US dollar by the Convertibility Plan, the brain child of Menem's Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo in the early 1990s, reducing inflation from 1,300% to virtually zero over the decade. But by early 2001 Argentina was in recession and strains were appearing. Prices were getting ridiculous and finally the connection with the US dollar broke and inflation again went through the roof. Cavallo, who had been out of office for five years, was brought back by de la Rua in March. During a run on the banks Cavallo placed restrictions on bank withdrawals that became known as the *corralito*. This led to rioting.

A basic truth of Argentine politics is that if you don't control the Plaza de Mayo outside the Casa Rosada (Presidential Palace) in Buenos Aires you cannot govern the country. Shots were fired and President de la Rua had to be ignominiously helicoptered off the roof of the Casa Rosada on 21 December while, less than a mile away, people were taking their evening walks in the streets and parks of the city. His Vice President had already resigned.

The collapse was complete and the confusion that followed total, with a non-functioning currency and no government. There followed a week over Christmas 2001 when there were four, possibly five, different presidents chosen. I delivered a message of congratulation from Tony Blair to the first one, Rodriguez Saa, on Christmas Day but he was gone a few days later and I did not persist with the others. Finally on 2 January 2002 a Peronist machine politician and former Governor of Buenos Aires province, Eduardo Duhalde, took over as interim President until May 2003 for the remainder of de la Rua's term. Dollar convertibility was formally repealed and the peso returned, with a 200% devaluation.

Duhalde's government had more important things to worry about than the Falkland Islands/Malvinas as his country descended into a great depression; notably, the international fallout of the New York 9/11 attacks three months earlier (the Lord Mayor of London was visiting Buenos Aires at the time), and later the invasion of Iraq. Unlike my colleague Roger Bone in Brazil, I was fortunate not to be summoned to the Parliament to defend UK policy.

We were mildly criticized in private by the Foreign Ministry and they declined to send troops in support without a UN Security Council resolution. But Duhalde spoke out strongly against Saddam Hussain and international terrorism. The Government did not want to put any relationships at risk given their own predicament.

I had one memorably light-hearted moment. In 1902 Argentina and Chile almost went to war over the delineation of the frontier which they shared. Instead, they agreed to ask the British Government to mediate. Sir Thomas Holdridge was dispatched to delineate the frontier and proceeded to travel south through the Andes on horseback. When he came to Patagonia, he found a vast expanse of land and very few people. The most significant community he found was Welsh, descendants of those who had refused to live under a new English law that forbade them to educate their children in Welsh and had embarked on the *Miraposa* in 1863 to search for a new land of milk and honey. They had ended up in Patagonia, vast, desolate and cold. After surviving the first year or two by the sea shore, trading with local Indians for food, they went inland and established the settlements of Gaiman, Trelew and Trevelin in the Province of Chubut.

Sir Thomas Holdridge decided to ask them whether they wanted to be part of Chile or of Argentina and he arranged for a vote to be held in the local school. That vote, in which they voted to be part of Argentina, came to be known as *el plebiscito,* and is celebrated nationally every year in Argentina. The centenary of *el plebiscite* fell in 2002 and for the first time ever the President of Argentina was going to visit Chubut. Sir Thomas Holdridge's direct heir would be coming out for the celebration.

I could not resist the opportunity. I had visited Chubut before, when Rhodri Morgan had come out as Chief Minister of Wales to pay his first visit to this unique Welsh speaking overseas community (Welsh is no longer spoken in New South Wales in Australia) and we both had found the whole experience enthralling. In my report to London I asked whether I was the first Head of Mission who had accompanied a Privy Councillor of the Realm on a visit and had not understood a word he said. I also was able later to confer an OBE on a leading member of the Welsh community in Chubut.

So I went again for the *plebiscito* centenary. I gave a speech saying how wonderful it was that Argentina had been the first country in the world to hold a plebiscite and to adhere to and implement the will of the people thus expressed regarding which country they wished to belong to. I said that Argentina had set the standard for self-determination for the world and I

noted that it had celebrated the event every year since. I did not mention the Falklands, but from the good-natured laughter and the boos it was clear that the message had been understood.

Former President Menem wanted to run again for President in the 2003 elections but Duhalde was opposed. When the time came, he backed Nestor Kirchner, a relatively unknown Governor of the southernmost province of Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz is as far away from Buenos Aires as Moscow is from London and Kirchner had never travelled outside Argentina. It was a choice Duhalde would come to regret.

And so would we. The Falklands issue is a gift to any populist President in Argentina. Las Malvinas is a natural national rallying cry, as it was to the military government in domestic trouble in 1982. It is deeply rooted in Argentine historical identity and will always be. For Nestor Kirchner the Islands were just offshore from his home in Santa Cruz. It was never going to be easy. He banned overflight rights to the Islands from Chile, causing considerable inconvenience. The annual talks on fish ceased and he arranged not infrequent demonstrations outside the Residence. He refused to see me. I did however initially strike up a relationship with his Foreign Minister, Rafael Bielsa, who had been imprisoned by the military regime in the 1980s. (Kirchner was privately rather ashamed of not having played a role in the resistance to the dictatorship.) Much to the horror of his minders at the Foreign Ministry, Bielsa accepted my invitation to him and his wife to a private lunch at the Residence. It was a friendly occasion – we all wore jeans - at which he was surprisingly open, but it didn't make much difference. He was not one to get into the issues and soon was moved to Paris as ambassador. He was still in office when we left but after our lunch he was told to put a freeze on us and did so, although he did give us a last-minute farewell lunch.

With a little help from President Lagos of Chile (whose ambassador in BA was a close colleague), we managed to get the new President Kirchner invited to Tony Blair's Third Way Summit of like-minded Heads of Government in July 2003 in the hope that a visit to Europe might broaden Kirchner's mind. It didn't. In London he did not attend any of the meetings of the Third Way Summit (which included Bill Clinton) and spent much of his limited time shopping on Oxford Street with his wife, Cristina (who succeeded him as President when he died). He did get a call on the Prime Minister and so was able to tell the folks back home that he had raised the Falklands/Malvinas issue with him. He cancelled his scheduled visit to Paris after that and went on to Madrid, where all the great and the good with any interest in

Latin America returned from their August holidays to meet him, only to be told at a lunch in his honour that anyone who had invested in Argentina during the military dictatorship was 'evil'. On balance I reckoned we came off lightly.

There was no way of doing business with Nestor Kirchner. So once again, as I did when in trouble in Ethiopia, I turned to public diplomacy. And this is where the Residence comes in. I was told before I went to Buenos Aires that the Residence was unusable, due to the water and electricity having made common cause behind the walls. It needed a complete refurbishment and the FCO had decided now was the time to sell it. They would find me a place to stay in due course, but I would start in a hotel. I said it was summer time, why not simply put a cable through the window to the living quarters on the second floor and we could look for alternative accommodation ourselves. The Office agreed.

The British Residence is one of the finest buildings in Buenos Aires. It is a beautiful *palacete* reminiscent of 19th century Paris - huge, and with a large garden, bang in the middle of the city. I went out ahead of Merril and for two or three weeks I was there with my electric cable through the window and it was fine. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it would be a great mistake to sell it. Here we were in the only country in the world with which we had a territorial dispute. We fought a war in part because we had withdrawn a destroyer at a particular moment and the misinterpretation of doing that by the embattled Argentine dictatorship had contributed to the decision to invade the Falkland Islands. The military felt that they could unite the country behind them in their time of need by the invasion and we wouldn't do anything. We couldn't afford to make that mistake again. Retiring to the suburbs could send the same message, so I was against it. So, interestingly, was the Argentine government of the day, de la Rua's. They wanted us to stay there; they didn't want wrong messages and misunderstandings. They wanted to feel that their country was important enough to us to keep the building. Without any discussion with me the local city government passed legislation forbidding the garden to be sold off separately. It then passed further legislation on the structure, basically saying it couldn't be changed for national heritage reasons. In other words, you can't sell this building to Sheraton, as a hotel. In fact, they made it virtually impossible to sell at all. Before any of this had happened, local estate agents obviously thought that there was a lot of money in this and put a costing on it which was extremely attractive to the Treasury. This now plummeted. I had a lot of visitors through who said, 'Is it true that they're selling this house? That's all wrong. What can I do?' I said if they felt strongly, they could write to the FCO/Foreign Secretary. So many

wrote that I got a note from John Kerr saying 'No more noises off, please.' I replied saying they were not my noises. Eventually London accepted that they weren't going to be able to sell it and decided to renovate it instead, giving the first, grand floor the capacity to be a conference centre which could be rented out. They invested a lot of money and the local architects did a really good job. We stayed on the second floor for our first year; then we moved to accommodation close by, a nice family house, for the next year and a half and we were back in the big house for our final year and a bit.

The day I announced that it had been decided in London that we were going to refurbish the Residence – because there was much interest in the Argentine press in what was going to happen to this precious building – I got a telephone call from Foreign Minister Adalberto Giavarini conveying the thanks of the Argentine government to the British Government for our decision to stay and invest in one of the finest buildings in the city.

Our return to the Residence coincided with the crisis that followed the financial crash. When something like that happens to a country civil society, wishing to do something constructive, splits two ways: those who want to help the people who are worst affected, the newly poor, those living on the streets, and those who want to change the institutions and laws to ensure that it doesn't happen again. This leads to two kinds of NGOs: charities and think-tanks. They sprang up almost overnight in Argentina, but nobody knew what anybody else was doing. So one of the things we did, as the British Embassy, was to publish an anthology of Argentine NGOs.

My thinking was that we'd moved into a time, under President Kirchner, of very much more difficult, and unreliable, government-to-government relations; they didn't want to see much of me and I had no particular reason to see much of them in the course of the crisis. I thought that in these circumstances we needed to spread our net wider, to find ways of reaching out to the wider public. And we had this amazing building which had been revived and many people in Buenos Aires treasured. We should feature it and make it available to civil society. Our book of Argentine NGOs proved very popular because people could find out what others were doing and they could get together. And we could offer the conference facilities (the first floor room held a hundred people and there was a large dining room next door and access to a beautiful terrace overlooking the garden) as a meeting place. I got senior speakers out from the UK on economics, on law, on how to run NGOs, on everything you can think of and for a time we were having two or three conferences a week. The Residence became

known as the meeting place for civil society. It worked, particularly because the refurbishment was new and everybody wanted to see it - and it was magnificent. Our first year back we had over ten thousand people through the Residence. We also rented it out as a conference centre to companies and other commercial organizations.

One of the things in which I took a particular interest was the cellar, which was found to be full of water. We had it dried and tanked. It was a good size and that's where we now kept the wine for the Residence. We also had it decorated as a *bodega*, with a bar, table and chairs. It became very popular. One of my visitors during this time was General Mike Jackson, Chief of the General Staff, who came out to do some military fraternization. After the usual dinner for him upstairs, I took him down to the cellar, knowing that he liked his whisky. We had a few down there and he loved the *bodega*. He asked me, 'What did it cost to do this house?' I said, 'A couple of million' (I am ashamed to say I don't remember the exact amount). He said, 'Cheap at the price. If they'd given me that kind of money, the impact I could have made is nothing compared to the statement made by re-doing this house.' I thought, coming from the head of the Army, 'Cheap at the price' – that's a serious vindication. And he was right. Many of our Residences around the world are in fine houses which are statements in themselves. In giving them up we are in danger of sending a message that we no longer care about the country in question or exercising influence there. They are a tangible presence that conveys meaning.

On the Falklands, when I arrived there were two outstanding issues from the resumption of relations in 1990. The first I discovered only when I received a letter from, I think, a Canadian tourist who had just visited Antarctica on a cruise. On the way back the boat had stopped off at South Georgia en route to Buenos Aires and all tourists disembarked for the day - except for an Argentine couple who were forbidden from setting foot on South Georgia. Wasn't it time, said the writer, to end this pettiness? I agreed completely and wrote to London accordingly, suggesting that perhaps this ban on Argentine visitors to South Georgia was something that had been held back during the negotiations in case of need and then forgotten about. So it proved and I was able to offer lifting the ban as a goodwill gesture to the well-disposed government of Fernando de la Rua.

The second leftover was more significant. There was a commitment in the agreement of 1990 restoring our bilateral relations that there would be a permanent memorial on the Islands to the Argentine fallen. Nobody had touched that one. Now, no society honours its soldiers

if they lose a war. It prefers to forget about them. The cause of those Argentines who had died in the conflict was pursued, not by the Argentine government, who showed no interest and never mentioned it to me, but by a body of people called the Commission of the Families of the Fallen. They were the ones to talk to about what sort of memorial they wanted for their relatives who lost their lives on the Islands. I invited them in to get to know them and start a conversation. We had a commitment that we would facilitate a permanent memorial, but not pay for it. It would be their memorial.

Their initial ideas were over the top: a cemetery with a church in the middle and a statue of the Virgin Mary inside wrapped in the Argentine flag. That was unrealistic: the Islanders would simply take it down. I explained that it had to be acceptable to the Islanders and suggested they take a look at the memorial at Darwin for the British fallen. I gave them plans and pictures and we began to meet regularly, every couple of months. There were eight or ten of them actively involved, including mothers who had lost sons. It took some time, but they eventually came up with what I thought was a reasonable proposal and plan. And then the Argentine economy collapsed. Who was going to pay for it? Certainly not the Argentine Government. So the Commission launched a fund-raising campaign starting with an opera at the Teatro Colón, the great opera house in Buenos Aires. I went along to the occasion and was interviewed and gave my support for the cause but it didn't raise much money. At that time there was really no way of raising money. They couldn't get their government interested and it wasn't for me to go to their government saying, 'I think you should be doing this.'

After a gap when nothing much happened because of the financial crisis I thought that maybe if I mentioned it privately to half a dozen of the richest people in Argentina and introduced them to the Families Commission, I might then be able to step back. I got together with my excellent local commercial team, particularly Alfredo Fierro, and we drew up a list of six possibilities. I decided that I would invite them to lunch, one at a time. The first one I invited was Eduardo Eurnekian, a billionaire who, among many other things, had founded and owned Aeropuertos Argentinos 2000 which had thirty-five airports in Argentina. Of Armenian extraction, he was a bit of an outsider. I invited him to lunch and explained the situation. I said, 'I think we've got a plan that might be possible, if the Islanders would accept it, and I think they probably will. Would you be interested in putting together a group of people to fund it, because the Argentine government isn't going to do it?' He immediately said, 'I'll do it.' I said, 'You mean, you'll get some people together?' He said, 'No, I'll do it.

How much do you think it will cost?' I said about US$800,000. He said 'I'll do the whole thing.' I took a deep breath and said, 'OK. Come back next week and I'll have the Commission of the Families here to lunch and you can meet them and see if you really want to do it.' He liked them; they liked him. They discussed the plans. And he told them he would pay for it.

Now that we had a backer and it actually might happen, I thought I should go to the Islands to try to sell the proposal there. This was when I was really glad that I had already been there. Of course, because no direct flights were permitted, I had to come back to London and take a military plane through Ascension Island. I spent a few days there with the Governor, Howard Pearce, who was a great help and arranged for me to meet as many people as possible. I explained the background and put the plans for the Memorial on show with pictures and a mock-up of what it would look like. The suggestion was that it should replace the existing cemetery which had two hundred wooden crosses with 'Unknown Soldier' written on them and was showing signs of age and neglect. It was out on one of the larger islands in a beautiful location.

Good for them, the Islanders agreed. Their agreement should not be underestimated. This is a small community, at that stage around 2,500 people, who had been invaded. They were prepared to accept a permanent Memorial on their territory to the enemy soldiers who died during that invasion, and to look after it. It was quite something. We talked about this and about how this was the right thing to do and that it would contribute to a peaceful future, with the Argentine families being able to visit the tombs of their lost ones. They agreed and it happened. The Memorial/*El Monumento* was built.

A few months before I left (we were now into President Kirchner's time), the Commission of the Families called up and said they wanted to come and see me immediately. They came to the new Residence. They said, 'We have spent all afternoon at the Foreign Ministry discussing arrangements for the inauguration of *El Monumento*, which has been completed.' I knew it had been finished, there were pictures of it in the Argentine press. 'We told the Foreign Ministry that we had invited you to the inauguration and they have told us to disinvite you. We have refused. We even saw Bielsa, the Foreign Minister. We argued about this at great length and we became so angry that we walked out. We will not inaugurate *El Monumento* without you, because it wouldn't be happening without you.' I was a bit overcome by all this, because after I had set them up with Eduardo Eurnekian and

visited the Islands I had backed off and my name wasn't particularly associated with the project. I said, 'You've got to be reasonable. You have to live with this (Kirchner) government and the people in it; I don't; I'm leaving in a few months. I'm very touched you want to invite me, but this not a big issue. Just disinvite me.' 'No, no, no,' they refused. The compromise they agreed to was that they would postpone the inauguration until after I had left Argentina. When it was finally time for us to leave, they came to say goodbye and, aware of my local reputation as a biker, they presented me with a leather motorcycle jacket that they had had made to measure for me.

The story doesn't end in 2004 when I retired. Thirteen years later I received a message from Eduardo Eurnekian, saying that he was going to go to the Islands to visit the Memorial and wanted me to go with him. We were living in France at the time. He paid my fare to Buenos Aires and we flew in his private jet, together with my successor but two or three, Mark Kent, and visited the Memorial. It was magnificent. I learned that in the intervening years intensive work had been done to establish DNA identification of the bones originally buried under the un-named wooden crosses. Now all but ten of the two hundred had names and dates, and the crosses were now all in marble beneath a fine marble wall with all the names. While we were there three or four Argentine families were visiting the final resting place of their loved ones. It was beautiful, on high ground with nothing else around it but wild land and ocean. The Islanders whom I met that day were rather proud of it and were clearly looking after it well.

We were standing in the middle of the Memorial and I found myself deeply moved. Eduardo turned to me and said, 'I've always wanted to know: why did you ask me to build it?' I explained. He said, 'This has become my life. This is my legacy. This is the most important thing in my life now, and has been all these years. That's why I wanted you to come with me. I wanted to thank you.'

Given the political turmoil of the time, the Residence and the Memorial are my lasting legacies in Argentina. It was a good way to finish.