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## **BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

### **RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR LAURIE BRISTOW, KCMG**

**RECORDED BY PATRICK SALMON, TRANSCRIBED BY SUE FLEMING,**

**6, 13 AND 27 OCTOBER 2023**

#### **First session, Friday 6 October 2023**

Patrick Salmon: I'm Patrick Salmon and I'm interviewing Sir Laurie Bristow, the President of Hughes Hall in Cambridge, on the 6th of October 2023. And, Laurie, we always start with the same question, which is why did you join the diplomatic service?

Sir Laurie Bristow: 'Plan A' was to be an academic, actually. And I'd studied in Cambridge in the 1980s as an undergraduate and a postgraduate. Not at Hughes Hall: I was at Trinity – in those days Hughes was a rather smaller college than it is now. And as I was coming to the end of the PhD, you start to think, do I actually *want* to be an academic? You know, do you want to do this for next 30-40 years? And the answer I'd come to was, actually, probably no. It's been great fun but it's probably time to do something else now. And this, again, was in the late 1980s, about '89 by the time that decision was coming up. And my wife was by then starting to establish herself in an International Development career. She was travelling the world, going to all sorts of exciting places. And I was looking at this and thinking, well you know, she's got a rather more interesting job, frankly, than I have, so it may be time to reassess. And of course, the other thing that was happening as I was going through the application process in the entry programme – CSSB and all the rest of it – was what was going on, what was happening in Eastern Europe and Central Europe.

PS: Did that already interest you then?

LB: How could it not, given all of my generation had grown up through the height of the Cold War? I was at school in the '70s and the early 1980s in Colchester in East Anglia. So, an army town and with all of the air bases around us in East Anglia and all the political controversies over Euromissiles, and the SS20s, Pershing and Cruise missile deployments in

the UK [SS-20 was Soviet; Pershing and Cruise the US response]; Protest and Survive, CND. That was the backdrop of my generation growing up. And when you see what you thought you're going to be living with for the rest of your life just changing at the speed and the extent that it was happening, there's still nothing more exciting and interesting that's happened in my lifetime. And, you know, that it is a huge privilege one way or another to end up working on that.

PS: Can I go back to your PhD and just ask if anything in that experience helped to prepare you for a diplomatic career?

LB: It's a curious question: a lot of people have asked me that, with the presumption that the answer is absolutely not. I read English: the PhD was on Ezra Pound and Fascism – I will spare you all the details.

PS: Yes, an interesting subject.

LB: But it did actually turn out to be extremely useful in a number of quite unexpected ways. First of all, the sorts of things that you read around the cultural history and the politics of the early twentieth century: it's real and it's current and it's relevant. But that's not why you're reading it at the time. A bigger point that I think here is the kind of skills and mind-set that you get trained in when you do that sort of thing. It's about the ability to assimilate very large amounts of information, argument; understand them and unpick them, deal with ambiguity, lack of clarity, and try to distil it into an argument. And – I've often joked when talking about what the life of the senior diplomat is about – quite a lot of it is exactly that. It's about trying to find the essence of a problem, trying to find a way through it. Trying to work out what you actually think about it or what the government thinks about it, and then do something with it. There are almost never absolutely clear-cut accounts even of what you're dealing with, let alone what your options are. So I found the ability to think and write, I hope clearly, was something that absolutely ... that PhD training was gold dust.

PS: A lot of people say a History degree is the best, but an English degree helps you to interpret the language, I think.

LB: Yes, the nuances in language: what exactly is being said, what's being left unsaid. By the way, I was sitting a couple of evenings ago next to Gillian Tett, the new Provost of Kings. She was talking about her PhD here in anthropology. And she was studying wedding rituals in Tajikistan. How could this be possibly more obscure? Until you apply the techniques and habits of thought to how companies work and how societies work and what happens when you step back and look at that as an outsider. It's something that we don't, I think, talk enough about: not only the intrinsic value of studying the humanities, but the actual hard skills that you learn from doing it.

PS: Yes, that's very encouraging and very positive. And I suppose there's a question we often ask, after we've asked the question about why did you join the diplomatic service or the Foreign Office: what was it like when you arrived; in particular what sort of induction did you have?

LB: The induction was ... I would describe it as a product of its era. Looking around the room, it was a mixed group of fast streamers and mainstreamers as they were then called. Pretty interesting demographic profile. Most people I'd say were straight out of university. I was unusual in that I done something else first: I'd done a PhD and not got a job, not a paid job. But that was the profile: people straight from university. Very white: I don't think there was a single ethnic minority in our induction group. And I remember noting at the time that the gender balance was quite interesting. The majority of the fast streamers were men, the majority of the mainstreamers were women. And that's the world that we were in at the time. The other thing that sticks in my mind: we would meet up from time to time and we'd have a laugh and reminisce about the old days. But there was one guy who turned up on day one and didn't turn up on day two, and I was just intrigued by what happened to him after 33 years. Did he just turn up and think, nope? I just thought: What happened there?

PS: And beyond that, was there much formal training?

LB: That was, I think, a two or three-week induction course where you were introduced to the basic roles in a department in London, the outlines of how an embassy works. You were given a task and some sheets of blue drafting paper and told to get on and do it and then told how the papers will get processed, tidied up and all the rest of it. The idea that you would have sat in front of a word processor – dream on – we didn't have them. You had secretaries

or you borrowed someone else's secretary and that's how it worked. A fair amount of sort of basic instruction in how government works, I think most of which anyone who'd done their preparation for CSSB and FSSB would already have known. Then you were pitched into a department. You were told to get on with it, this is your department.

**Taiwan Desk Officer, Far Eastern Department, FCO, 1990-91**

PS: Which was your department?

LB: My very first job was Far Eastern Department, and it was the Taiwan Desk, in the China section, which I think was four of us. The Head of China Section, his deputy, someone dealing with Mongolia and other bits of China, and me.

PS: So it was very small in those days.

LB: Yes, just think about it: China!

PS: Yes, but that's how it seemed, I suppose, at that time?

LB: We used to joke about one room, two systems because we had Taiwan and the People's Republic in the same room. Obviously there were other more senior people in the Office and around government also dealing with China. But that was it, that was China policy. So, you know, I was put behind a desk and told: You're in charge of Taiwan policy. I knew absolutely nothing about Taiwan. Not 100% nothing, no. But I had to go and get some books out of the library, and spend a bit of time chatting to people, because of course no internet, no Wikipedia, no nothing then. You fall back on your research skills.

PS: Did the library give you what you wanted, then, since it still existed as a physical library?

LB: The Foreign Office Library: I think I was probably their best customer at the time, partly because I'm a bookworm and love libraries. But, you know, it was a proper professional research library, great atmosphere, great collection. And it was tragic, actually, when the Foreign Office decided it couldn't afford to keep it.

PS: Yes. And what were the priorities you had when dealing with Taiwan at that time?

LB: It's always a balancing act dealing with Taiwan because essentially what you're dealing with is the consequences of an unfinished civil war. When the Republic of China government lost the civil war with what became the People's Republic, they took themselves off to Taiwan. And you have a lengthy period of at least a cessation of hostilities with the occasional sort of uptick in that. But essentially a big pile of unfinished business. So, a country that nobody recognised as a separate country, including the People's Republic and including the authorities on Taiwan. So, therefore, no official dealings with the authorities in Taiwan. But it kept me pretty busy because it was, even in those days, a very dynamic economy, clearly of huge importance in terms of East Asian security, global security, and the residual commitments that the Americans had made when they switched recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic. But very carefully judging all the time how far you could go to develop, mostly, the commercial relationship without treading too hard on the toes of the people in Beijing. From time to time we overstepped the mark and there would be frosty interviews in Beijing and London, with each side reading out their speaking notes and then you'd move on.

PS: Yes, did you actually visit Taiwan?

LB: No, I had to forbid myself from visiting Taiwan.

PS: So that was part of the arrangement, was it?

LB: It is part of the arrangement and fundamentally it hasn't changed. We don't recognise, we don't have formal dealings as the UK Government, frankly like most governments. But there is a lot of business you need to get through. What that meant in practice was that I wasn't allowed to visit Taiwan because I was the officer dealing with it in the Foreign Office. We weren't allowed to meet in each other's offices. So business got done over lunch.

PS: There's always a way. Let's go back a bit. Because I'm just trying to work out the date you first joined the Foreign Office. When was that?

LB: It was, I think, the 28th of August 1990.

PS: Good. And then how long did you stay as Taiwan Desk Officer?

LB: In those days – it's a bit different now – you go into your first job, whatever it is, and you're essentially being assessed. Can you cope, are you ready for an overseas posting? As always, quite a lot of expediency you need in this job, things needed to happen quickly. And so I did that job for probably ... it must have been about a year, I would guess. For quite a lot of that time, starting the conversation with the Personnel Department about where the first posting would be. Because of course until you've proved yourself in London and abroad, you're not going anywhere. And you joined the fast stream so that you can progress.

### **Second Secretary Political and Press, Bucharest, 1992-95**

PS: And was it fairly well managed in those days – your career – did you have much choice in where you went?

LB: Let me describe how it worked in those days, nothing like how it works today. There was no bidding system. You found out, I think from your personnel officer, what jobs were likely to be coming up, and you started basically haggling, depending how assertive you were with your personnel officer. Because my wife was working in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia at the time, of course I was gravitating towards jobs in that part of the world. And the conversation went something like: 'We'd like you to apply for a job in Bucharest.' And as the conversation progressed, eventually I asked: 'How many other people are you having this discussion with?' To which the answer was: 'Just you.'

PS: So basically you had no choice.

LB: 'You're going to Bucharest.' And honestly, I don't regret it in the slightest. It was a fantastic time to be there. And of course it set me off on quite a lot of the things I subsequently did.

PS: Exactly, so what was the date you arrived in Bucharest?

LB: I did about six months' language training.

PS: Where did you do the language training?

LB: In London. In those days, let's put it this way, there was one viable teacher of Romanian. This was the autumn of 1991, the first few months of '92. There was no two-way dictionary of Romanian. There was no internet, there was really no access to television or radio. Occasionally the Embassy in Bucharest would remember to send me over some back numbers of newspapers, but basically they didn't. And so you made your own resources. What I also remember was my Romanian teacher, bless her. She asked me in lesson one, 'Do you mind if I smoke?' I said, 'No, I don't mind if you smoke.' A rookie error as she then chain-smoked, lighting one after the other, for the next six months. So I got that baptism ... In terms of in-country immersion, it simply wouldn't have been possible, as much for practical reasons as for security reasons.

PS: So how did you feel about your Romanian when you left for Bucharest?

LB: It was pretty good. I eventually did what's now called C2 Romanian. It's not that hard a language. If you have one or two Latin-based languages, you're most of the way there. The bigger problem was just total lack of materials and practice opportunities. You're pretty much just left with conversations with the same person day in and day out. And that's not a great way to learn.

PS: No, absolutely not. And again, where was this conducted: in her home, in the Foreign Office?

LB: No, in London: in those days there was a training department just off Smith Square, so all the lessons were there.

PS: OK, I see, so when exactly did you arrive in Bucharest?

LB: We arrived in March 1992, and we decided to drive out to post. Partly because the logistics of getting there were quite complex. It was not long after the end of the Communist regime. So, basically nothing worked. But also because, where possible, we've always found it very beneficial to travel over land to posts for a couple of reasons. One is you make the

mental transition as you're doing it and the other is, particularly with that posting, you just see a whole lot on the way. Bear in mind that about two years before, the Iron Curtain had come down. That was essentially a closed world to us. When we were travelling as students, you just could not go beyond the Iron Curtain or get a visa. Whether you would want to ... it just wouldn't happen.

So we drove through central Europe, we drove into Hungary from Austria, thinking that this is a bit rough, but we can make this work. And then we crossed the border into Romania, and we got ... Oh! The extreme stratification between a country in the communist bloc like Hungary which had had a fairly well-developed economy, a relatively painless path to what happened after '89, and Romania, where the economy, society, was essentially destroyed and traumatised under [Nicolae] Ceauşescu. The stark difference as you crossed that border was just painfully visible.

PS: So you had to make your way to Bucharest, find your way to the Embassy. Who was the Ambassador then?

LB: It was Andrew Bache, ah no it wasn't Andrew. Andrew Bache arrived about a month or two after me. I need to look him up. I forget the name. [It was Michael Atkinson.]

PS: So he would have been your Ambassador all the way through your time then?

LB: Yes, Andrew Bache pretty much continuously.

PS: What was it like, starting life there?

LB: As always, you pitch up in a new country, a new job, a new organisation, you're finding your feet a bit. But what I remember from the period, is, first of all, being a bit taken aback by how hierarchical an embassy really was. Some great colleagues I worked with, worked for, some really great people; but there was a hierarchy and when the Ambassador came in the room at the beginning of the morning you stood up. And this was the house style: it wasn't up for discussion, that's how it was. And you called each other Mr in your written minutes or Mrs, or whatever. And that's one of the things I remember and absolutely do not miss. I think the Foreign Office is a whole lot better for having moved on from that world.

The other thing that I remember about the job I really liked about it – and I'm really glad in the bosses I had on this – was the freedom to work out what actually the job was. If you think about the situation, you've got a very small embassy in a country that pretty much doesn't work, and about which hardly anyone in the West knows anything, frankly. I think they knew very little about us as well. Everything is hugely improvisatory. The infrastructure is just non-existent, and telephones didn't work, there were no supermarkets. I remember the first supermarket opening in Bucharest. No ATMs, no cash machines, hyper-inflation. In winter – we lived out of the diplomatic compound; we had a free-standing house out in the city – so before winter you stockpiled logs. This is what the Romanians did. You stockpiled food and you stockpiled logs because when the gas goes off and the electricity browns out, that's what you've got. This is Europe in 1992.

PS: So was it part of the plan that you should stay outside the compound or was it the only place to ...?

LB: I inherited that job from my predecessor and I'm not quite sure how we got there but in the Communist years the authorities strongly encouraged you to live in diplomatic compounds so they could keep an eye on you, and more to the point which Romanians were coming and going, and of course discouraging them from doing it. By whatever route, my predecessor and one other person in the Embassy lived out, in free-standing houses, and of course that meant that you got a much clearer sense of what was going on outside the diplomatic bubble, and that's a critically important thing, particularly in a society like that.

PS: Your job was Second Secretary, Political and Press, so what did that actually entail?

LB: In one sentence: working out what the hell was actually going on! And that was about the size of things. Imagine the scene. You've got a chaotic government that a few months before I arrived had been overthrown by the miners' raids, these basically counter-revolutionary things where there's a dispute within the governing ... it wasn't even a party, it was the National Salvation Front, a post-Communist, a political body, I would say with still some quite powerful echoes of how communist parties work. And one faction competing with another brought these coal miners to Bucharest to smash the place up and overthrow their opponents.

And this was the ever-present risk of extreme instability as people try to rebuild not only a society but political structures, political parties. And some of the political parties seemed to change their names every week as the factions moved around. But also, beyond that, as if Bucharest wasn't opaque enough, you've got this other rest of the country. A large country, very ethnically diverse, with latent ethnic tensions going on, particularly between Hungarians and Romanians, and of course the Gypsies, the Roma, who basically were at the bottom of everybody's pile. Numerous other ethnic minorities, some inter-ethnic violence after the end of the Communist period. But what you've also got going on to the west is the collapse of Yugoslavia. And extreme violence as that was taking place, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, on that side, and extreme violence taking place in the Caucasus. And a big chunk of my more or less unwritten job description was: get on the road and go and see what's going on.

PS: So you got outside Bucharest? Where did you go and what did you see?

LB: All over, all over. I particularly focused on – more by just happenstance than planning I think – the Transylvania region. The big mixed towns, places like Tîrgu Mureş and Cluj and maybe one or two others. And also the big industrial, monoculture cities. Basically, the Russian monogorods [single-employer cities].

I remember a couple of trips: I remember going to see Gheorghe Funar, the nationalist mayor of Cluj, vehemently anti-Hungarian, whose political platform was to stir up inter-ethnic differences between the Hungarian and the Romanian populations. I went to see the steelworks in Galatz on the Danube. This was the kind of Communist-era combine where the entire town is employed by the steelworks. You had iron ore and coal coming on barges at one end, and the output gates a couple of miles away. Products go out and quite a lot goes up the chimney in between.

The other Chancery tour I remember, quite vividly, was going to see the coal miners in the Jiu valley. This was a couple of years on from the last big visitation in Bucharest. But what was happening at the time was an enormous pyramid scheme called Caritas. And you can see it was getting to the point where you couldn't find cash because all of the cash had been hoovered up by this pyramid scheme. And you don't need to know much economics to know

how these things work and how they collapse. And I'd heard that basically all of the miners had bought into this scheme, so the sort of thinking is, right, there's going to be trouble when this thing collapses and takes all their savings and they'd be on the streets again.

So I went to see them. I had a meeting in his office with the miners' leader Miron Cozma, who was one of the scariest people I've ever met. He put a huge tumbler of whisky in front of me, with missing fingers and scars, and said – I remember him saying to me – if there's any left at the end of this meeting I will be offended. He's not the kind of person you'd want to offend. I then somehow managed to engineer a trip down one of the coal mines. I had a visitor from London and took him along on this trip, he was quite impressed. They took us down this appalling Soviet-era coalmine. It was just indescribably dangerous and horrible with all these coal miners stripped to the waist, covered in coal dust and pickaxes in the walls. And I asked a couple: 'Did you pay into Caritas?' And they said, 'Yes, of course we did.' And I asked, 'Why?' And I remember one of them looking me up and down and saying, 'Just look around you. If this was your world, you'd pay into it too.' And it's one of those moments where you think, Ah! I'm beginning to understand how this society works.

PS: What happened to Caritas: did they lose all their savings?

LB: It collapsed; they lost their savings.

PS: And what happened then, what was their reaction to that?

LB: The immediate consequences were suppressed, of course. But looking back on it, it spoke to the really precarious nature of life, of these societal structures, the economy. During this time the economy was going through hyperinflation, there were huge disruptions of people's lives. Everything they'd grown up with, all their safety nets. Everything they knew just going overnight.

PS: So they're bound to want to invest in something like that.

LB: Yes, of course. I think I probably would have too. But this was, I think for me, the crucial insight. And it's about how quite often in those jobs, particularly more junior jobs, what you're doing is trying to get inside how the country you're in really works. And if you

don't understand it you're not going to be much use, actually. Another point. I remember having a discussion with a Romanian colleague, who sadly is now dead. And we got to trust each other enough to have quite open conversations. And I asked her about the repression, about the Securitate and dealing with the police state in what was one of the most repressive police states in the world, frankly, during the Ceaușescu years. Without getting into all the details. She looked at me a bit tolerantly and said, 'Let me explain.' You know, if you grew up in this system and you thought that's what you'd be living in for the rest of your life, you'd have to be pretty courageous to stand up to it. If you've got a family to feed, you've got kids to educate, you've got unhealthy ageing grandparents, you'd do what you need to do. And again, I was this naïve, 20-something-year-old. It's one of those things where you just check your assumptions.

PS: Yes, absolutely. When you were going around the country were you reporting back to London and, if you were, in what form did your reporting take?

LB: The reporting –I thought about this a lot over the years – and the conclusion I've come to is that it's the wrong thing to do to just pour detail on to a desk in London that just doesn't know what to do with it, can't do anything useful with it. I think what you're really trying to do is understand the country you're in. So when a question or a problem or an opportunity comes up, you can give good advice about how to address it. You don't need to tell all the people in London every last detail.

PS: And that is an education process for yourself primarily?

LB: Yes, an institutional educational process. And it informs you of what you individually do, and as an embassy actually do, to meet the government's requirements. Of course, if you come across a grotesque human rights abuse, for example, or something that you look at and think, 'This is really quite dangerous', then obviously you need to alert London to that. And also you get tasked. There were a few occasions where I was asked to go and see somebody to demonstrate support for them, to some of the communist-era, high-profile human rights activists who were still getting a hard time from the authorities. Just showing up and being seen to show up.

PS: You were there about three years, is that right?

LB: Yes, three.

PS: And what changes, or maybe even improvements, did you detect over that time?

LB: It was pretty startling, and looking back over that period, you very rarely get to see an entire society reformat itself in real time, in front of your eyes. And there was probably a window of about five years where that was possible. I was there for three of them. So, looking at it in that perspective, it was a privilege to be there and to be part of it, even a tiny little part. But as I was saying earlier it's really one of the biggest things that's happened in my lifetime. And if that's not what you joined the Foreign Office for, I'm not quite sure what is.

PS: Yes, absolutely. So you must have been looking at coming to the end of that tour and wondering what's happening next. How did the next stage work?

### **Head of Trade Policy Section, EUD(E), FCO, 1995-96**

LB: You still have this posting system where it's a kind of conversation rather than a formal process. I was looking at the options, the options were looking at me. One of them was the Trade Policy Desk in European Union Department (External). Happy to do that. It's an interesting subject, a way of broadening out into a number of other areas. Getting EU work: a much more economic portfolio, a more technical portfolio, in a multilateral profile, than I'd dealt with. Quite high-stakes politics because one of the big things that turned out during that period was EU/US relations.

This was '95 to '96 and going into the '97 election. And of course the UK's relationship with Europe was coming right up the political agenda for the Conservative Government at the time. To cut a long story short: one of the ways that the party was trying to hold itself together was by slightly positioning itself as a bridge between the EU and the United States. Of course, there were very transatlanticist tendencies within the party. For some of them it was seen as an alternative to Europe. And so we were, during that period, negotiating through the EU something called the New Transatlantic Agenda, which is a very broad policy framework for US/EU relations, and of course for our own purposes we were trying to shape

that. So that was a crash course, both in the technicalities of trade policy – this was just after the Uruguay Round had finished – but also the politics particularly of trade and investment.

PS: Who was your Head of Department then, who was in charge?

LB: It was John Holmes and Dickie Stagg.

PS: So quite high-flying people.

LB: Indeed. There were two European Departments at time, European Department (Internal) and (External).

PS: Yes, I remember that distinction, I never quite understood what it was.

LB: Internal was the institutions, the structures, the essentially domestic policies of Europe. External was the EU's external policies. It was a powerhouse in the Office.

PS: The Foreign Secretary at that time would have been Malcolm Rifkind? What was he like to work for as Foreign Secretary?

LB: I still see him from time to time. I found him personally very good to work for. He was clear about what he wanted. He was pleasant to work for. Looking back on it, one of the bigger problems wasn't so much the character of the Ministers as the divisions within the party. The thing that sticks in my mind from that period was how high-stakes the politics were, both in terms of the international policy but also the sense within government and within the Conservative Party of where this was going.

### **Private Secretary to Minister of State for Europe, FCO, 1996-98**

PS: So that was up to 1996, and then you move to become Private Secretary to the Minister of State for Europe. How did that transition go: was it quite a big jump up at that point?

LB: It was the same grade, and there were a couple of things behind that decision. First of all, in career terms it was a good move to go and do a private secretary job because that's how

you build your profile in the Office, but it's also how you get inside how government really works. It's a ringside seat to the big decisions; you're helping to support the Minister through those decisions. Working on understanding how politics and the bureaucracy fit together, what's effective and what's not effective in helping them work together. Also, how Whitehall and the wider system work; particularly in a complex area of policy like the EU where basically every single department of government has a first-order interest.

PS: Who was the first Minister of State for Europe that you worked for?

LB: The first one was David Davis.

PS: That was until the general election, and then Labour came in.

LB: Labour came in, and then it was Doug Henderson.

PS: Was there any question about whether you would stay on as Private Secretary?

LB: Absolutely. I should start by saying, even after all these years, that the nature of a private secretary role is that you have access to a lot more confidential relationships than in most jobs. And it can only work if the Ministers you're working for trust you at the time, and their successors trust your successors. I remember being told at the time, quite rightly, by the PUS: your responsibility is to do this job discreetly, particularly with things that are as sensitive as EU affairs. Particularly at that time going into the election with all of the intra-party as well as the national questions around the EU, which of course we've seen play out since. But the contrast couldn't have been starker in terms of personality, politics, the general mood around the two governments. And of course, as anyone who's ever worked in a private office knows, you go into the election with two briefing packs, assuming there are two outcomes. And one briefing pack may be considerably larger than the other!

What you have done is go through the manifestos, the Departments have had their contacts with the parties and basically got Whitehall ready for day one. And on day one, one of the briefing packs goes in the shredder. And that's the end of it, and you pivot to the new government. That happened over a weekend. Of course, the elections were on Thursday and the results were coming in on the Friday. And it was pretty clear that the incoming [Tony]

Blair administration had won a big majority, and they were going to take the country in a different direction on Europe. So we then spent most of the weekend waiting to hear who the Minister was because there were clearly things going on within the party that an official like me wouldn't have been privy to, and you were waiting to hear who your Minister is. And of course it is their prerogative to appoint whoever they want in those jobs. And, not unnaturally, if you've worked for the outgoing administration in a relationship that close, it would be natural to assume that the incoming Minister might want their own choice of Private Secretary. So I was ready for that.

PS: How long did it take before you knew Doug Henderson would have you as his Private Secretary?

LB: A few days. As always with someone you don't know, all of a sudden, you're basically living together in the Office and quite a lot of time out of the Office, you're sizing each other up. I can't speak for him, but I think looking back on it from my perspective, we got on pretty well. I made it pretty abundantly clear to him that I saw my role as helping him do his job. And that's how it went.

PS: How did the priorities change under Labour and how did your job change?

LB: Totally. First of all the personalities changed, the political relationships between the key players changed. What you had at the time was a sort of an evolving balance of power between different parts of the party, different leaders. You had Blair in Number 10, [Gordon] Brown in the Treasury, and a few other big beasts around the system like [Peter] Mandelson and so on. And as an official you're trying to recalibrate your compass: how it all works, and where your Minister fits into that. The positioning of the incoming government was to take the relationship with Europe in a very different direction from the previous government. So pretty much the first thing that happened: we had a trip. We had a meeting that was going to take place on, I think, the Monday or Tuesday of the week after the election where the UK was going to sign up to the Social Chapter. And of course the Minister coming in hadn't actually been expecting that job and so he was on a pretty steep learning curve. Pretty much a big chunk of what we did the first day was: here are all the things you need to know. Here is government policy, you're going to sign up to the Social Chapter, here's your brief, your speaking notes.

And of course there was huge press interest in Brussels in the incoming Government: where it's going to go, what the tone of the relationship was. So a lot of it was coaching the Minister through how you pitch that right in the first outing of the Government on this stuff when you're in front of the world's media. Highly political stuff.

PS: And it must have been quite a cheerful time, if the mood was changing in that respect?

LB: Yes, I'm sure we've all seen the pictures of the early days of the Blair Government. Whatever your politics, when you've got an incoming government that wishes to send some very clear positive messages about its relations with the subject that you're dealing with, of course it's energising.

PS: But were there already divisions opening up, especially over things like the Euro?

LB: While I was doing that job, there were probably three fundamentally important areas of evolving policy in the European Union. One was the introduction of a single currency that year, and the move towards that; and one was opening the enlargement negotiations – accession negotiations – with mostly the central Europeans, and also of course Cyprus, which was a very important part of this; and the third was the next stage in essentially constitutional discussions: what's the shape of the European Union, what's the extent of its powers, how do the pieces fit together? And of course the three things are very closely related. And again, in terms of the international policy, the high politics, the national politics of this, it doesn't come much bigger than that.

PS: In your time as a Private Secretary, did you travel much with your Minister, overseas?

LB: Incessantly, incessantly. My wife was by then working for an NGO that required her to travel to Southeast Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.

PS: So you were never in the same part of the world at the same time?

LB: We had to keep a diary, as to who was going to be feeding the cat.

PS: And did the cat survive?

LB: Yes, the cat survived. But it was one of those periods where you're both just intensely busy. There were weeks where the Minister and I would travel three times in a week. Usually to European capitals, sometimes a bit further afield. The portfolio had changed right after the election. We had the European Union portfolio, but also Eastern Europe, the former Soviet countries. So we travelled as much as we could. But of course, the main focus by some distance was the relationship with the EU.

PS: So you would be going to Brussels most would you?

LB: Brussels, Luxembourg, sometimes other capitals. Relationship-building between the new Government and its counterparts in other countries, particularly the left-of-centre governments.

PS: And looking back at it, did that strategy work, did you manage to establish those sorts of relationships with EU countries and the countries hoping to join the EU?

LB: In terms of building the relationships, absolutely. The underlying question, though, was always going to be national policy. So do we, as the UK, go into the Euro or stand aside from it? That was the huge decision for the country there. The longer, slower-burn question was about the whole relationship with the EU, as we subsequently saw. For the UK there was a pretty strong consensus around enlargement. There weren't serious people arguing that this was a bad move in terms of the UK's interests.

PS: No, and the third element, the constitutional element, was Labour hesitant on that? Obviously, not as much as the Conservatives, but was there hesitation about deepening the EU institutions?

LB: Looking back, I don't think they were quite as acute as they became subsequently. Essentially the focus was primarily on the European Union, on the Euro, the single currency, and the evolving positions of particularly Germany and France, around how that would be structured, how strict the criteria would be. The London Government had essentially decided that they would stand back from it.

PS: Yes, and they'd made that decision quite early, hadn't they? It was Gordon Brown, wasn't it, who really insisted on that?

LB: Yes, if you remember there were a number of tests.

PS: Yes, five tests, wasn't it?

LB: A number of tests were constructed. Unpacking the politics of those tests, they were tests that, you know, were not going to be met. The heart of it was a political decision, not an economic decision. I would say the discussions in Europe and in the UK about the future constitutional arrangements were a bit slower than that, and the shape of the discussion was forming up, but the main decision at that point was single currency, and enlargement.

PS: Was Doug Henderson your Minister throughout your time there?

LB: Yes, except for literally a week, right at the end. Towards the end of my time in that job I was looking for my next posting. It's quite important that at some stage ... you know, they're the kind of jobs that you shouldn't do for too long, in my view. Partly because you get burnout, but also partly because you may not actually be what your Minister or your Department needs for the longer term. And people need to think about succession planning. So I had secured my next job, which was Turkey.

I think we could all see a reshuffle coming. And that portfolio was likely to change for internal party reasons as much as for anything else. And, in a way, it was quite serendipitous that as the new Minister came in, almost the first thing I said to her – it was Joyce Quin – was: I will be moving on shortly. We've prepared you a list of candidates for your Private Secretary, for you to look at them.

### **Head of Political Section, British Embassy Ankara, 1999-2002**

PS: So it worked out really well. You planned your next move and, again, how much guidance did you get, how much choice did you have, had things changed at all since the beginning of your career?

LB: Guidance: none at all. By that stage, because you are more senior, you have more of a profile around the Office. I'd become particularly interested in Turkey. It has an enormous number of reasons why you would go and work there. A fascinating country. It's the intersection of Europe, Euro-Atlantic issues, NATO, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union. It's got everything for a diplomat.

PS: Did you learn Turkish?

LB: Yes.

PS: And how was that?

LB: Hard! Turkish is by some distance the hardest language I've learned.

PS: But were you confident enough in it to do business?

LB: Yes. It's a different proposition from Romanian. I had, probably, nine months to learn it, which is considerably less than you need, actually. I spent two months of that doing immersion living with a family in Istanbul, who were selected for their inability to speak English.

PS: It must have been a lovely place to live for that time.

LB: Yes, who's complaining? And of course, as always with immersion, quite a big chunk of what you're doing is, is not learning the language, it's getting inside the country, their culture.

PS: And you can do that in Istanbul very easily, can't you?

LB: Yes, Istanbul's a big cosmopolitan city.

PS: It's quite a big step up to be head of political section in an embassy?

LB: Again, the same grade, but it was a much, much bigger job than the one I'd done in Bucharest. The active issues, while I was there, were any number of them. The ones that spring to mind were Turkey's perennially troubled relationship with the EU: that was going through a particularly active phase. Essentially both sides were manoeuvring around each other. Where is this going? Are we actually serious about accession? The accession negotiations with the central Europeans had by then started, which brought into play the Cyprus question, because Greece had made a condition of agreeing to the central European enlargement that Cyprus would also come in. Unresolved Cyprus dispute, of which Turkey is a party, and was a guarantor power, and the Turkish military had invaded Cyprus in 1974. So, again, pretty big stuff. And what you've got is the Central European enlargement interplaying with Turkey's own relationship with the EU.

You've also got the Saddam [Hussein]-controlled Iraq, to the south, with all the Operation Northern Watch stuff happening out of the Incirlik airbase in the south-east of Turkey. You've got Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union moving quite fast in quite disparate directions towards the north and the east. You've got the relationship with Iran, which was coming to be quite crucially important, particularly as security concerns about Iran evolved. You've got terrorism, counter-terrorism, the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. You've got the perennial economic crises in Turkey itself. These are the years of the [Bülent] Ecevit government. And as if that wasn't enough, in my first couple of months in the job the huge earthquake took place in Istanbul. It killed 20,000 plus people.

PS: In your job were you mostly monitoring domestic politics in Turkey, as well as everything else that was going on?

LB: I tended to focus mostly on the EU relationship with Cyprus. There was an active phase of negotiations over Cyprus, involving the UK, because we were the guarantor power. And on the EU/Turkey/NATO relationship. One of the really big questions at the time, which was very difficult indeed, was whether the EU's emerging defence and security policy could have access to NATO assets and capabilities. And the Turks, not unnaturally, said, we are in NATO and we are a very stalwart partner in NATO; we are not in the EU. We have a say in this. So there was a lengthy, very detailed negotiation going on to try to work out how we would bring the Turks on side.

PS: Who was your Ambassador at that time?

LB: It was first of all David Logan, and then when David retired, it was Peter Westmacott.

PS: And it was a much larger embassy than you had worked in before, presumably, so there were many more people dealing with different aspects of policy, so you were just able to focus on those few basic things?

LB: Yes, but you can't do those things sensibly unless you keep abreast of internal political developments in a hugely complex, enormous country and also, specifically, what was happening around Iraq in the years where we were moving inexorably towards some sort of confrontation with Iraq. I should have mentioned, by the way of course, the other big thing that happened on my watch in Turkey was 9/11. This was something that just completely shook the kaleidoscope of the Middle East: the broader Middle East, the World.

PS: Yes, absolutely. Thinking about how embassies work, were you constantly talking to colleagues about what was going on, and were you recording things and reporting things: how did that work?

LB: The technology had moved on a bit in the intervening few years. I got my first word processor with e-mail on my desk in Ankara. Pretty clunky to start with. And with the very first one, you dialled in at a certain time of the day when you could pick up your e-mail. There's your email and that's it until tomorrow.

PS: Rather pleasant in some ways?

LB: Yes, possibly. Because it was such a bigger problem-set than Bucharest, coordination within and beyond the embassy had a much higher premium on it. If you think of the range of things that I've just described, EU coordination was critically important and the UK's interests in Turkey, and the issues that passed through that Embassy, meant that we put a lot of effort, rightly, into trying to shape EU policy towards Turkey and then towards Cyprus and the EU/NATO relationship. That was really top of my pile. But again, going back to Bucharest, you can't get inside a country and understand the thinking process of its leaders and its populations unless you get out and travel.

PS: Did you manage to do that?

LB: Yes. Not as much as I would have liked to, obviously, but when you think about the nature of the country, you've got this huge bureaucratic, military centre of gravity in Ankara, the commercial and media centre of gravity is Istanbul; then you've got this whole other part of Turkey, which is the east, the southeast: there was still essentially a counterinsurgency situation in the southeast, the conflict with the Kurdish separatists. So whenever I could I would travel in the east and the southeast of Turkey. I don't think the Turks were that delighted that we did it. They didn't entirely trust us, to be honest. So, for both security reasons and other reasons, whenever I travelled in the sensitive parts of southeastern Turkey it was always with an escort. To keep us safe and also keep an eye on us.

PS: So you were there from 1999 to 2002, another three-year posting, and what stage did you think you'd reached in your career: what had you learnt and where did you think you could go next?

LB: A lot of things were going on there and it's important just to pause on the fact that as well as a career you had a personal life going on. We had our first child in Turkey, and that was great. It's a great place to have children. But it does prompt a kind of re-evaluation. Where are we going? Where do we want to be? Not so much we, more I. And I would say I started thinking about this. If I decided to pursue other options, what would they be? So one of the things I did in my time in Turkey was do an MBA.

PS: Did you really?

LB: Yes, distance learning in the Open University. Specifically for two reasons: one I was interested in the subject matter, the other was to generate options.

PS: And did you gain much from that: did it help your career?

LB: Hugely. Well, the career option I don't know, and I can't honestly say it wouldn't have happened. But the discipline and the experience of looking at organisations through a different perspective ... I deliberately chose modules that included things like financial

strategy and how the private sector works. Partly to understand, to be more credible, but also to look back in on government: what do we need to know that we don't know? About the rest of the world.

PS: You must have evolved some thinking about the Foreign Office itself at that time through that prism?

LB: Yes, it's a way of thinking about what the Foreign Office does well, what it doesn't do well. And probably the most useful things to me, directly from doing it, were thinking about how you manage and lead people and how organisations succeed or fail.

PS: Which had motivated you to managing, leading people?

LB: Yes, and of course, it does. And when you're on the cusp of going into the senior management structure, of course that becomes really the heart of the job.

PS: How do you make that transition to the senior management level: how did it happen in your case?

LB: Maybe a couple of things looking back on it. One is rebalancing what matters to you and how you do the job. About that time I did the Foreign Office Leadership Programme at the London Business School, and part of that is the usual 360-degree feedback. And the feedback I remember getting, when you boil it down to its essence, was that you are as capable as anyone in this organisation in terms of policy and intellect; you need to do a bit of work on your management and leadership. And it was one of those moments where you think: Ugh! Well let's put it this way: you have to decide, are you going to take this message on board?

PS: Yes, and you took it on board and consciously changed your style?

LB: Oh yes, totally.

PS: And did that help you make the transition to the next stage up?

LB: Yes, absolutely. It was a very well-constructed and well-timed programme, and the Office needed it. It wasn't just about me, it was trying to change the culture: the leadership culture.

PS: Was this the first time they'd gone into this on a large scale?

LB: I don't know if it was the first iteration; I remember it being quite new.

PS: So quite a few of your generation would have gone through it at that stage?

LB: Pretty much most of us who were at the top of the delegated grades and the lower end of the senior management structure.

PS: So one could then possibly observe outcomes over the next few decades if you wanted to.

LB: Yes, so Simon McDonald was on the same course.

### **NATO Defence College, Rome (Senior Course), 2002-03**

PS: Yes, that tells you something. I think we might conclude the first part of our discussion quite soon, but it would be quite nice to end on the last position you had before you joined the senior management, and that would be at the NATO Defence College in Rome. How did that come about?

LB: It was entirely serendipitous. I was coming to the end of my time in Ankara, looking at what was happening next. I wanted to bid for my first senior management structure job, and all of a sudden up popped in one of the office circulars something saying: 'Does anyone fancy six months at the NATO Defence College in Rome?' So I instantly wrote yes, I'll do that. Why would you not? It's something with loads of things I'd worked on previously, a very good fit for the things I was interested in. It's Rome: no one would turn down an opportunity to live in Rome for six months. But also, it's pretty clear what I and the Office would be getting out of it. It's a six-month – slightly under six months – essentially a strategic studies sabbatical with about a hundred mostly military officers. And the origins of the – it's called the Senior Course – is to prepare soldiers of about colonel rank to go into their

first major appointment: to first NATO staff appointments. And what they were doing at the time was to try to broaden out the course membership to include a few diplomats, a few civilian officials and so on. We weren't quite the first cohort, but the course was changing, the profile was changing. So there were half a dozen diplomats on that course. I put in the application and thought nothing of it. It's not going to happen, stop worrying about it. Then I got a phone call in, of all places, Blue Water shopping centre: Sainsburys. From a woman in the MoD saying can you present yourself in Rome in three weeks?

PS: Very good!

LB: So my successor was appointed. She was by that stage in Ankara, and as one of my staff had been promoted into my job. So there was no issue there. We packed up the car and drove to Rome. With a one-year-old.

PS: The whole family went?

LB: Yes.

PS: That sounds very nice for all of you.

LB: Two things have stuck with me from that, one is obviously about the importance, particularly if you're working on international security subjects, of understanding how the military work and think. And then understanding how we work and think. And I like to think that we all got a huge benefit from doing that and then of course in subsequent jobs I worked a lot with defence planners, operational defence people. It's its own world. You need to understand the language, you need to understand the culture. It's like being an emissary to a foreign country, except we are all on the same side. The other thing is the importance of thinking time. I got a lot of reading done in that six months. And a lot of recalibrating about subjects I just didn't know enough about; the opportunity to step back and think things through, on the subject matter but also a few other things as well. Something that was a really good use of time at the right time.

PS: Good. Shall we make a break there?

**Second session, Friday 13 October 2023**

**Deputy Director, Iraq Planning Unit/Iraq Policy Unit, FCO, 2003 (Feb-Aug)**

PS: This is our second session and last time we ended, I think, in 2003 at the point at which you were promoted SMS after your time in Rome. What job did you come back to, in the UK at that point?

LB: When I came back from Rome, I'd already been appointed to be Ambassador in Baku starting at the end of the year. And of course, I needed to do some pre-posting training, particularly conversion of Turkish to Azeri. But of course, one of the things that was happening, towards the end of my time in Rome, was the build-up to the invasion of Iraq. So, all of the negotiations going on in New York about the first and second resolutions, giving authorisation for military action. And of course, given that there are a lot of military US and other military on the course in Rome, by the time we ended, quite a few of those people knew what they'd be doing next. They would be going into action in Iraq. So when I got back, I was asked if I'd join what was then the Iraq Planning Unit. It was a very, very small unit operating in the Foreign Office, in the India Office Council Chamber, the remit of which was essentially to do the planning for the post conflict phase, Phase Four in the jargon: 'What happens when the fighting stops?' So, I joined that with Dominick Chilcott as the head of the Unit, Nick Carter as the military liaison, in those days a lieutenant colonel who subsequently became Chief of the Defence Staff. And our job was to try and think through what were the issues that we need to be on top of once the Coalition were actually in power in Iraq, once the fighting had stopped.

PS: What were the issues that you identified?

LB: Well, there were all sorts of things and of course the planning, particularly in the US, had been very heavily focused on the military campaign itself, with a presumption that there would be a very rapid transition to an Iraqi civilian leadership when the fighting had stopped. I think our view at the time, certainly borne out by events since, was that that was wholly unrealistic and the sorts of issues that we were dealing with were things around, for example, the law that would apply. Legally you're the occupying power, and once you've removed the government of Iraq, we are there essentially as a military force. But particularly the things I

was working on were our sense of what needed to happen for the transitional political arrangements back to Iraqi control. And so there was a great deal of work going backwards and forwards between Washington and London as we tried to shape US thinking on how that would happen: what would be the processes by which you'd build an interim Iraqi government, who should be brought into it, how they should be brought into it, and at what stage do you take that to the Iraqi population? A whole host of other issues including, actually, who is responsible for which parts of Iraq? You will remember that the UK military were located in Basra in the south. A stream of work that I was particularly involved in also was management of the oil industry, the major revenue stream for any future Iraqi government. How to manage it, how to preserve options for an incoming government.

PS: So you're putting that planning up to whom? Who were you reporting to higher up in the system?

LB: Within the Foreign Office, it was to the Foreign Secretary: the crisis leadership in the Foreign Office. But bearing in mind that there were for much of that time actually two structures within the Foreign Office dealing with Iraq. There was the Crisis Unit dealing with the day-in, day-out policy and operational issues arising, which were of course enormous, and the Iraq Planning Unit, which was trying to think through, do the forward thinking and planning. That was the thing I was in. Ultimately, there were these conversations going on between the Prime Minister and other senior members of the government and their counterparts in Washington and elsewhere.

PS: How far did you feel you were able to shape American thinking on post-operational planning?

LB: Hardly at all. I think that the problem went really in a way wider than that. What we were seeing at the time, and again, I think, borne out since in numerous books that have been written on this, was that the Administration itself was being pulled in different directions by competing agendas, by different views, different levels of expertise, frankly, on what we were dealing with. The single event that most sticks out in my mind was the question of De-Ba'athification: what to do about the Ba'ath Party and its members. I was writing a paper on that. And it's not a difficult paper to write. It's in my view absolutely obvious, and that

paper, in summary, said: you lock up the top leadership, the guys on the 'pack of cards', and you leave them for a future government to deal with, and you give everyone else a job.

PS: Did you go back in your thinking to previous occupation: like for instance the occupation of Germany in 1945?

LB: Yes, of course. Just a brief aside there. This is one reason why I think institutions like the Historians in the Foreign Office are crucially important, because when you're making policy on the run, as you are in those sorts of situations, being able to ask deep subject-matter experts: what are the precedents? What can we learn from things that have gone well or not gone well in the past? And I think that has been a huge asset throughout my career: Research Analysts, Historians, deep subject-matter expertise. But of course, what then happened was that a telegram from Baghdad landed on everyone's desk, announcing that the Coalition Provisional Authority had basically abolished the Ba'ath Party, the military, the intelligence services, the Olympic Committee, the whole lot.

PS: So in London you're watching this thing unravelling, presumably, over the early summer of 2003?

LB: Exactly so. The military campaign obviously finished very, very quickly and decisively. Probably quicker and more decisively than anyone had dared hope. And then we were into a rapidly developing situation where there were not enough soldiers; there wasn't a clear enough concept of how we were going to make the transition from the Saddam regime through to a democratically elected successor regime.

PS: At what point did you leave the Planning Unit?

### **HM Ambassador, Baku, 2004-07**

LB: I was due to go out to Baku at the end of the year, so I stayed in the Unit until August, I think it was, and then had a very truncated period of preparation for Baku.

PS: The preparation would have involved language training, as you said. How was that transition from Turkish to Azerbaijani?

LB: They're both hard languages. The transition was relatively straightforward because they are very closely related. Essentially, Azerbaijani is a Turkish dialect. But there are a few important differences there, in structure. There are lots of differences in vocabulary, a lot more Arabic and Farsi words [in Azerbaijani], a lot of Russian words in Azerbaijani. But you're not trying to get to grips with a language as completely different from English as Turkish.

PS: When did you leave for Baku: at the beginning of 2004?

LB: Right at the beginning of 2004. We stayed in London over the Christmas and New Year break. We had by that stage a five-month-old child and a three-year-old. We did it the hard way. We managed to turn up at Heathrow with, I think, seventeen checked bags, having closed up the house over Christmas and New Year. It was chaos. And we met, for several years afterwards, people who had held one of the babies, or helped us with the luggage on to the planes.

PS: And this is obviously your first ambassadorial post. What was it like taking up that position?

LB: Well, clearly, if you joined the Foreign Office, it's probably likely that that's what you aspire to. And certainly, it was a fantastic job, and it was exactly the right time to be there for reasons I'll come on to. The thing I most remember about the early days was, first of all, arriving in the dead of night in Baku airport, and a Turkish TV crew wanting an interview in Turkish, which is the language I had just overlaid with Azerbaijani. So, the fuses in my head were popping by this stage. But the thing I most remember is that point where you sit your team around you at the table on your first morning there, and there are all those faces staring back at you saying, 'Tell us what to do.' And that's the job. There's no one else to tell you. It's at that moment where you suddenly realise that you are in a leadership position. There is no one else to tell you what to do.

PS: And how well prepared did you feel at that point? Did you know what you wanted to do?

LB: I had a pretty good idea of what our priorities and interests were. But I think the real learning curve there was not the policy work, it was the leadership function. That every single day, you are the person to whom everybody in your mission is looking to give them direction. That's the core of the job.

PS: How big was the mission actually?

LB: In those days it was about ten UK based staff and about 25 local staff.

PS: What were the priorities when you got there? What were you were aiming to do?

LB: There were two or three really big things going on. One, of course, was the commercial and energy security side of the job. While I was there, BP spent several tens of billions of dollars developing the oil and gas infrastructure. So, while I was there, they built all of the offshore oil and gas infrastructure in the Caspian [Sea]; and the pipelines taking the oil and gas to markets. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and the gas pipeline alongside it. That meant that the UK was a first-rank player in the country and in that part of the world. There were huge stakes, huge economic and energy security, as well as commercial stakes in play. About a month before I'd arrived, Heydar Aliyev, the previous president died, and of course his son, Ilham Aliyev, became president. So there was a very difficult moment of transition from one generation to another. These things are always important, particularly in countries where state institutions are still young and the succession is all-important, let's say, in terms of political stability. And the other thing, of course, was the ongoing Nagorno Karabakh war. And so still in a state of no war, no peace. Most days there would be shooting across the line of contact. And, as if that wasn't enough, you've got Russia as a difficult neighbour to the north, Iran as a difficult neighbour to the south. And it's got everything in terms of policy interest.

PS: As British Ambassador, what did you feel you could contribute to that mix?

LB: Support of BP was obviously a very large part of the role: that was the primary economic interest of the UK. Stability in the country and in the region; trying to nudge the government towards better governance. You needed to be realistic, particularly in a post-Soviet country at that stage in its development, with a new president. Trying to, again, nudge the parties to

the Nagorno Karabakh conflict towards some sort of settlement was unlikely, but there was a great deal of work going on to try to build the logic of finding a way forward. It's a rather convoluted way of putting it.

PS: At the time you were there – of course it's recently blown up again – did that situation mostly stabilise itself?

LB: The situation was inherently unstable, so there was no peace agreement; there were no peacekeeping forces. It was soldiers in trenches, shooting at each other from time to time, and occasionally really awful things happening. I remember a young child shepherd being shot by a sniper. And there was a murder carried out by one serviceman on another, at a NATO training course, I think in Hungary. So, all of a sudden, a crisis blows up and you've got to deal with it.

PS: And personally, what was dealing with it like: what did you have to do just to try to calm things down?

LB: Try and calm things down, try and keep things on the bigger picture. I got to know the president; I got to meet the president very regularly and so it was possible to build some sort of dialogue with him. In those days, of course, the big oil and gas revenues hadn't arrived. Azerbaijan was making some money from oil and gas, but it was only towards the end of my time, as the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline came in, that they were exporting a million barrels a day, with the cash flows that come from that. But what was clear even then was that the economic asymmetry between Azerbaijan and Armenia was heading in only one direction: that Azerbaijan would re-arm – its commitment was very clear – to recover control of the territories that it had lost in the war. And of course, you've got Turkey in the mix as well, with its own historical grievances between Turkey and Armenia.

PS: Was Russia also being active at this point?

LB: Russia is always active in what they call the near abroad.

PS: And you could detect that in your daily work?

LB: Yes.

PS: So, you're there for three years from 2004 to 2007, and you've already explained that the country was more prosperous by the end of that time. Was the general situation in the country improved as well, politically, for instance?

LB: If anything, I would say it was probably going gently backwards.

PS: Why was that?

LB: At the beginning of my time there it was possible, for example, to have a pragmatic discussion with the authorities around human rights: the question of political prisoners and so on. There was a turning point in 2005. There was a parliamentary election, and the government was feeling insecure about that election. Of course, you remember that it was the time not long after the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. And there was an anxiety that those things would be coming the way of Azerbaijan and of course a great deal of influence-peddling. I don't need to name the countries involved. But there were those saying, you know: the West, the Americans and the Brits, they want to have a kind of revolution here too. I knew perfectly well it was going on. What happened at the time of the election was – I never quite got to exactly the bottom of what was happening – but there was essentially what looked like a mini coup. So, two senior ministers arrested in the middle of the night; soldiers on the streets briefly and just a very, very dangerous moment. It didn't help that one of those ministers was a very close contact of mine.

PS: What was it like – going back a bit to your role as Ambassador? What about your family life? Where did you live, and how did your very young family live at that time?

LB: We lived on top of the shop. The residence was a large very well-appointed flat on top of the embassy which was in a business building in downtown Baku. It was a great time, actually. A lot of things came together at once. You know: your first ambassadorial job in a place as interesting and of consequence. Azerbaijan, like Turkey, is very family-oriented and we were pretty welcome wherever we went. There were no problems there in the slightest.

PS: Was your wife still working at that point or was she looking after the family?

LB: She was actually working. She was working with BP setting up a Science Centre in Sangachal oil and gas terminal.

PS: Slightly different to what she had done before, or was it an extension of her development work?

LB: A kind of extension of what she had done before. It was an interesting thing to do at a time when there was an important role for public education about what the oil and gas industry meant for the country. And a little bit about building the identity of the country bearing in mind that this was still barely fifteen years after the end of the Soviet Union.

PS: By what point did you know what your next role would be? How did your career develop at that point?

#### **Deputy Ambassador, Moscow, 2007-10**

LB: I was looking at next steps and I'd wanted to work in Russia, on Russia, for a very long time; and the Deputy Head of Mission job in Moscow was coming up, so the usual conversations take place. I bid for the job and got it. Absolutely delighted to get it. It was exactly the right move, I think, from the job in Baku. And, of course, in some foreign ministries once you are an ambassador, you are always an ambassador and the idea of going to be a deputy somewhere is a bit odd. Not for me! And I think not in our system. The curiosity about that appointment was that the news came through pretty much the same time that Alexander Litvinenko died of polonium poisoning in London. And so I called a relative back in London and said you'll never guess where we're going next. By this stage it was pretty clear what happened with Alexander Litvinenko. And they said, 'No, no, we'll never guess, where are you going next?' And I said, 'I'm going to Moscow.' And there was a long silence. And then the question came, 'Why can't you get sent somewhere like Stockholm?'

PS: Yes, a family member would say that. But, again on a practical subject, how was your Russian at that point?

LB: I'd spent a lot of time in Baku building Russian up for precisely this purpose. Baku, in particular in those days, and in the Soviet days, was pretty much a bilingual city. The elite spoke Russian – actually, the elite these days speak English as well – but you would hear people in the office switching between the two languages, several times within the same sentence even. It shouldn't be possible, the languages don't work that way grammatically, but it did. So, it wasn't hard to find opportunities to practise, teachers and so on.

PS: Looking at the dates again, what date in 2007 did you actually arrive in Moscow?

LB: We left Baku at the beginning of the summer. I did immersion in St Petersburg over the summer and then we went out to Moscow in either August or September 2007.

PS: And your children were a little older at that point. Where did you live, and what did they do when they got there?

LB: First of all, we drove to Moscow.

PS: Oh yes, another road trip.

LB: Yes, another road trip. We picked up the ferry in the UK, drove across Scandinavia and went into Russia through Finland, drove down through Russia. Again, that's something I like to do, something we like to do, to get a sense of the route there. When we arrived in Moscow, it was not long after the round of expulsions that had followed the Litvinenko affair. We'd expelled four Russian diplomats from London, and they'd expelled four of ours from Moscow. And we were put in one of the flats on the Embassy compound, as a transit arrangement, with the idea that we'd go and live in one of the wings of the big house. We looked at the options and thought, this is really obvious, we're going to stay here. For two reasons: One is that it suits the family situation better than the Embassy estate. The Embassy residential buildings in Moscow are just the best I've ever seen frankly, really, really well done. A great environment. But also, for operational reasons, in an environment like that I think it's really important to have a senior member of staff on site. So that was really a decision made for us.

PS: And again, the children; were the children in nursery school by that stage?

LB: They were by that stage at the Anglo-American School. It's one of these Cold War institutions that were built up over the years, created by the Americans, us and the Canadians, principally for the international community during the Cold War, in the Soviet Union. By that time, it was an enormous school. The boys slotted in very well. Of course, what's happened in the last year after the Ukraine invasion, it's been closed down.

PS: Oh! How awful, I didn't know that.

LB: It became a political football.

PS: That's depressing. And your wife, did she find work there?

LB: By that stage she was mostly looking after the boys, doing pieces of work for the NGO sector, back in the UK and elsewhere.

PS: OK, so you're starting in Moscow, who was your Ambassador at that point?

LB: It was Tony Brenton and then Anne Pringle.

PS: What did you do? What was your work?

LB: As a Deputy Head of Mission, Russian speaker, in that particular mission at that time, of course it depends on what your head of mission want you to do as well. What I particularly focused on was trying to build both for myself, but also for the Chancery, for the Embassy, a centre of excellence in reading Russia. That's the heart of what that embassy does. Knowing how the place really works; knowing as far as you can (it was still a very closed system in those days); knowing the people who can help you do that. How do you get the people who can help you to read the place properly, but also have influence within the system? Bearing in mind that the Russian state, particularly Putin, tended to restrict our access to decision makers, and that got much worse when I went back as an Ambassador. Making sure that the Embassy is run properly, particularly that morale is high. It's a difficult place to work. It's a doubly difficult place to work if you don't speak Russian and don't know your way around Russia, and some staff thrived on that, some staff found it difficult. And a really key part of

the Deputy Head of Mission role in those circumstances is to make sure that the Embassy is run effectively, that there are good welfare systems, that it's fun to be there, that people have ways of enjoying their time there.

PS: I suppose in an Embassy like that quite a lot of the people will be career diplomats who aren't necessarily Russia specialists, or even Russian speakers. How did you manage to make them part of this centre of excellence?

LB: Well, it's easy to say, a lot harder to do. In an environment like that if you don't have good Russian, you are limited in what you can do. Your ability to read, to listen, to talk. Russian isn't the hardest language, but it's not an easy language. You have to work at it, and you have to practise, and you have to get out of the Chancery building. Bear in mind this is Moscow, so the security layers around the Embassy and the Chancery are formidable. Starting with the people dressed as policemen on the gate whose job is to be taking very careful note of who's coming, who's going. And where necessary dissuade people from coming in.

PS: Did you or your colleagues get out of Moscow much?

LB: Not as much as I'd have liked but as much as we could. Russia is one of those countries where if all you see is the centre of Moscow, you are completely missing what that country is about. If all you see is Moscow and St Petersburg, you're still missing most of what the country is about. In those days we had a Consulate in St Petersburg, and we had a consulate in Yekaterinburg, in the industrial Urals. Bear in mind that Yekaterinburg is a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Moscow, and you're only just getting started crossing Russia. I have actually sat on a plane for nine hours crossing Russia and you're still in the same country. It's just incredible. But things feel very different when you're in the provinces. The point of comparison is probably another continental-scale country, the United States. The US is not just Washington, it's not just the East Coast. If you don't understand how people think and feel and talk in the Midwest or the West Coast or the South, you're not understanding the country.

PS: But you did feel you were picking up what it was like in other parts of Russia?

LB: Yes, that's right. I did one particularly memorable trip around the Southern Urals with the Consul-General in Yekaterinburg. We started out in Yekaterinburg, we went to Magnitogorsk which is basically an iron and steel city. It started off in the Soviet Union, processing an iron ore mountain. I think they went most of the way through the mountain. And that's what they did. And then we went on down to Ufa and Orenburg, so the southern end of the Urals. By the time you are in Ufa you're in Bashkortostan, which is, I think, a Turkic language, isn't it?

PS: Yes, so back almost to where you started.

LB: So yes, I could read the inscriptions on the walls. But, looking at the map, when we got back, we'd covered an area not wildly dissimilar to the size of France, and that was just one part of the Urals region.

PS: What were the issues that you had to face? You did mention of course the murder of Litvinenko – that was one presumably you had to deal with – were there others?

LB: Yes, on the domestic political front, the bilateral political front, almost the whole story was the fallout from the Litvinenko affair. Not just the expulsions and their impacts on both policy and operations: you've got an embassy that's had a number of key staff expelled at a few days' notice. It's a bilateral relationship that was getting quite confrontational by then. Various levers were being used against us in the form of staffing matters. Just to say there are many and varied ways in which the Russian state is well-practised at in making your life unrewarding. I don't want to go into the details, but you know this stuff is all widely documented. Still trying to find areas of interest in common. One of the things that we were still working on, in those days, was building up university links with a specific eye to the next generation of Russians who would be in positions of influence, commercial importance, power, a few years down the line. A lot of cultural diplomacy which, again, I always thought was important in a society that values high culture. The British Council was under attack, direct attack by then, but was still functioning. And the commercial relationship: it was a big and important commercial relationship. Lots of Russian companies wanted to list on the London Stock Exchange, lots of British companies wanting to invest in Russia. It seems like another world looking back on it now, but the logic at the time, apart from the commercial interests in play, was that if you can bind Russia into a mutually advantageous economic

relationship, then at least that will constrain some of the worst instincts of the security state. At best it creates a self-reinforcing logic that there's more to gain than lose from working together than from working against each other. Turns out we were wrong.

PS: Yes, absolutely. Of course it coincided with the world economic crisis, didn't it? And did that have an impact on relations? Or was it just a thing happening at that time?

LB: It didn't directly have an impact on relations. I think with Russia, as with everybody else, if you're looking at it now from the perspective of getting on for fifteen years, of course it created economic, political, societal tensions within Russia, as I think it did in all other countries. And again, this is where I think the value to the Foreign Office, to government, of deep subject matter expertise comes into it. The people who'd studied that country for their entire lives were able to take a perspective on what was happening, why it was happening, what it might mean two or three political cycles down the line. And it's really important, I think, for the Office to hold on to that capacity.

PS: So you're really talking about the Research Analysts in the Foreign Office.

LB: Yes, and their reach into academia, their reach into the think-tank world. The fact that we need to repeat from time to time is that there are more and better experts on Russia and countries like it outside government, than inside. And we need to find ways of tapping into that.

PS: Russia itself, of course: its behaviour was changing. When was the invasion of Georgia, was that 2008?

LB: The invasion of Georgia was on my watch. My first summer in Moscow after arriving, a bit less than a year after arriving. Of course, my Ambassador was going on leave for the summer and I was minding the shop. I remember Tony saying to me before he went: 'You'll have a quiet summer; nothing ever happens in August.' And a week later the Russians invaded Georgia. It happens. And again, looking back on it at the time as well as in retrospect, it really wasn't a surprise. What we had seen was a cycle of provocation and reaction that had gone on for some years but had escalated over the previous maybe six to nine months. As essentially Russia was needling [Mikheil] Saakashvili to try and get him to

do something rash and eventually, he did. If you remember, his Georgian forces took action against Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Because they were Russian 'peacekeepers' - I say that with inverted commas around the word - in Tskhinvali that immediately became interpreted as an attack on Russian forces and the Russians had a force the other side of the Roki Tunnel ready to come through. They got what they wanted, which was the pretext to invade.

PS: How do you handle that situation, as a Chargé d'Affaires, at that point?

LB: You don't sleep much. As with all crisis work, things always move incredibly fast. That one was over inside a week. And your first responsibility is to make sure London know what is actually happening. Very, very difficult to do and again this is when the preparation you've done in terms of building up your capacity to read what is happening – why they are doing it, what we think happens next – is an absolute premium. And what you're not going to get is access to Russian decision makers to ask them what they are doing. That doesn't happen in Moscow. With just an aside on that, that's one of those moments where the value of the defence attaché staff in an Embassy like that really came home, because what we had were actually quite junior military staff in Moscow who were able to tell us what the different formations did, what their purpose was, and what that told you about not only the Russian military's capabilities but its intentions. If they move this, it means they are going to do that. That's a really important capacity to have in an embassy like that.

PS: So, your reporting was back to London ...

LB: In real-time.

PS: In real-time, and then presumably London is talking to our allies about what's going on?

LB: Yes.

PS: What was the British response to that invasion?

LB: The most important Western responses were, first of all, to try to rein the Russians in. For most of that week it wasn't entirely clear whether they would actually seize control over

Tbilisi, the capital. And of course that would have been a very different prospect as what they are essentially doing is invading a neighbouring country and imposing either a Moscow-friendly regime or actually, as they later did in parts of Ukraine, annexing it. So we didn't know what was going to happen there. What we did see happening was a filleting of the country. The Russian campaign had serious deficiencies in it as well, which then played through into their military reform and their doctrinal reforms after that. But the most important thing that happened that week was [Nicolas] Sarkozy, the French President, doing shuttle diplomacy, essentially trying to reach a ceasefire deal. Which he did. It was a very cynical Russian deal. It gave them basically what they wanted. But it was one of those situations where, if the war had continued, Georgia would have lost a lot more men, a lot more territory. It would have lost the war very, very quickly.

PS: You refer in your notes to the Bucharest Summit. What was that?

LB: The Bucharest Summit was the NATO Bucharest Summit, also in the summer of 2008. As always with NATO summits, there was an enormous agenda on the table. The part that was most important for these purposes was a question about what to do about admitting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. There were divisions within NATO, particularly between the US, the UK, Germany and France, and it wasn't possible to reach a clear-cut decision. So what the Bucharest Summit communiqué said was – from memory, I haven't got the exact wording – Ukraine and Georgia will one day become members of NATO. At the time that looked to me like a really dangerous statement. That was, I think, borne out subsequently.

PS: Yes, absolutely. And you also mentioned – moving back to the bilateral relationship – that the Russian aim was to force the British Council out of Russia. That was something that was also happening on your watch?

LB: What had happened was over a course of some years a succession of manoeuvres, initially bureaucratic manoeuvres, to try and squeeze the British Council's operating space. So, tax inspections, health inspections, fire safety inspections; all of them of course nothing to do with tax or health or fire safety, everything to do with harassment and with finding pretexts to close operations down. What had happened during the 1990s was that a whole string of British Council offices, big and small, opened across Russia and the wider former Soviet Union, as it became possible to pursue a different sort of diplomacy with those

countries. By the time I arrived as Deputy there were three left. There was Moscow, St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg. And the harassment of those offices really went off the scale as part of the fall-out from the Litvinenko affair. And in the end we were forced to close in St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg. And the way the Russians did it was essentially putting extreme pressure on the Russian staff, and for their own welfare that forced the issue for us.

It's worth saying a bit more about the diplomacy around that. We could see the pressure building over the end of 2007/2008. It was clear that the Russians were manufacturing a crisis over this and so we had a visitor from London – it was actually Simon McDonald, who was in a senior role in London at the time. And we saw the then head of the Foreign Policy Secretariat in the Kremlin, Sergey Prikhodko. And we thought we'd agreed with him a time-out while tempers cooled, and we'd all thought about where this was going. Simon hadn't even reached the airport before the goons were going in. So that was a message.

PS: Yes, a very clear message.

LB: There's one other aspect that's worth bearing in mind particularly over why the FSB and the Russian state were going after the British Council, and it's about Russia itself. So, if you think about who are the kinds of Russians who engage with the British Council, they are people who probably want a more democratic Russia, they want something that the UK and the British Council and the West represents, they want a different kind of relationship with the West. They probably think of themselves in a more European way than certainly the security forces in Russia do. This is an attack on them as well, and it was pretty clear, at the time even, that we were moving into a stage of increasing repression of democratic institutions in Russia itself. So the attack on the British Council was partly an attack on us but it was also part of that wider picture of deepening authoritarianism, deepening repression.

PS: Did you have any dealings with very senior people like Putin for instance: did you come across him?

LB: For all ambassadors your contacts with Putin are strictly limited and invariably when you have a senior visitor from London; ambassadors do not have meetings with Putin, no matter how senior they are. And that became more and more extreme in recent years.

PS: Is there anything else you would like to say about your time as Deputy Ambassador before moving on?

LB: There's one very important development while I was there which then carried over into my subsequent role, and it was the election of Dmitry Medvedev as President. What happened was that the Russian Constitution in those days limited the Presidency to two terms. And as it came towards the end of the second term, of course, the big question is: what's he [Putin] going to do? Is he going to change the constitution, is he going to ignore the constitution? It turned out that he was going to put in place a selected successor. At the time nobody knew whether that was permanent or temporary or what the plan was. It's not a system that exactly announces its plans ahead of time. What was curious in the run-up to that was there wasn't actual total clarity of who the successor was going to be. So there were two candidates in the running for quite a long time. These were Dmitry Medvedev who was thought to represent – there were no reformists in the government – but the more economic reformist, maybe conciliatory end of the political spectrum, and Sergey Ivanov, who was a *Silovik*, a leader of the security services. And suddenly into this mix popped up Viktor Zubkov, a man we had to go through our Rolodexes to work out if anyone had had any contact with him. I still haven't quite worked out what was going on there other than possibly putting the other two off balance.

But in the end they went for Medvedev. Putin had nominated Medvedev: there's only one possible outcome to elections in Russia. I got to go to Medvedev's inauguration because Tony Brenton was on leave at the time. It was just one of these curiosities of the role where you get to stand in. I don't think anyone was under any illusion at the time that this represented a fundamental break with what we could already see was becoming a pretty repressive state hostile to us – no illusion there – the leadership that had produced the Litvinenko killing and a few other things. But at least Medvedev was using the rhetoric of reform and of a different kind of relationship with the West. So that led to the possibility of what became the US reset – and our own version of that. We didn't call it a reset at the time – but at least it was an attempt to recalibrate our own relations with Russia.

PS: Did you see any improvement in relations at that point?

LB: Briefly. I was back in London as the Director for the region. I organised David Cameron's visit to Moscow, the first visit by a Prime Minister for at least five years and certainly since the Litvinenko killing. It wasn't a fresh start, it wasn't a reset; it was an effort, an honest effort, the right thing to try to do: to see if there was scope there for a different kind of relationship with a regime that we still had no illusions about, but you work with what you've got.

PS: So, you'd left Moscow by 2010.

LB: Yes, that's right.

PS: And then you started as Director of what part of the Foreign Office?

### **Director, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, FCO, 2010-12**

LB: It was the Directorate for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. There's a bit of a history to that. I left Moscow on the Friday and started there on the Monday, as you quite often do. That's just the way the timings went. And it was really what was called a managed move. It's one of those jobs where to do it effectively you must know the region, and you must know Russia. I said I'd actually quite like to do this job and so that was essentially the decision made.

At the time I moved into that job there was also a restructuring of the areas of responsibility. Up to that point Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus had been in the Europe Directorate, led by Matthew Rycroft in those days. I said 'I think it makes a great deal more sense for those three countries to be part of this Directorate.' Matthew agreed and so we made it happen. So what had been Russia, South Caucasus and Central Asia Directorate became this new Directorate, essentially taking all the countries of the former Soviet Union minus the three Baltic republics, which by then were members of the EU.

PS: And recognising that you had to treat them as a unity because of Russia's changing behaviour?

LB: It was the centrality of Russia in the problems and opportunities in the region and the common but very contested history between them. And also, of course, the straightforward knowledge of the region and the issues.

PS: What does being a Director of one of those units in the Foreign Office involve on a daily basis?

LB: Well, on a daily basis it's setting the direction of policy, advising the Foreign Secretary and other parts of the government, on what your options are, where you should be going, leading the team, making sure that you're supporting and supported by the embassies on your patch. And because of the nature of the region almost all of my time was taken up on the Russia dimension of that. Secondly I'd say Ukraine, a huge country and those days with a very ambiguous direction of travel. In some ways moving forward and some ways slipping back into corruption and absence of the rule of law. And, of course, from time to time, conflicts popping up or re-emerging across the rest of the region. I did manage to travel to all of the countries in my region, with the single exception of Belarus where there was a policy position across the EU at the time, that because of the very repressive nature of the regime in Belarus we had essentially downgraded relations.

Ps: We didn't even have an ambassador at that point?

LB: We did. But the scope of political level contacts was essentially non-existent.

PS: You talked briefly about a slight opening up with the Cameron visit. What were the other issues that dominated your time as Director?

LB: That was probably the most important thing that happened on Russia, in that time. That was really the heart of the job. It was a period where nobody, I think, was quite sure in which direction things were going. Towards the end of the Medvedev presidency, it was becoming pretty clear that Putin would be coming back to the Kremlin. So I think a lot of assumptions had to be tested and challenged about what direction Putin would go in a third term. Bearing in mind that he had been, in reality, running Russia from the White House, from the Prime Minister's job. It was increasingly clear that Medvedev was not going to be the decision maker.

PS: And you could sense a continuing hardening of the Russian position, then, because of Putin's imminent return?

LB: Yes. The relationship continued to get difficult in new and interesting ways, if you want to put it. But still at the same time the economic, energy, commercial relationship was developing. During the later part of my time as Deputy in Russia and Director, for example, BP and the other oil and gas majors operating in Russia were recalibrating their relationships with the Russian state and with their Russian commercial partners. Of course, things had gone very badly wrong between BP and TNK-BP, their Russian partner. The Russian state, to cut a long story short, wanted to keep BP engaged, and essentially that operation was brought into a new relationship with Rosneft, the Russian state oil major. So that was a major development on the economic and energy security front.

PS: I wonder if we could go back to the British political scene because you've got quite a big change from Labour to a Coalition government, at this point. Is that reflected in foreign policy generally that sort of shift? Or is there more continuity between one party and another?

LB: In those particular circumstances I would say more continuity than discontinuity. By the time of that election, it was pretty hard to ignore what Russia was becoming. So, again, going back to the invasion of Georgia and the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, it doesn't leave you with a great range of options. Most of your options are around how do you protect your national security? Bear in mind, also, that much more so than for the UK, most of our European and NATO allies were in a rather different place. They were much more inclined to give Russia the benefit of the doubt particularly with regard to some of the European allies. They were in a whole different place as regards how to deal with Russia, how to react when they crossed red lines. So quite a big part of our Russia policy, at the time was trying to – the way I would put it – to create a centre of gravity in EU policy, that particularly suited our interest.

PS: What else from that period do you remember as being important? I'm looking at the notes for instance where you are in Central Asia and accompanying the Defence Secretary and Minister of Armed Forces on visits to all five Central Asian countries?

LB: Yes. It was by no means my main priority. My main priority, of course, was advising the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and others on handling Russia. A first order national priority. We had at that time an element of another first order national priority which was Afghanistan. We were coming up to the end of ISAF, the military presence in Afghanistan, the phase of active military operations in Afghanistan. And a very big part of that was that we had, I think, by that stage the UK's largest military commitment in the world in Afghanistan. Over many years huge amounts of infrastructure, military infrastructure had built up, and it had to be got out. And when you look at the map of Afghanistan – as I was later to have cause to do in some detail – there aren't many ways in and out of Afghanistan, it's a landlocked country. And several of its neighbours are countries where there is no question of cooperation: Iran and China.

So your options are Central Asia or Pakistan. Pakistan, of course, is a very complex relationship and the Afghan dimension of that is super-complex. And what we could not afford to happen was for the government in Pakistan, the military in Pakistan, to have unfettered leverage over our ability to do what we needed to do to get the British military presence down to the level that it needed to be after ISAF and the military operations had finished. So, after careful study of the map we worked out that Central Asia was the other option. And of course, a lot of the infrastructure in the region had been built up over the years, during the Soviet years, to service the Red Army's intervention in Afghanistan. That didn't end well for them and didn't end well for us either. One of the highlights in that role was a week's tour of all five Central Asian capitals with the Defence Secretary and Minister for Armed Forces, essentially doing deals with the countries in the region about use of their infrastructure to get our military equipment out. Of course, in the background none of this would happen without Russia's consent. They had leverage over those countries and that means if they disagreed it's not going to happen. So there's a whole diplomatic process going on with Russia; with the countries concerned. You're talking railways, roads, capacity, cost, logistics.

With the MoD logistics lead on this we'd done a preparatory trip and then we took the Ministers round all five of them in sequence and basically said, can we use your railroads please? A couple of complexities – there are always complexities in that part of the world, Uzbekistan in particular. And one of the two critically important countries in the region:

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. We'd had a next to non-existent relationship with them since the Andijan massacre – lots of people killed in the Andijan, in the Fergana Valley in 2005 – and of course, the whole business over the then Ambassador [Craig Murray], vehemently criticising both his hosts but also the US and UK government policy.

PS: Yes, I remember all that very well.

LB: With, eventually, him leaving the Service. And long-standing, very serious differences of view with Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, over human rights, governance, the whole lot. And our task was to turn up and say can we use your railways please? And as happens in that part of the world, you're into deal-making territory.

PS: And did the presence of the Minister of Defence help, did that essentially attach some importance?

LB: Yes

PS: Getting back to the Soviet dimension – sorry, the Russian dimension – what you just said was in a way that it depends on Russian consent. So that in different sections you could see different types of Russian behaviour, that they would allow certain things: even though they might be confrontational in others, they might be more amenable in this?

LB: For much of that time, really until quite recently, it was possible to have at least in some areas a transactional relationship with Russia. Bear in mind in this particular instance over Afghanistan it was well put to me by a senior Russian official when I asked him, before this actually, when I was Deputy Head of Mission in Moscow: What does Russia actually want us to do in Central Asia? Because the threat from al Qaeda and extremism in Afghanistan is a threat for Russia as well as for us. They need this as well as we do. Most of the heroin that was grown in Afghanistan was trafficked out through Russia with, of course, a huge problem for them in Russia as result of that. And his answer was: 'Don't fail and don't stay.' So that answers the question: it was in Russia's interest for NATO to make an exit from Afghanistan. They wanted NATO out of a region that they didn't want us to be in. They wanted us out in good order without leaving a mess behind. So it was in their interest to work with us rather than against us.

## **Director, National Security, FCO, 2012-15**

PS: We're reaching the point where you take up your next job in London, which is as Director of National Security at the FCO. What did that involve?

LB: First of all, I was asked to apply for the job. Largely, I think, because I'd been doing a great deal of work on the national security dimensions of the relationship with Russia. And by that stage – it's now 2012 – we were starting to see signs that we were moving back into a period of essentially great-power confrontation: certainly competition, potentially confrontation. So that element of national security was starting to move up the agenda after a long period when the war in Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan, counter-terrorism and so on had been at the top of the national security agenda. It still was, but things were starting to change. So I applied for the job, got it, again moved very quickly in the space of about a week or something like that: that's the way things happen.

The job involved three things: I was supervising three departments this time. There was no geographical directorate, no embassies to run, but a cross-cutting interest across large parts of the world. And the three elements were: oversight, or supporting the Foreign Secretary's oversight, of SIS and GCHQ, the intelligence agencies, for which the Foreign Secretary has responsibility; the Counter-Terrorism Department in the Foreign Office; and the Cyber Policy Department in the Foreign Office. The third of those was a sort of emerging area of policy, initially about how do you regulate cyberspace? By the time I was coming into that job it was becoming much more focused on how do you defend yourself and conduct conflict in cyberspace? That was the growing agenda. So, very different subjects from what I had been dealing with before. But again with this central theme of how do you deal with existing and emerging serious threats to the security of the UK and its allies?

There are lots of things obviously I can't talk about in relation to that job: it is one of the more sensitive jobs in the Foreign Office and it just wouldn't be right to talk about it. The things to bring out, as those that mark my time in the job: there are a couple. One is a sequence of very serious terrorist attacks overseas combined with the rise of Islamic State/Daesh, particularly in Iraq and Syria, and the other is the whole [Edward] Snowden business. A US contractor for the National Security Agency who disappeared off with vast

amounts of super-secret data, much of it ours. And then, over the subsequent months and years, things that had been held incredibly tightly in government were starting to appear on the front pages of national newspapers. And clearly there was a lot of work going on to try to minimise the damage, including the damage to capabilities and alliances, and minimise the risks to people that arose from that. But also to try to address the impact on public opinion; on political opinion. One of the points about the whole Snowden affair was that nothing that he revealed about the UK's operations or policies was unlawful. I think our key problem there, in political terms, was that the public didn't know about it. They didn't know about the extent of the state's capabilities or why they were using them. So there was a debate, which eventually we decided we needed to engage with, about security and privacy. Which of course is not only a debate about government, because even in those days, over ten years ago, the private sector also amasses and exploits enormous amounts of data on you and me and everybody, not necessarily with our understanding or consent.

PS: Certainly, yes. Just going back, a bit. During your time in both jobs back at the Foreign Office, from 2010 onwards, the Foreign Secretary would have been, first of all, William Hague, is that right? And then did you work with Philip Hammond?

LB: Yes, first of all William Hague and then Philip Hammond. Very different ministers, and actually I enjoyed working with both of them, for different reasons. William, at least in my experience of him, believed in the Foreign Office, wanted to build it up, wanted to grow its capacity, its ability to do what the government needed it to do. It was a good time to be working in the Department. Philip Hammond, I enjoyed working with for different reasons. I found him a minister who asked exactly the right questions and wasn't prepared to take inadequate answers. Certainly, on some of the issues I was working to him – on the national security dossiers – there were occasions where he would simply hand the submissions back to me and say, 'First of all this is far too long: you need to tell me what actually the deal is here, what are you asking me to do, why, what are the risks, what are the benefits? You need to do it in a more concise and operational way than this.' He knew what he wanted; he was an effective minister to work for.

PS: Yes, and that message certainly got down to the lower reaches of the Foreign Office. I think we all felt that, and the message is still being refined, even as we speak.

LB: In my dealings with him, I thought it was the right thing to do as the minister. Your job as a minister is to take decisions. If it's an easy decision it shouldn't have reached you. If it's a hard decision it needs clearly setting out: what is the decision you are taking?

Interestingly, William Hague had a slightly different approach. I remember him saying to the Office once: 'A policy submission generally has three options: one is mad; one is illegal, and the third is the bureaucracy's preferred option'. So I once gave him a submission with six options, all of them viable. One was to do nothing, and then it went through a scale up to some quite exciting stuff. The point was: you've asked us to give you options, here are the options, pick one, you're the minister, you're accountable.

Going back a bit to the counter-terrorism agenda at the time, I think there are two things to underline on that. One was that working in that role required close daily cooperation with the Home Office, MI5, the police, and other parts of the domestic security apparatus. That's something that most diplomats in the Foreign Office just don't do. It's a world that's different from our world. My take on that at the time, and my message to the staff at the time was: 'This is the kind of thing that brings governments down if it goes wrong. Our job is to help them do their jobs. This is the thing that matters to politicians and the public; our job is to help them do that.'

I saw a lot, for example, of Theresa May when she was Home Secretary. I used to represent the Foreign Office every week at the weekly security meeting, sitting directly in front of her. And my job each week was to essentially do the global horizon scanning – what's coming at us from abroad. With the national security heads of agency and others around the table, you learn pretty fast what really matters in terms of domestic security in that environment. And the other thing, of course, was dealing with the crises. So, on my watch we had the In Amenas attack, when al-Qaeda took over a gas plant in Algeria. It ended in fighting, and we lost a number of British citizens there. And of course there was an inquest and we were all required to explain what happened. The Westgate shopping mall attack in Kenya, where again there were deaths of a number of British citizens. The case that really stands out in memory, though, was the hostage cases in Syria and Iraq: 'the Beatles'. What had happened there was that the Islamic State/Daesh groups – a group of UK fighters – had taken a number of hostages, British, American, European and others. Most of the European hostages were ransomed; the UK and the US have a policy of not paying terrorists ransoms for hostages ever, under any circumstances. That job involved very frequent contact with the families,

next of kin, supporters of the British hostages. That was one of the hardest things I ever did. It's very, very difficult to do that and it's even harder to lead your staff through it when you know how this probably ends is the hostage being killed. Having to keep hope alive but realism alive at the same time. The Americans, with our support, did try a rescue of the hostages. They missed them. It was the right location, but they had been moved.

### **HM Ambassador to the Russian Federation, 2016 – Jan 2020**

PS: At what point did you know you were going to be the next Ambassador to the Russian Federation?

LB: Well, it's the job I had joined the Foreign Office to do, so as you start to approach those most senior jobs, the way you go about it is to work out what makes you qualified to do them, and make sure that your CV has the right roles on it, with the right reputation, with the right influence back in Whitehall; with the right networks across the international Russia watchers in that particular role. I was appointed to the job – in late 2014, I think the Boards took place. There was lots of lead-in time, which of course you need to prepare properly for those sorts of jobs. The plan was to spend a lot of time bringing my Russian up to the level needed to do that job, reading back in, thinking around the subject, going to see experts in the field. And I think for the first time in my entire career, I managed to keep that time free from other things and use it effectively. The curiosity there though, of course, is that when you're appointed ambassador you're not going anywhere until you have *agrément* from your hosts. Getting *agrément* from Russia and one or two other countries is not straightforward. They can, if they wish, refuse you. And in the sort of political relationship that we had with Russia by then – they've never done it before but that's not to say that they won't, particularly if they think you're taking them for granted. So, the drill was through much of 2015: I know I'm going to Russia, quite a lot of other people know I'm going to Russia, but I can't say anything at all. And I'm spending most of my days taking Russian lessons to see to that. Our boys by this stage were early teenage and they were both in school in the UK, with Russian kids. You probably know a lot of Russians, in those days, sent their children to schools in the UK. Because several of those Russian children were the children of the elite, back in Moscow, we had a sort of *omertà* that we were not going to tell the boys where we're going. So we called it country 'X'.

PS: Did they work it out?

LB: So, all of a sudden, the older one who was wise in the ways of the world said to us when we got to Moscow: ‘We knew country ‘X’ was Russia.’

PS: *Laughs.* Yes, the children usually do know more than the parents think, don’t they? But they were polite enough not to tell you that they knew?

LB: Oh yes. Of course, the other thing was that when I got my appointment from HR, of course bearing in mind that our IT systems are what they are, I got a letter, over basically open e-mail, saying ‘you’ve been appointed Ambassador to Russia, under no circumstances must you discuss this with anyone’, copied into the Language Centre which is where I’m learning Russian. I remember walking down Whitehall, probably that afternoon, and bumping into a colleague from another Department saying, ‘Oh, great, I hear you are going to Moscow.’ And thinking OK, news travels fast. And I think I had only just heard by that stage, so that was extraordinary.

PS: When did you actually arrive in Moscow on this occasion?

LB: We flew out – I don’t remember the exact date – it was right at the beginning of January 2016. And this time round I knew perfectly well what I was going into because I’d been working on Russia pretty much continuously for a number of years, and completely up to date on all of what was going on, the leading personalities, the whole lot. But still, you turn up in Moscow in the winter in the snow. And as we drove in from the airport, one of the drivers – the driver who came to get me, was someone I’d known when I was there as Deputy – and he sort of went, ‘Hi!’, that sort of thing.

A very old friend who I’d worked with in Moscow previously, now my chief of staff, came out to get me. Then, coming down towards the river and the Kremlin, all of a sudden you turn a corner and there’s St Basil’s, just huge in the windscreen and you think, ‘We’re back, we’re back.’

PS: Did it feel good to be back?

LB: Oh yes, absolutely. I was chatting the day after with Michael Bird, the British Council Director, someone I'd known since university days. And, of course, this was his dream posting as well, to go back to Moscow as British Council Director. And we were looking at the Kremlin, the cathedrals on the Kremlin opposite the river from the residency. He just looked at me and said, 'I just hope we never get tired of that view.'

PS: Did the family come on this occasion, to join you in Moscow?

LB: Yes, they came. The boys by this stage were in boarding school, so they used to come out in the holidays.

PS: Did they like that arrangement?

LB: Yes, I think they did. Our older boy was actually learning Russian. He was doing his International Baccalaureate in which you've got to do a language, so he decided Russian would be quite a neat language to do, he rather liked it. We did a lot of travel as well with the boys around Russia. They were old enough by that stage, to do it and enjoy it.

PS: As Ambassador were you able to travel more freely?

LB: Yes.

PS: Could you get where you wanted or were there still some limitations?

LB: There were some limitations. The one I particularly had to watch carefully was the summer after the Salisbury attacks in 2018. We hadn't been able to plan a big trip, or we hadn't had much time to plan a big trip because we just didn't know when that crisis was going to end. We didn't have time to do it but also, I had to be prepared for literally anything that summer. So in the end we decided to drive up to the very north of Russia to the Barents Sea. All the way through Karelia and on up the Kola peninsula. We literally dipped our toes in the sea, the Barents Sea, and the next stop is Canada, the North Pole. It was so cold even in August. You know, you ran out yelping. But the thing I had to watch on that trip was of course that the top of the Kola peninsula is where all the submarine bases are. And the White

Sea is also where the submarine bases are. So I had a little map with me of where they were so I could avoid them.

PS: Yes, make it very clear that you are not interested.

LB: Because most of them are closed regions, and usually there's a big sign up saying: this is a closed region do not come in. But if you wander in by accident in those circumstances as Ambassador, after the huge crisis of the Salisbury poisonings, you don't know where that's going to end. So, really taking no chances at all.

PS: No. You've talked about Salisbury already but that didn't happen immediately and I'm just wondering about when you arrived in Russia: what was the situation; what did you have to deal with?

LB: The atmosphere had become tangibly colder, even in the five years since I'd left as Deputy. And even in the three years since I'd left the Director job for the region. By that stage, by early 2016, the relations between Russia and the West, Russia and the UK, were on an inexorably downward path. It didn't help that in my very first week the judge who'd conducted the public inquiry on the Litvinenko killing published his report. This was the [Sir Robert] Owen report on the Litvinenko killing. It wasn't fantastic timing; I've got my predecessor to thank for that.

But that was in my first week and, yes, the thing about the Russian state is that nothing is ever considered to be a coincidence. Other things happened in the first week as well but that was the important one. So it was not a comfortable start, it was a pretty frosty start.

PS: Did things ever improve?

LB: No.

PS: That's a pretty depressing thought, as you start the biggest job in your career.

LB: Well, I knew that when I took the job on. You know this is dealing with Russia in 2016 and beyond. If you don't understand that you've no business being there.

PS: Yes. So we could stop at that point if that seems convenient.

LB: I'd like to stop with one anecdote that really illustrates this point.

PS: Absolutely, yes.

LB: The anecdote is this. In Russia, as in many capitals, you've got to present credentials to the President when you first arrive. And you present your copies of credentials to the Foreign Ministry, that happened within a couple of days. It was a pretty good policy-focused discussion with [Vladimir] Titov, the Deputy Foreign Minister, not a meeting of minds – it never is, that's not his job, it's not my job – but it was a pretty in-depth review of the state of the bilateral relationship in which he said what he needed to say and I said what I needed to say.

But when it came to presenting to Putin, this was in a group of I think about fifteen ambassadors, they do it that way, they collect them in batches, you all get summoned to this large ornate hall in the Kremlin. It is not meant to be cosy, it's imperial grandeur. You are supposed to feel the imperial grandeur. As you go in there are soldiers who are immaculately uniformed, immaculately drilled like robots and their heads track you as you go past. This is very unnerving. And then you line up with your credentials in this enormous hall and the President reads out a speech. It's his survey of Russia's foreign policy and of bilateral relations with the ambassadors of the fifteen countries lined up. And I still have the copy of *Kommersant*, the newspaper reporting this rather strange occasion. The opening line went: 'I went to this rather strange occasion in the Kremlin yesterday, and it goes something like this. Mr Putin described how wonderful Russia's relations with India were, Russia's relations with Bolivia were fantastic, relations with ... I think it was Western Samoa, they were pretty good too when he could remember where Western Samoa was. Then he got on to Australia. Of course, this is Australia: my very good friend Peter Tesch, a seriously good Russianist. Of course, the big thing between Russia and Australia is the number of Australians killed on flight MH17, which a Russian missile shot down over the Donbas. So that was a pretty awkward moment in that speech. And then he got on to the UK. And I summed up the UK section for London as: 'Russia's relations with the UK really suck and it's all your fault' – and there's no right of reply.

What then happens, of course, is you have to walk the length of this very, very long carpet to present your credentials to Mr Putin at the end flanked by Yuri Ushakov his foreign policy adviser and Sergei Lavrov who's looking distinctly bored by the whole occasion. There's a phalanx of television cameras down one side and I spotted about 20 metres out the fold in the carpet in front of the television cameras. You have to remember not only not to fall over on the way up, but on the way back as well, because if you do, you're over.

PS: The fold is then very carefully planned, presumably?

LB: Who knows? Who knows?

LB/PS: *Laugh*

PS: Let's stop there. That's really good.

### **Third Session, Friday 27 October 2023**

#### **(Private Secretary to Minister of State for Europe, FCO, 1996-98 – Addendum)**

PS: Well, we ended last time with your appointment as Ambassador to the Russian Federation, but I think before we carry on with that, we wanted to go back a bit: back to the time when you were Private Secretary to Doug Henderson and one of the trips you undertook with him.

LB: Yes. So this was 1998, I think it was, and at that time the Europe Minister's primary responsibility was the European Union and related matters. But he also had responsibility for the countries of the former Soviet Union: Russia and the other countries of the region. There was just one particular episode which was quite important but also quite a good example of the colour that you get out of working in this profession.

All of this very, very dry technical, high-stakes stuff going on in the European Union. And all of a sudden I had a contact from a previous minister, Tim Eggar, saying that he was involved in a smallish oil and gas company, Monument Oil and Gas, in Turkmenistan, and they had been rehabilitating an old oilfield, a Soviet oilfield, and they wanted a minister to come and preside over a sort of wheel-turning ceremony where they make the thing live; and could I

provide the minister? So, to cut a long story short, we had quite a few reasons to do a regional trip anyway. And so I did a deal with Tim that if he provided a plane, I'd provide the minister. And Doug was up for it, and so we took ourselves off to Turkmenistan.

It was possibly the strangest two days of my life. It was in the days of President Niyazov, Türkmenbaşy the Great. I think it was our first ever ministerial visit to Turkmenistan. So maybe fifteen or so years on from independence from the Soviet Union, a country still finding its feet, with enormous oil and gas reserves. And so we flew into Ashgabat for meetings with the government and then flew out from Ashgabat to Türkmenbaşy City in the west of the country on the Caspian, to do the oilfield ceremony. And I remember the official meetings in Ashgabat were about as strange as it's possible to get. There were quite senior ministers being made to actually put their hands up in meetings before they were allowed to speak, and that sort of thing.

When we got to the airport to transfer out to Türkmenbaşy City, we had this little episode where it was a bit like, so whose plane are we going in? Ours was a rented 20-seater Bombardier, his was a Boeing 757, so that kind of answered the question. And everywhere we went, there seemed to be dancing girls in national costumes, twirling on the tarmac. But the tail end of this was, when the job was done Türkmenbaşy and his entourage just disappeared, just went. There was no information flow of any sort. And so we then had to find not only our helicopters, but the right airfield for the helicopters. And most of the government were also in the same position. So you had these columns of cars whizzing backwards and forwards across the desert, just randomly turning up at air bases, looking for their helicopters. Of course, none of the phones worked at all. So there's no way of finding anything out. We eventually found ours, took off with minutes to spare in terms of pilot's flying time. And then I realised that we'd left two of the journalists behind. They made the plane, but only just: it was by the skin of the teeth. I was wondering how I was going to explain to the PUS that we'd left the two journalists in the desert.

And then we went on from there to Tbilisi, to see Eduard Shevardnadze. So again, a very, very important relationship, a very difficult time. There'd been multiple coup attempts against Shevardnadze, some quite difficult things going on; and some quite important business that we needed to transact with him. And you're sitting in this meeting with a man who was absolutely in the inner core of the Politburo at the time of the end of the Soviet Union. It's

one of those little moments where you think, ‘I’m not only having a ringside seat on history – I’m sitting with a piece of history here.’

PS: Had he changed? He must have been physically much older and less effective as a personality, I guess, at that stage.

LB: I don't remember him being less effective. I mean, clearly being part of the inner core running the Soviet Union in its last days was very different from running a country like Georgia in the 1990s. But no, I remember him being very, very sharp, very impressive even then.

### **HM Ambassador to the Russian Federation, 2016 – Jan 2020 (cont.)**

PS: Good. Well, we'll go back now to your time in Russia, and I suppose to start at the deep end: what were the big issues that you faced when you were there?

LB: Looking back on it, I think there were a number of things from which it was quite hard at the time to discern a very clear direction of travel. So, by 2016 we were well into the annexation of Crimea, well into the war in the Donbas. All sorts of things happening around that: the shootdown of MH17, of course, the overhang of our own bilateral problems with Russia, in particular the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London.

But there was another side to the story, which was that it was still a very important economic and commercial relationship, so becoming more difficult to manage over time. And at least at the beginning of my time there, there was still at least scope to explore whether there were alignments of interest. One of the things that we were looking at when I went out to Moscow was: would it be possible to draw them back into some form of, at least, dialogue, if not cooperation, over global counter-terrorism? If you remember, they'd had a plane, basically bombed, flying out of Sharm El Sheikh.

And when something like that happens, the first thing that our security experts look at is not whether the plane is Russian or British or anyone else's, it's how did the bomb get on board? Because if it gets on a Russian plane, it can get on one of ours. We tried to draw them into a discussion about that. I think it didn't work because they were more interested in instrumentalising the discussion for other things in the bilateral relationship, but it was worth a go.

A couple of other quite important, positive things happened in my time there. Throughout my time what I was trying to do was to communicate to a wider public as well as the elite that a different sort of relationship was on offer and was possible. We had the World Cup in 2018, where obviously the Russian state took it on for propaganda reasons. But the effect on public opinion in Russia and the UK, and more widely, was I think broadly positive as a whole lot of people just went to Russia, found out a bit about Russia as a country. They almost in all cases knew nothing about it, had never been there, and found that it wasn't necessarily as black and white as they expected.

And so, in my last few years, we tried to build on that by ... actually we set up a youth orchestra. It was something I'd wanted to do for most of my time there. We had a bilateral UK-Russia year of music. I worked very closely with an opera conductor. We were chatting, we thought wouldn't it be nice if something survived just a series of concerts and we decided: let's set up a youth orchestra. Early career professionals, essentially music students at the big academies in Russia and the UK, competitive auditions, 50/50 split – it was fantastic. And it was as good as most orchestras I've heard, but the impact, I think, also was understood: what we were trying to achieve and why, both in Russia and in the UK. Of course, the negative side of the UK-Russia relationship was the poisoning of Sergei Skripal.

PS: Well, tell us a bit more about that. That must have been extremely hard to deal with.

LB: When you take on a job like that, particularly if you have a background in dealing with Russia, you don't have any illusions about what they're capable of. I spent large parts of my previous roles dealing with the consequences of the Litvinenko killing and I had this private fear that one day I'd wake up in the morning and we'd be going through all that again, and one day it happened.

The news was starting to break over the weekend that there was something very, very strange going on in Salisbury. The details of who it was and what their background was came through to me very quickly. And at that point it was pretty clear where this is going. I think the Whitehall system learned a lot from the experience of dealing with Litvinenko, so it was very quickly clear, pretty much, what had happened. Clear quickly who was behind it, what the thing represented. And so, within a matter of just a few days we were into reaction and taking it to the Russian authorities.

And obviously, there's a lot of detail about that, that I can't go into. But in the course of the week that followed, he was still fighting for his life as was his daughter. I had to make the

first call to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and that call was a carefully scripted message: ‘We know what was used, we know who used it. I’m not asking you to say anything, I’m asking you to pass that on to your authorities and tell them we know.’

And the next stage, of course, was a meeting with a Deputy-Minister in the Foreign Ministry. It was a very, very short meeting where essentially again I read out a scripted message saying: ‘We see two scenarios here. One is that your people did it, and the other is that they lost control of the material. You have 24 hours to explain what happened.’ On the whole, you do not deliver ultimata to the Russian state unless you mean to follow through.

PS: You already knew what the consequences would be on our side.

LB: It was perfectly clear that the response would be: ‘How dare you, it wasn’t us. We’re not ... You don’t speak to us like that.’ We knew that and we had modelled through what would happen then. So what happened then? Again, there’s a lot that I can’t go into, but essentially the decision in London was that we expelled 23 Russian diplomats from London, knowing full well that they’d expel 23 of my staff from Moscow, and knowing pretty well that they would then escalate beyond that, because they always do. So again, it was, I’m afraid, me that got summoned into the Foreign Ministry to be handed a list of names of people who were going to be expelled. One of those names was of a person sitting next to me in the room, so I turned the piece of paper over very quickly. I didn’t want to have that discussion in front of the Russians.

You know, when it came to our expulsion of the Russian diplomats in London, basically we did that in London and I did that in Moscow. Because we didn’t want to leave any scope for misinterpretation or misunderstanding given how the Russian system works. They were pretty awful discussions.

Just two things that of course then happened very quickly after that. One is as you come out of the Foreign Ministry, there is an enormous gang of media people, and most of them are Russian state media, so what they are looking for is a media stakeout that basically supports the Russian side of the argument and as far as possible, humiliates me.

So I had a member of staff – we had thought it all through in advance – who was literally standing behind the BBC camera pointing down at it: Speak into this one, not into the Russian propaganda TV station. We’d taken a bit of a pause in the lobby, just while I got my lines straight. It’s one of those situations where you deliver what you need to say and then you

walk away. You are not going to take questions. And then back to the Embassy to take the Embassy team in groups through who is leaving and who's staying.

PS: That must have been pretty tough.

LB: It was, and while everybody knew pretty much that the axe was going to fall, we didn't know until the list of names came through where it would fall. It was a pretty difficult week. You've been given seven days for people to leave. So what that means in practical terms is that people are winding up their lives in seven days, taking kids out of school, worrying about how they're going to get their cats and dogs back to the UK, packing up their households against the clock.

We managed to get the Foreign Office to agree that, rather than put everyone on a BA flight, we'd just charter a plane. You get more control over it, and it's better for the welfare of the people involved, but even so it was an awful week. Bear in mind also that the Russians had carefully selected: they'd selected towards the Russian speakers and the people for whom Russia was an important part of their career because they wanted to cause us systemic damage. And that meant, of course, you've got people who've learned the language, they're very committed to the country, want to be there, and they're never going there again.

PS: Never, no. One thing that was very heartening about the whole episode was the international support that we got. What was your angle on that?

LB: My advice to London at the beginning was, first of all, we need to impose a substantial cost on the agencies that did this. That was why the expulsions were structured the way they were. The other point of comparison with the Litvinenko killing was that the support at the time in 2006 was declaratory but not much more. The big difference in the case of the Skripal poisoning was that by 2018 it wasn't really possible for our partners and allies to ignore what was going on here anymore. Particularly after the shootdown of MH17, it could not have been clearer what kind of state you're dealing with, and the lengths they'll go to.

And so we marshalled a quite broad coalition, particularly with NATO and some of the European Union countries. And, in the end, the total tally was 151, I think, diplomats. A lot from the United States, of course, some from countries that wouldn't previously have acted alongside us. It was a real turning point in that sense. And the purpose of doing that was, first of all, to magnify the systemic damage done to Russia, but also to get across a very clear

message that we have allies, and we work in alliances and that's a source of asymmetric strength. So again, it's about how you deter Russia from doing this sort of thing.

What then happened, partly as a result of our success in doing that, was that they came back for round two. So again, I could see it building. I was called back into the Foreign Ministry one weekend. I have to say I didn't immediately run across to the Foreign Ministry. There's a sort of choreography to how you play this game. But we were told that a headcount cap was being imposed on the Embassy and more people were being required to leave. Of course, because you have a mixture of UK and Russian staff, a headcount cap includes the Russian staff, so that was pressing down really hard on our ability to operate. And of course, along the way we'd lost the British Council in Moscow as well. So the British Council had been finally closed out of Russia, finishing off the job that was started after the Litvinenko killing.

PS: Were you still there when the subsequent poisoning took place in Salisbury? Was that while you were still Ambassador, the one that was discovered in a bin?

LB: Yes, that was a recurrent concern throughout the whole of the Salisbury poisoning. We knew what had been used, we knew the unit that the men were from, we knew who they were. It was a much quicker discovery of the facts than in the Litvinenko case. And that of course worked to our advantage. The problem, of course – the very, very big problem – was that we didn't know what had happened to the rest of the material. It was pretty obvious that there was more of this material around. And what then happened was that a few months later, all of a sudden, Dawn Sturgess and her partner turned up very, very ill. What happened, it subsequently transpired, was that her partner had found this material in a perfume bottle. He'd taken it home, given it to Dawn. She'd taken a sniff of it, and eventually it killed her.

One of the things I found really quite troubling about the Russian state's response to that part of the Salisbury episode was the very dismissive way that they talked about Dawn Sturgess, up to and including the President, where he used some very disparaging language on television about her, essentially trying to undercut our narratives. There were literally dozens, scores, of fake narratives being put around by the Russian state to divert attention from what had actually happened here. So I made it my business in discussions with Russian officials and the Russian media to say her name. The fact is that a completely innocent woman here was killed, in the most horrible way. And when you see the Russian state talking about her in very, very disparaging terms, you know, we're just not having this.

PS: I suppose you could never judge whether it had any effect.

LB: It had no effect at all, but I thought the point needed to be made. You're not talking about some sort of random person, we're talking about a person with a name, whom you killed.

PS: What else should we be talking about, do you think, on the bigger strategic issues that were at stake at that time?

LB: In terms of Russia and the West, it was broadly speaking a transitional period through from the huge shock that the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas represented through to where we are now. One of the really big things that happened in my time – it was part of a pattern to do with the breakdown of the arms control treaties and the big stabilisers in the military and security relationships that we built up in the late Cold War and then in the post-Cold War period – was the collapse of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

We'd known for some time that the Russians were developing and deploying a non-treaty-compliant missile. I think it was called the 9M729 missile, and it was clearly a breach of the INF Treaty. And the Americans, we, had been calling them out on this, they were saying, it's not so. As always with the Russian state, it just basically denies, it says that black is white. And in the end that caused the Americans to withdraw from the Treaty. Bear in mind that this was a treaty between Moscow and Washington, but it's at the heart of European security at the end of the Cold War.

And I remember explaining to my staff one morning, in the daily Chancery morning meeting, why this mattered. Essentially what it comes down to is that you've got missiles deployed in Europe with nuclear weapons on them. Where the flying times are in a small number of minutes, which means your decision-making time in a crisis, is a smaller number of minutes. And the point here is that Europe and the world were immeasurably safer as a result of eliminating this class of weapons. And now we're back there. We're back there. And the point we were trying to get across to the Russians is that this directly undermines your own security as well.

But things had moved on by then. The curious thing about this, I realised at the time when trying to explain this to my own staff .. They're looking at me like, why is he talking about the 1980s and INF and the Euro Missiles Crisis? And then the penny dropped – half of them weren't born then. So, it goes back to what I was discussing earlier about the need, when making or executing policy on a country like Russia or China, to have institutional memory.

How did we get here, what were the choices that were made, or not made, that got us here?  
What's at stake, what's the time-scale that the other side is thinking in?

PS: Yes, I agree with that very much. Are there any other aspects of your time in Russia you want to talk about before we move on, or have we covered most of it?

LB: I think maybe the last thing to say is, despite some of the awful things that were happening, just what a privilege it is to do a job like that. This is what you join the Foreign Service to do. It's really big issues that matter to the UK profoundly. It's not difficult to separate out the disagreements with the Russian state from actually liking the country and its people.

PS: Yes, of course.

LB: Now, I almost certainly will never be able to travel there again but that was part of the joy of the job. The good sides of dealing with Russia and being in Russia.

PS: And you got just enough of that to make the job worthwhile did you, within the framework?

LB: I would say more than just about. It was a great time to be there.

#### **Head of International Coronavirus Task Force (temp. cover), FCO, 2020 (Feb-March)**

PS: Good. I'm looking at your chronology and you left Russia, according to this, in January 2020. Which is quite an interesting date, as it just pre-dates the onset of the Coronavirus crisis.

LB: I came back to London not knowing what I was going to do next, as quite often happens. I had a lot of leave to take. And all of a sudden, you can see that there is this cloud on the horizon. Some mysterious things happening in Wuhan that the Chinese state won't talk about. Not many days after that, a lot of people suddenly getting very, very ill in Korea, in Northern Italy. I think it was half-term at the school skiing trip. And so I had a call from the Office saying, 'The person doing the forward planning, on what we think may become a pandemic, needs to take a few weeks' leave, can you come in and cover for her?'

So, I said of course, I'll do that. It's not my first time working in the Crisis Unit. And almost within each day you could see this problem getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It starts off with, 'How are we going to evacuate holiday makers from Italy?' But within a few hours it's 'What happens when the entire global aviation industry closes down?' And I was

representing the Foreign Office in some of the cross-Whitehall meetings, where at every single meeting, the problem got bigger and scarier. And it was pretty clear that government just wasn't configured to deal with it.

PS: Did you then evolve ways of dealing with it, in the time you were there?

LB: It was a classic example of trying to build a plane and fly it at the same time. But also in a subject area where it's almost impossible to see how you would plan effectively for something of that magnitude in advance. We'd done lots of preparation and execution of crisis management on things like terrorism attacks and plane crashes, but a global pandemic with all that involves, including the domestic dimensions of that? In an environment where I remember having the conversation with the PUS: in not many weeks from now we may be closing down this building. That's what I'm hearing from the epidemiologists in government. So we need to start thinking now about how we're going to do that.

PS: And the building effectively was pretty much empty, wasn't it, apart from the people dealing immediately with the crisis? None of us came into work at that time.

LB: Exactly. And just bear in mind that at that time, until the vaccines became a realistic possibility, you're looking at a situation where there is no obvious exit from it. You're looking at the waves of infection going around the world. Of course, the epidemiologists model these things mathematically; and you're looking at the number of people who might die, the speed with which the health service will be completely overwhelmed. What I remember from that time is just how difficult it is to plan sensibly for that environment.

PS: You were there for a couple of months by the look of it. And why did it come to an end? Did the person doing the job come back?

### **COP26 Regional Ambassador, FCO, 2020**

LB: The person doing the job came back. I'd agreed to go and work in the COP26 Unit and as a Regional Ambassador, and pretty much everything was in motion by that stage. So, anyway, I went off to work on COP26. The job that was sold to me there was that I would be Regional Ambassador for China, the Middle East, North Africa, the countries of the former Soviet Union, Turkey and the Balkans. So a very large portion of global emissions, hardly a single democracy amongst them, large parts of global oil and gas production.

PS: How on earth did you start working on that one?

LB: But there was another thing as well. And this is essentially a fast sprint through to November 2020. The very first thing that happened was that the entire country, the entire world locked down, and the whole point of the job was to be out there, talking to partners, trying to build momentum, trying to get commitments out of those major countries and economies to bring to Glasgow. And all of a sudden, I'm doing this from a bedroom in London, like everybody else, trying to work out how Zoom works, you're on mute, all those things. The next thing that happened was that, of course, we had to bite the bullet and postpone Glasgow for a year.

PS: Which was the only realistic thing to do at that point.

LB: There was simply no way that that conference could have been run in November 2020.

PS: No. So was that a frustrating period? Did you feel that you achieved anything at that time?

LB: It was an interlude. It's not a subject I knew particularly well. I think the value that I brought to the COP Team – I hope the value I brought to the COP Team – was not knowledge of climate policy – literally everybody else in the unit knew far more about it than I did – it was how to deal with the geopolitics of it. And particularly how to deal with authoritarian states, petro-states; how the politics of energy works, particularly in those countries, and try to work out where are the alignments of interest, who are the people we need to work with, who are the people who we're going to need to neutralise one way or another in these arguments.

PS: Had you basically set up the systems that would work a year later, at that point, or did a lot of work still need to be done when COP eventually took off?

LB: It was a huge amount of work and the team who carried on through to Glasgow did an absolutely fantastic job delivering serious results at a turning point and through a pandemic. While I was in the role, I think the most important thing, by miles, going on was the sort of three-way manoeuvring between the European Union, China and the US. The European Union moving towards applying carbon taxes, border adjustment mechanisms as they are known, basically trying to shape the global economy in the direction of low carbon, the low carbon world. The United States, with an election coming up, so depending on what the result was going to be, the US was either going to come on board with the Paris agenda or it was going to go completely off in a different direction.

And China was looking at this, and we were trying very, very hard to get a handle on the reasoning of the Chinese state. Where were they going to go on this? And the answer was that they were going – and I think it was the right answer, they were very smart about it – they decided that they were going to move early. So they declared a net zero target of 2060. So not really good enough. But better than no target, and some interim targets along the way. And the reasons that they did it were partly domestic, partly economic: it's about who captures the high ground of the low-carbon economy. But it was also frankly geopolitical, because if it's a Biden Administration, China has basically set the agenda rather than waiting for the US to set it. And if it's a Trump Administration, China is not the bad boy in the room. So it was a really smart move.

PS: Well, we've reached the end of your time as COP26 Regional Ambassador: that would have been towards the end of 2020? And did you know what you were going to do next?

### **HM Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2021**

LB: Yes, it's Ambassador to Kabul. The decision to accept that job was one of the harder decisions I had to make. By the end of 2020 it was pretty obvious that we were heading into some sort of watershed moment. If you remember, the Trump Administration had done a deal with the Taliban in February 2020, earlier that year, which essentially said the military are leaving. There was a timetable on it. There was a kind of conditionality on the Taliban, but it didn't amount to anything. It also, by the way, didn't involve the government of Afghanistan, so they were completely cut out of the deal. But they were required to do things under it, including letting free thousands of Taliban fighters from prisons, who, of course, all went straight to the battlefield.

I had the right profile to do that job, but even so it's the sort of job where you have to ask your spouse/partner, 'if you don't want me to do it, I'll say no'. And Fiona's answer was can I come?

PS: And did she come with you?

LB: No, absolutely not. By 2021, it was by some distance the most dangerous posting of the network. I couldn't even walk around the Embassy without a close protection team. And in the latter stages of the planning for the military withdrawal we were pushing down as far as possible the numbers of staff that we had in Kabul. So I was appointed to that job at the end of 2020. I got myself out of the COP Unit. The fact that the Conference had been put off for

a year meant that there was a bit of flexibility for the COP Unit to find somebody else to do that role. And then it was straight into preparation. And most of the preparation, apart from the usual reading in and trying to work out what you think the core issues really are, was leading a team, doing the planning for the transition from an embassy entirely dependent on the large military presence to an embassy that could stay there safely with no military presence at all.

PS: That was quite a challenge, I would guess.

LB: It was a considerable challenge. I don't think, looking back on it, we ever fully answered some of the questions. To spell it out a little bit what that means, all of the logistics were military. The entire security structure around Kabul, the green zone, the support to the Afghan military and police depended on the military presence and on the capabilities that they brought. Really basic things like the medical facilities. I hardly need to spell it out, but in an environment like that, if you need medical facilities, it's because you've been shot or blown up. And the purpose of those facilities is to keep you alive long enough to medivac you. That was to a military facility that was leaving. And without that you can't fulfil your duty of care, and nobody's going to be there. The airport: who's going to run the airport, how do you get to a situation where you can rely on the airport being open in a crisis and planes able to land and take off? We had answers of a sort to most of those questions by early to mid-June. That date mattered, because the military withdrawal was taking place at pace through May, June, July. So there was a stay or go decision, with quite a hard date on it in the middle of June. And unless we could guarantee to our Ministers and the Prime Minister that we were able to meet our legal duty of care to staff, we're all leaving. The choice was made for us legally as well as politically. If you can't provide the basic level of security for your people there, then they shouldn't be there.

PS: Did Ministers understand that, do you think?

LB: I think there were forces pulling in different directions within the Government. The UK Government as a whole didn't agree with the decision to pull out the military. That was clear, it was publicly stated. I don't think anybody did, apart from the US Administration. But that wasn't our call because it's a US decision, because they were by far the biggest partner there. And despite some of the political chatter at the time, it just wasn't possible, even if it was desirable or sensible for the allies to stay there without the Americans as the framework of all

of that. There were some within government who, I think, understood the scale of what could go wrong.

In my discussions, in my planning, what that looked like was the seizure of the American embassy in Iran at the time of the 1979 revolution; the killing of Chris Stevens in Libya; the bombings of the American embassies in East Africa. That's what bad looks like and you need to remind yourself and the people around you that this isn't just an embarrassing photograph: you're going to lose people if this goes wrong, possibly quite a lot of people. So unless you're confident in your arrangements, that is the decision made for you.

We got to a point where we had sufficient assurance, ultimately from President Biden himself, that there would be enough US capabilities in Kabul for us to decide that we can assure the safety of our staff. The system was still being designed through June-July, but there was enough there. And the core of that was a large contingent of US Marines and other capabilities that in extremis could provide the security backstop. That, of course, was completely inconsistent with the Doha deal with the Taliban, which said that all foreign forces and military contractors will leave. So, there was an untested question in there about what would happen. But that got us to the decision to stay. That was essentially my job done in London. So my predecessor, Alison Blake, left and I was on the plane the following day.

PS: What date was that, then, when you first arrived?

LB: Mid-June 2021.

PS: And by that point the Embassy and its personnel had been run down dramatically?

LB: Two things had happened in the previous year. One was the effects of Covid and trying to run an embassy in a Covid pandemic. You had this embassy that was absolutely enormous. For some years, it was actually the biggest embassy in the world. It no longer was by 2021, but still pretty huge. And bear in mind also that it's not just the diplomatic staff, it's the security staff, the life support staff. You've got this highly militarised bubble in the middle of a war zone. My predecessor had had to reduce the Embassy a lot simply because of the logistical difficulties of keeping that operating through a pandemic. And that, of course, had put a huge amount of pressure on the staff left behind. It was also very difficult to travel backwards and forwards. And the work cycle in that sort of conflict zone is six weeks on, two weeks off. If you're spending two weeks in quarantine it's not going to work, is it?

PS: No.

LB: As the military drawdown gathered pace, the political direction was to get as small as we can that's consistent with being able to fulfil the job that the embassy is there to do. And so we were agreeing with the Foreign Secretary, successively reducing headcount caps. Essentially, how many people you absolutely have to have there and move everything else offshore.

And the purpose of being there? I had this debate with a close relative who asked me pretty directly: why are we even still there? The purpose of being there was first of all the national security mission, and that's what the Embassy was there for. It's what the intervention after 9/11 was about. It was trying to support the government that I was accredited to through security support, financial support, anything else that we could do with them. It was also to ensure that we had the contingency planning in place to do an evacuation, if we had to, including British nationals and others. And to get on with what was called the ARAP scheme, the Afghan Resettlement Assistance Programme. A successor to the programme for military interpreters, basically to resettle Afghans who'd worked for us and whose lives were at risk as a result. And that was essentially the business of the Embassy by the time I arrived. Anything else, you don't need to be doing it.

PS: So you did arrive. What was it like when you got there, what were your impressions of the place?

LB: Lots of impressions. It was still, of course, during the later stages of the pandemic. So there were very, very strict protocols about quarantine, about who was allowed to mix with whom, because what we couldn't afford was a big Covid outbreak in that environment, that would very rapidly overwhelm the medical life support facilities in the business.

The ability to travel even outside the green zone by then was sharply curtailed. This is the very highly fortified, very heavily guarded, city within a city, in the middle of Kabul where the government and most of the Western embassies were situated.

It was pretty clear that even by June, the war out in the country was going very, very badly for the government. At the time, the sorts of discussions I was having with the military advisers in Kabul and with people back in London were about the risk of a cascading collapse. So, how do things fail: slowly then quickly. That's what we were fearing happening, and we were starting to see signs of that. The Afghan state wasn't able to grip the situation. It was increasingly clear it wouldn't be able to turn it around. And so what was happening was an accelerating failure on the battlefield.

PS: I suppose it's difficult to get to the next question really, but we were talking about the way in which the whole thing collapsed very, very quickly. What happened and how did you respond to that?

LB: Throughout June and July almost all of my job really came down to a very limited number of tasks. Of course, the main one was getting around as fast as possible and as far as possible the top decision makers in Kabul. So, President [Ashraf] Ghani, his National Security Adviser, Foreign Minister – who lived in the house almost next door to mine – Defence Minister and others, to try to have the sort of conversation with them that says, 'Look, we're here with you, the military have pulled out. There's not really much to discuss on that, but we continue to support you. But this is going very badly wrong, very quickly.' There was, I would say, a high degree of denial in the Afghan government about that, but also, understandably, a fair amount of, 'Well, what's your answer? What do you think we should do?' A genuine question and one I don't think any of us had a really good answer to in those circumstances.

Another part of the job was really pressing the system in London to move fast on resettlement. My base case assumption was that we've got less time to do this than we think we have, so we need to get on with it. If we seriously intend to fulfil our commitment to these people, we've got to accelerate this. We've got to identify and break down the roadblocks, move people because there may quickly come a point where that's no longer possible.

PS: Did London understand that?

LB: I think the officials closest to it understood it. Of course, there were both practical and political constraints. The practical constraints really centred on the genuine serious difficulty of relocating large numbers of people quickly. You're reliant on local authorities and you're reliant on housing stock that may not exist or may be earmarked for other purposes. Politically, I would say that by this stage Afghanistan was a subject that nobody particularly wanted to be at the front of the news. The last thing, of course, was you're trying to lead a team through all of this. And part of that team is your Afghan staff. And every single conversation with them, really, the sort of ghost at the feast was, 'Are you going to get us out?'

PS: And you're presumably trying to reassure them that you would, but you couldn't have any absolute confidence that that would happen.

LB: In a way it's worse than that. With some of them that's the case. In the case of others, the policy meant that they didn't qualify for evacuation. And almost the last meeting I had with our Afghan staff was in late July where a group of the staff had been told they didn't qualify for evacuation. And they wrote to me saying, 'This is unjust, we're going to be killed by the Taliban.' And I thought I owed them a hearing. So I sat them down in the garden of the Embassy, by the war memorial and heard them out. And honestly, I agreed with them. So I put the recommendations back to London saying, 'I think we need to rethink – actually we do need to rethink.'

PS: And what was the response?

LB: That particular question was overtaken by events because of course within two weeks the whole thing had collapsed and then the criteria for evacuation were developing within days, inside each day.

PS: Well, I suppose we have to move to that point now, at which the real collapse became evident, and what happened.

LB: There are a couple of waypoints there. First the attack on the government on Eid. I was eating my breakfast one morning and you hear the unmistakable sound of projectiles going overhead, followed by a series of explosions. And, of course, the next thing that happened is that the close protection team, with which I shared the house, came bursting through the door, basically picked me up and pushed me into the safe room. You've got missiles going overhead, you have no idea what's going on at all. And so, the setup is that I'm sitting there in this kind of walk-in wardrobe with heavily reinforced walls with a very nice young man, an ex-soldier, armed to the teeth, in 35-degree heat, waiting to hear whether we're making a run for it while the rest of the team check out what's going on, to decide on a course of action.

What had happened there was that the Taliban had launched a rocket attack on the entire government who were at Eid prayers outside the palace. And they launched these rockets from a vehicle outside the green zone. They travelled pretty much over us on the way there. If they had landed in a slightly different pattern, that would have killed most of the government in one go. So that was the point at which, I think, in my mind it became real. This is a war that the government is now losing, in the middle of Kabul, and with a slightly different pattern of rockets there would be no government.

The next one was a little time later, early to mid-evening, an enormous boom. Again, when you work and live in those environments, it's not hard to understand what it is. It was an enormous bomb going off a few blocks away, next to the Defence Minister's house.

So, again, the Embassy goes into lockdown. We are watching what's happening from the blimp, the eye in the sky that has surveillance of Kabul, watching this gunfight going on around the Defence Minister's house. So again, the Afghan state was fortunate in that the Defence Minister wasn't at home. But even so this was an audacious attack against the Defence Minister, no less, in the middle of Kabul. There aren't many alternative conclusions you can draw from that.

What then happened over that period of weeks was an increasingly desperate and accelerating situation, as the Taliban had really filleted the country. They'd taken control of the main roads, the main border crossing points, which of course means revenue as well as political prestige and all the rest of it. They had seized a large number of rural provinces and small towns and there were just the main cities left, the provincial capitals. And we still thought at that stage that if things go okay – we weren't right about this – the government could hang on until the winter, to the end of the fighting season, and then we'll take a breath and see where we go from here.

I was actually in the air, on a breather visit back to the UK when Zaranj, the first provincial capital, fell. This is right down on the Iranian border. So, basically, I got back to London and booked a ticket to come back again. And spent the intervening days in crisis meetings in London, working through the details of the evacuation plan, what we thought the trigger points would be for making that decision. And then, getting on a plane back to Kabul.

PS: By which time more cities had fallen?

LB: Well, as I was in the air going back – you can't fly direct from London to Kabul – you could go via Dubai or Turkey. Every time the phone came live there would be a list of cities that had fallen, and on the phone from my primary British military contact in Kabul. And I'm afraid I can't name him but he was my most important adviser with the most knowledge on the ground of what was actually happening – and of course, what we were doing with that was trying to make sure that London had, in real time, a very, very clear, straight assessment of what was happening and what we thought would happen next, and in what time scale, as we approached that decision.

PS: By this time, was it clear that the Afghan army was not putting up any serious resistance?

LB: It was a mixed picture. In some places surrender deals were being done and again you could see this happening by the hour, and that was the speed with which it was unfolding. In some places the army laid down their weapons, went over to the other side, went home, and deals were done at the elite level. In others they fought really, really hard. I think there's a rather unjust view that basically says the Afghan army gave up and went home. Not all the Afghan army did that. I think also it's just worth saying that, by this stage, there was really no state to fight for in any meaningful sense. So I do not think it's just to say that the Afghan army didn't fight, they weren't up to the job. It's much, much more complex than that.

PS: What did you think about their ability to defend Kabul at that point?

LB: Well, this was the really big question for us. One of the scenarios that we modelled through, at an earlier stage, was one where the government and government forces managed to hold on to Kabul as a sort of city-state, and then you're kind of limping into the end of the fighting season. In the first half of August, it was becoming abundantly clear that that wasn't going to happen, and there were attempts to broker a political agreement, actually a negotiated surrender, up to the very last day. They weren't going anywhere. There was no reason why the Taliban would agree to a negotiated surrender: they'd won at this stage. Why would you negotiate surrender then? They hadn't up to that point; why would they now? But what we were also seeing was military capabilities being brought right up to the boundaries of Kabul, including things like artillery. And at this point, you're starting to think, are we now going to see the battle for Kabul? You know that could get very, very ugly very quickly. And we're in the middle of it. And bearing in mind, also, that the airport is also in the middle of it.

So this was the key decision point on the 14th, I think. Let us backtrack a little bit. In the days before the fall of Kabul, three days before the fall of Kabul, it was increasingly clear that we were facing a huge crisis and that we, the Americans, needed to get forces into theatre quickly, if only to get ourselves out safely. So there was an announcement from Washington that they would be deploying military force back into Kabul and bringing more into theatre ready to deploy into Kabul as needed. A similar commitment was made on the UK side with smaller numbers. But those forces were still coming into Kabul through the period of the 12th to the 15th of August. And this is where the real decision point comes. On the 14th of August, the US military commander in Afghanistan basically said, we assess the Taliban

might attack the city. If they do, we have not got enough soldiers here to hold the airport. That makes the decision for you.

And so the evacuation decision taken in London, which I was part of, particularly when I was back in London, modelling this through, was a two-phased evacuation. Phase one was to close down the Embassy, evacuate ourselves from the green zone, of course leaving a big hole in the green zone, and deploy a small team to the airport. We had a small military base on the airport. Phase two was we'd pull the whole lot out if that became necessary.

PS: So the decision was taken on the 14th?

LB: There were decisions being made sequentially through those days but when it became clear that we did not have enough military force in Kabul, if the Taliban assaulted, if they conducted a military assault on the city and the airport, there wasn't really any other alternative but to pull everyone out.

PS: And so from that point onwards, you were just trying to manage the evacuation?

LB: Well, yes. We managed to get at least one plane away, on I think, the 15th, so maybe backtrack a bit. The end came very, very suddenly on the 15th. I was by that stage in the UK military base on the airport, again, just messages going backwards and forwards, mostly on WhatsApp actually, at this stage. That was the communications method with my military adviser, and we were watching it happen. We were watching President Ghani giving his address to the nation, from the Presidential Palace, pulling levers that were no longer attached to anything.

Then I had a message saying there are aircraft being lined up, helicopters being lined up. Next message I had is Ghani has left. And the one after that was, the Taliban are through the gates, in rapid succession. And then, of course, you got the picture of the Taliban around President Ghani's desk. At that point you know that's it's over – it is absolutely over.

What then happened, we went into full speed on evacuating really anybody we could identify who needed to be evacuated. So, the British citizens and their dependants. Most of them, of course, British citizens of Afghan origin and dependants who, for the most part were undocumented because they had never lived in the UK, and those of our staff that we needed to get out. So we got, I think, at least one plane away on the 15th. And then the decision was made that we had to pull out all the civilian staff.

PS: So we go back to Kabul, then, and we think about what's happening and the way in which the evacuation operation was conducted. How did that go? At the time, we got a lot of visual images of what was happening.

LB: After the Embassy had been evacuated, and the staff pulled out, those of us who were left hunkered down in the military base on Kabul Airport. We were looking at a scenario where you actually don't know what's going to happen next. Our military were going into a defensive posture, looking very, very carefully at other flights still able to operate. Will we be able to get planes in and out of here in six hours? How fast can we get our people out? Bearing in mind that both we and the Americans are still trying to get soldiers in, not get people out, to hold the airport. Unless you can hold that airport, you're not doing anything, you're leaving if you're lucky.

And, of course, what then happened over particularly the 15th and 16th was that we lost control of the airport. There were literally not enough soldiers to hold the airport perimeter and so what you had was thousands, possibly tens of thousands of Afghans descending on Kabul and descending on the airport. Just desperate to get out, as you or I would be. First of all, they overran the civilian terminal, which was a few hundred metres from where I was. You will have seen the pictures of people standing on air bridges, on the tops of planes, trying to force their way on to the military planes, clinging on to the side of those military planes as they took off. And those awful pictures of people falling off a US C-17 onto the runway.

That was what it was like, that's what was happening. It got to the point where it was no longer possible for flights to land or to take off because of the sheer number of people on the airfield. That was a very big problem indeed because, obviously, if you can't bring soldiers in, your scope to regain control of the airfield is sharply limited. We were told: you need soldiers, in large numbers, just to recover control of the perimeter. And if planes can't take off none of us are leaving. So that was a long night.

PS: But eventually they got enough soldiers in to retake control?

LB: Well, the soldiers who were there managed to re-establish control. The night of the 16th, 17th was one of the longest nights, I have to say, of any of our lives. At one point I was basically shaken awake and told, 'We need to move to a safer location.' With a box of soldiers around me like that, as they moved deeper into the military base. And then we basically sat in the operations room, watching what was happening.

Not much I could do about it by that stage. But what happened in the course of that night was that the soldiers and some Afghan units managed to recover control of the runway and the airport, enough for flights to start again. And I knew they'd started again because I heard a C-17 land and take off. Bear in mind the building I was living and working in was about 200 metres from the runway, so it was quite unmistakable.

I have to say that was quite a relief when I heard that planes had started up. But even so, that's by no means the end of the story. What then happened, once we had sufficient control of the airport to bring people in, was that the Americans, we, and others brought in very large numbers of soldiers to hold the airport and the perimeters, so that we didn't lose control again. I think it was about 6,000 in total, in the end, just to hold that one airport.

And that in turn then meant that we could then start up the Baron Hotel evacuation handling centre, which was an arrangement we'd planned months in advance. It's the standard operating model for a big civilian evacuation. It's called a non-combatant evacuation operation, an NEO. What you need is a big secure facility that you can process people through, it just makes it much more efficient. And you had the Baron Hotel, a big heavily fortified hotel right on the airport perimeter. We'd paid them an impressive amount of money as a deposit, some months before that, for the use of their hotel.

PS: So that process started and how satisfactory was it? How successful were you in getting the people out who should have got out?

LB: Well, we had a Foreign Office/Home Office Team, ready in the UAE to deploy for basically three hours flying. It was as close as we could get them, so that if the opportunity came to run an evacuation, we'd get them quickly, because we had no idea how long we'd have, the hours or the days. So we brought those in as soon as it was safe. Safe isn't the word but as soon as it was possible to do so.

We set up shop in the Baron; the team very quickly got some processes together to bring people through and then the processing started. Essentially, you've got a process of calling people forward for evacuation. They get an email saying come to the Baron for evacuation, you qualify for evacuation.

It's, to say the least, imperfect, but it's what you've got. And then once people are into the Baron they go through a number of processes. One, of course, is basic physical security screening by the soldiers on the gate. Quite a lot of them were in quite bad shape by the time

they arrived. So, a quick medical screen, any first aid they needed. The Home Office team were absolutely invaluable because they could look at a document and say this is real, this is fake, just like that. Because their immigration officers' working lives are spent on the Heathrow immigration desks, they can look at the candidate and say this candidate is genuine, or this candidate is not. What they're able to do is filter out the people who have no business being there, much faster than you could without those teams.

Then you take them through eligibility: are these their children? Are these people alongside them eligible for evacuation too? Brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, random people, parents? The criteria were, I would say, flexible, up to a point. But this all sounds very neat and very straightforward. It was mayhem, chaos, in the middle of a war zone, with desperate people, many of whom had been beaten up on the way. There were stories of women being raped out on the street outside. There were dead children being pulled out of crowds. You know, it's the idea that this was an orderly bureaucratically tidy process. It simply couldn't be in those circumstances. You do what you've got [to do], with what you've got. And what the military and civilian teams did I thought was beyond anything that could be reasonably expected of them.

PS: So maybe we should take a break here ...

PS: We've just been talking about the processing, as best it could be, of all the people trying to get out. What was the ultimate outcome of all that? How many of the people we should have got out, did we get out?

LB: We got out over 15,000 people in eleven days, which was wildly bigger than the planning assumption. We had planned on getting a much smaller number of people than that. Did we finish the job? No of course not. That could never have been done in the time available.

PS: No. What's the next stage that we should be talking about?

LB: We should probably talk about what else was going on around the evacuation. As well as the processing of people, the vast numbers of people under awful circumstances around the Baron, of course, there was the whole political situation around it. It was a huge crisis in the middle of summer, with parliament being recalled. It was all at the top of the global media for the entire time of the evacuation. There was a lot of recrimination in the UK, US, and everyone's media about why hadn't we seen this coming, how we allowed it to happen and all the rest of it. And a large part of my role was essentially advising ministers, senior officials,

back in London of how things looked on the ground, how long we thought we had, what were the issues that we needed to be addressing, unblocking blockages where necessary. But also trying to help ministers and senior officials think about the bigger political issues here.

When you're in a crisis, you tend to focus absolutely on the thing in front of your nose. It's the wrong answer. You've got to think about the bigger picture. What that meant amongst other things was things like, how is the relationship with the Americans going? I think Tony Blair, at the height of the crisis, was quoted in the UK media describing the American evacuation as imbecilic. You know, there's a lot of things that could be said about the Americans and our preparation for it, but having that debate in public didn't strike me as the right thing to do at the time. We are there in circumstances that none of us wanted, none of us wished for, but that's what we've got. The job is to complete the evacuation, try to rescue what we can from the situation and get our own people out alive. As we'll come on to a bit later. There were a number of moments where things could have gone the other way and one moment when they did, and of course that helps. If you lose soldiers or civilians in an environment like that, that makes a very bad political situation even worse.

PS: You talked about the American relationship. Were there other geopolitical factors at work at that time?

LB: I think everyone was trying to make sense of what does this mean in the bigger picture, and again, that was part of how I saw my role at the time. Just trying to think through, and help London think through, the 'day after' issues. So, once we're out of here, once we've got this evacuation done, which will be by the end of August: the Taliban have made it perfectly clear that they weren't going to tolerate the evacuation continuing beyond the end of August. What are we going to do then? Are we going to deal with the Taliban? On what basis?

They've literally just overthrown, by military force, the government to which I'm accredited, but they are a political fact. What are we going to do with that? What are the implications for Pakistan, a country of enormous importance for the UK, who at the very least have played a substantial role in the situation we've now got? India? The Indians were completely on the other side of that argument. What conclusion are the Russians, the Chinese and others, the Iranians drawing from what just happened here? Including about the West's and the US's ability and willingness to protect its own interests? Those are the size of the questions that were starting to come up. And to some extent, being played out in the media as well.

PS: Were you able to convey this thinking to London at the time that you were holed up in the airport?

LB: Yes.

PS: That seems impressive to me.

LB: But it's part of the job: somebody has to be thinking about that bigger picture as well as about the operational issues. And I think that role falls to the Ambassador: you are the person closest to all of these issues. That is the role.

PS: Yes. How many other Embassy people were with you at that time: were you on your own?

LB: I was the only Embassy person in the few days between the evacuation of the Embassy and the reopening of the runway. We also had in Kabul during that period, a very small MoD civilian team who were the people doing the resettlement programme. They stayed, and my Defence Attaché stayed, during that period. But because of the circumstances, it would have been entirely the wrong thing to keep staff there, putting them at extreme risk, if there was nothing for them to do, nothing in the evacuation, there were no planes running.

PS: No, but they had at least got out of the country by that time.

LB: They'd got out of the country, and we'd assembled a team in the UAE to bring them back in. So, my Deputy, my Head of Development Section, a rapid deployment team had come out from London, the Home Office people. And then what we did over the subsequent days was to prepare subsequent teams to come in as well. Partly so that we could ramp up the evacuation, just to get more people through the system faster. But also, you've got to bear in mind that you're still working under pandemic conditions. There were no pro-Covid precautions whatsoever, by this time. I'm amazed that there was no big outbreak. But if people had got ill, we'd have to have shipped them out.

Bear in mind also the stresses of the situation. The team working in the Baron were working at least 18-hour days, in awful conditions, 35-degree heat, awful, distressing life and death decisions hour by hour by hour by hour. You have to bear in mind that that can break people. And so one of my main concerns at that time was just keeping a very, very close eye on the team in case I had to say, 'Look, you need to be out of here.' Of course, the sort of people who do those jobs: the last thing they would admit to is, 'I need to leave.' This is not the way

people behave in those circumstances. So that means it falls on me, and my deputy to say, 'Sorry, you need to leave.'

PS: And there was a certain number you did have to say that to?

LB: None! Looking at it after the event, maybe that wasn't the right call. But at the time the commitment to the job was total. Nobody said, 'I just don't want to be here anymore.'

PS: I can't quite grasp the chronology, but we'd got to the point where you've re-established a degree of airport control, you've established a process for people to be processed through the hotel.

LB: Yes.

PS: How long was the period then before your final evacuation from Kabul?

LB: The evacuation proper was up and running by the 17th of August. There were a lot of contacts going on in the background with the Taliban as the Americans explored with them, whether they would tolerate the evacuation running beyond the end of August. Essentially, an understanding had been arrived at - the end of August: that was it. The armistice would be up. And that was one of the reasons why the Taliban allowed the evacuation to go ahead. The tacit deal was do what you need to do and then leave. There's rather more to it than that obviously, but that was the situation.

The political pressures on the Americans and on us, of course, were extreme by this point. You've got these awful television pictures. Everybody with an Afghan contact or an interest in the country, or has worked there, is trying to get their people out. Making the problem bigger and more complex and messier and harder to handle. But you know, at the heart of it, these are people who need to get out because they're going to be killed if they stay, or at least at very serious risk.

So, again, the political demands were pulling in different directions: get the job done and get it over with, versus we're not going to get this done in time, and that's a problem back home. It became increasingly clear that it wasn't going to be possible to extend beyond the 30th. So then what the military planners had to do was work through the departure sequence. To spell out a bit what that means: start from the end, the last plane out is the most dangerous flight anyone will ever make because you're leaving an airport where by now there are no friendly forces, it's Taliban if you're lucky. There are, by the way, Islamic State and other extremists

in that mix as well – we’ll come on to them in a minute. And so what you do then is work backwards. You create an order in which the evacuation happens. It’s all very carefully planned. Bearing in mind that you do not want to leave behind equipment that can be used by extremists against you or others, so that needs to be factored in as well. The equipment is there for a reason. You’re trying to use it to do the evacuation. And the military planners did an amazing job of sequencing the departure. What that meant was that we had quite a hard deadline for closing down the evacuation. We needed to get the last Afghan evacuees out, we needed to get our own civilians out, before that final military pullout was under way because, apart from anything else, you’re going to be in their way at the time of maximum risk.

Our military squeezed the window from that as hard as they could, so we got an extra day or two that we weren’t counting on at the end, to get more people out. Of course, what that also brings, though, is more risk. You’ve got people in theatre who are not soldiers, they’re not trained to carry weapons. You’ve got an escalating security threat. And the longer they’re there, the more chance of it going wrong, frankly.

So let’s talk about what then happened, how it went wrong. We had seen indications for some days that a terrorist attack was being planned. As always, almost always in these cases, what you don’t have is the time and the place of the method of attack, but we knew it was coming. What you’ve then got is the most difficult decision of all, which is: do we keep our people at risk trying to deliver this evacuation or do we play safe? Bearing in mind that if you close the operation down, you’re never going to start again. All those people out on the street, that’s their chance gone. So there was a calculated set of risks in there. And, as always with these things, you hope it goes your way, but it might not.

I remember I was in the military base at the time, preparing to go over to the Baron, when a message popped up on my phone saying, ‘Attack imminent’. What we’d seen was certain signs that they were preparing now to launch the attack. At that point, we’re not moving anywhere, we have a decision to make here. We don’t know where the attack is going to be. We don’t know exactly when. We know it’s building. We don’t know the method. What we’ve got is, by this stage, a few dozen civilian staff over at the Baron, the soldiers in and around the Baron guarding it, maybe a thousand or more Afghans in that hotel; what do you do?

Because, of course, one method of attack is that a bomb goes off in the crowd, another is that a truck comes through the gate and then you’ve got a shooting spree. We just don’t know. So

the decision there is essentially, are we going to hunker down in the Baron, or are we going to move the civilians? It was the kind of decision that nobody wants to make and there just isn't time to refer it back to London. We'd had a number of discussions about what it might be, but essentially the core leadership team on the ground, the military commander, [Brigadier] Dan Blanchford, me, my military adviser, and the embassy security adviser basically had a conflagration. The security adviser checked his lines with London; the call was, 'We're going to move our people now. Bring them on to the airport, close down the Baron, hunker down the Baron.' And so the Foreign Office/Home Office team were moved from the Baron on to the airport, the hotel closed down, hunkered down in defensive posture. Less than an hour later the bomb went off in the crowd and our team had driven past that location: less than an hour previously. That was how close it was.

LB: The news came through, again it was a WhatsApp message: Attack at the Abbey Gate, multiple casualties. So, of course, then what happens is the first thing you do is account for your staff, on the civilian and the military side. Have we lost anyone? We quickly established we hadn't lost anyone on the civilian side, and the military were telling me they were pretty confident we hadn't on our side as well. But it's clearly a mass casualty event. And the numbers were starting to come through that the Americans had taken serious casualties, lots of dead people, lots of seriously injured people, lots of shooting going on. As it happened, I had a call booked with the Prime Minister to discuss something completely different about an hour after that. And so I had to tell him, 'There's been a bomb go off at the Abbey Gate, which is outside next to the Baron Gate. It's mass casualties. As far as we know, we haven't lost anyone, but this is ... it's happened.'

PS: How did you react?

LB: A number of things. First of all, adrenaline kicks in. It's because of the jobs I've done before. It's not the first time I've had to deal with this sort of situation. You have to focus right in on what are the key questions for us, right now? How do we keep our people safe? What about the soldiers? They're in the military chain of command, but my personal objective is: we're not losing anyone on this operation. How could it be anything else? What does it mean for the evacuation? Can we continue? Should we continue? These are things on which you've got to give straight, honest, evidenced advice to the people in London, who have got to take that decision. It's a pretty big decision. Then, of course, there's a media angle to this. The face of the Embassy and the airport. You've got to decide what you're

going to say to the media, in what tone. And the tone is far more important in the context of this sort of situation. And last but not least, the staff themselves. That's the point at which you say to your staff: if you want to leave, thank you. No one did.

PS: After the explosion, what's the interval between that and the final evacuation?

LB: Once the explosion had taken place, bearing in mind we've been tracking all through this, through the last days of the fall of Kabul, just trying to get a handle on how many bad guys were out there. How many Islamic State fighters have been released from the prisons alongside the Taliban? And the answer was: a lot. So the fact that it's happened does absolutely not mean that's the end of it, that there's no more coming. In a way, what you would expect is a sequence of attacks. If that's what's planned, they're capable of it. It sharply accelerated the close-down. We had to close down the Baron, there was no going back there after that. There'd already been a close-down plan for the Baron to bring the thing to an orderly close. To get our people out without creating riots outside and in the Baron itself. As you say to people this is over, [they reply] you haven't done me yet. And to get through the evacuation path, the last of the people that you need to get out, right up to the very last plane, there were people who we were trying to get out who seriously needed to be got out, and they'd found it difficult to get to the airport because of the crush, but also because the Taliban were looking for them. So right down to the very last minute, buses of people showing up. It became right: we're doing it.

PS: And you could identify them?

LB: It was getting harder. By this stage, everybody could see that the international evacuation was coming to a close very soon, and this is your last chance. So what you've got is huge crowds of people still desperate to get out. Most of them, by that stage, with no claim to be evacuated. But in them, in that crowd, are people who seriously needed to be got out, because the Taliban were hunting them by that stage. And, of course, what you've also got is a Taliban cordon around the entire airport. So they control who gets through to the airport perimeter.

The other thing here – it sounds like a small thing, but it really wasn't – it's the Ramp Ceremony. Thirteen American soldiers killed in the last three days of a 20-year operation. The way the military do these things is that you have a small ceremony where you load the coffins on the back of a plane. So obviously I had to represent the UK at that. It was totally chaotic by this stage. It took us three goes to coordinate with the Americans on that because

they were completely knocked sideways by the whole thing. We kept getting wrong times and turning up, and given notice, it's three hours from now; and that took us through the night basically. And when it happened it was blazing sunshine, in the middle of the morning. A C-17 lined up on the tarmac, a line of soldiers, others on each side and then thirteen coffins.

PS: Can I ask you about the animals being evacuated?

LB: The animals – I had a discussion with Dan Blanchford on the first day of the evacuation when that story first started coming our way. Brigadier Dan Blanchford was the senior military officer in Kabul running the military evacuation. I said to Dan, 'This is building – we're doing people.' Dan said to me, 'Absolutely right, that's what we're doing. We're doing people.' And we also agreed that we needed to insulate our people from what you could see was going to be a media storm about this and any number of other things. And that's what we did, we did people.

PS: I suppose we've then got to the point at which you finally left Kabul: what was that like?

LB: Well, first of all, I had to do a series of media clips before, as we were winding the evacuation up. Bear in mind the size of the news story: we needed a controlled media event to tell the public back in the UK this is now closing down. I'm the face of the Embassy, the face of the operation there. We had to do one from Kabul Airport and then I had to do one from [RAF] Brize Norton when I got back into the UK, basically to communicate to the public what's happened here. The one at the airport was grimly comic, actually, in a way. Obviously, we had to decide what do you want the backdrop for this to be, and it had to be military aeroplanes taking off and all that. So, with the military communications team, we went out and did a stand-up interview by the side of the runway surrounded by my close protection team, with a camera on a tripod and a directional microphone because of the immense noise of these planes going on. And Andy McCoubrey, my development director, who was one of the stalwarts of the evacuation team, holding up my crib sheet, on a sheet of A4 because we're only going to get time for one take of this thing. And just as we'd finished this Humvee of heavily armed Americans came roaring across the tarmac at us, basically saying what are you doing? 'This is the British Ambassador; he's making a film.'

PS: But you did it anyway, you managed to do that?

LB: We got it done, yes. So the evacuation itself had finished by that stage. I said goodbye to the soldiers that I'd lived and worked with, just incredible people. And Dan Blanchford

and I walked out to the back of the plane. You know, people like that, when you work alongside them in circumstances like that, they become real friends.

PS: Yes, I can imagine.

LB: Yes, but he would be leaving later that night under cover of darkness, with the last of our military team. And we got on the plane, the ramp came up, you're in darkness, you're all wearing your body armour and helmets because you could get shot at, as the plane takes off. The plane took off and I just stared into space. Quite a few of my colleagues were just flat out asleep, total, total exhaustion. That wasn't really an option.

PS: So, you had the journey home, and the end of that mission?

LB: Yes

PS: Anything more you'd like to say about Afghanistan and your time there?

LB: Yes, one last thing. It's that I'm still in contact with a lot of the civilian team there, and with some of the military. It never goes away. You never leave it behind.

PS: No. But you did come home, and you had to do something. You had to adjust to being back home again: what was that like?

LB: It was fairly difficult in a way, and a lot of relief, a lot of congratulations from friends and family, all the obvious things. Also, a lot of self-examination. All of us thinking: could we have done more, could we have got more people out? Bear in mind that we're all still getting phone calls, texts, messages: can you get me out? Those didn't stop for over a year after I left. And it's the same for others. We all had to go through PTSD screening, including the military. I'm still in touch with some of the military commanders and some of the people who were there who found it very, very difficult and still do.

PS: I can imagine that. But you had to resume your career, your life. In your notes you talk about things like the aftermath, the FAC enquiry and recriminations. Where do we stand on that?

LB: There were a lot of recriminations. Some of them as always, with justification, some of them for other reasons, a lot of blame-passing going on: that's to be expected. Whether it's something that should happen is another question.

Most of my focus in the months after coming back was trying to help the lessons learned exercises. What do we think actually happened here and why? What would we do differently? Preparing, of course, for the Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, which was going to be pretty gruesome. It was. And, yes, trying to make sense of the thing.

PS: Do you want to talk about the FAC session?

LB: Very briefly. I think the best way to understand that particular session was a couple of things going on. One was a genuine wish to understand why the operation at the London end, I would say not only in the Foreign Office, but across Whitehall, was not all it should have been. That's a good question. It wasn't all it should have been. And the Foreign Office, Whitehall, needed to learn from that because if you don't, you're going to repeat the same mistakes. I think the other important thing to understand going on there was the sheer level of grief and personal investment of a lot of people. Not only people on the Foreign Affairs Committee. This was a campaign that lasted 20 years. We lost 457 soldiers, we spent billions of pounds on Afghanistan, and at the end of it, the Taliban are in charge.

PS: Just as they were when they started.

LB: There's not only a question of policy and strategy and political prestige, there's a question of the human cost. And I think one of the things that I would have liked to have seen at the time was a more explicit public debate about why that happened.

PS: Do you think lessons have been learned? Do you think we have learned enough, the right lessons, from Afghanistan?

LB: It's probably not really for me to say. We have no excuse if we haven't, either in terms of crisis management or in terms of effective strategy. That we, the West, the US, and its allies, made some enormous strategic mistakes in Afghanistan. We need to know what they are; we need to understand how that happened. If we don't, we're unlikely to learn from them.

PS: Having gone through all that, you're still back in London looking for another job at that point?

LB: To cut a long story short, after doing that job, it's a point at which you evaluate what you want to do next. And two things really came together at the same time. One was that I was elected to the job I'm doing now. The President of Hughes Hall in Cambridge. It's

something I wanted to do for a very, very long time – over a decade – to do a job like this, a role like this. It has all the things I want to do, basically. And the other thing was that it became pretty clear that there was nothing suitable on offer in government. So that was the decision made, really. You reach a point where it's time to go and do something different: it was that point.

**Russia Strategy Adviser, FCDO, 2022**

PS: But you were advising on Russia in 2022, presumably after the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

LB: Yes. The job in Cambridge wasn't due to come up until the new academic year, September/October 2022. And the Russians, of course, invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. And I said to the Foreign Office look, you know, I'm happy to help. I don't want a job description, I don't want terms of reference, but I do know this country probably better than anyone else in Whitehall, at this level. I'll write your strategy papers if you want.

PS: And you wrote them.

LB: Yes.

PS: What was that like, though, reflecting on Russia at that point? Were you thinking new thoughts or recycling? I suppose you were recycling what you'd learned over all those years?

LB: Both. As always with a country like Russia, I would say you can't make good policy unless somebody in the system seriously knows what they're talking about. How we got here, what you're dealing with, why they behave the way they do. But invading Ukraine: this changes everything. And what was happening as a result of that, I think, was not only around London and the UK, but around the world. One of those moments where it's hard to avoid the conclusions that you're drawn to, which is that this changes everything. A P5 country has invaded its neighbour in the middle of Europe. For no reason, no good reason.

PS: Yes, and presumably it all goes back to Putin?

LB: It goes back to Putin; I think it goes back to the idea of what Russia is that Putin and the people around him have built up over the last 20-25 years. It's essentially an authoritarian and imperialist view of Russia. This war is about Russia, it's not about Ukrainian territory. It's about Russia and its place in the world. And I think the value, I hope, that I was able to add both in my last months in government and actually since, is helping policy makers and

the broader public to understand that that is what's actually happening. It's time to put away your illusions about these people. This is what they're doing. This is who they are, this is where it leads, this is what it means for us.

PS: In your notes you say that there was a paucity of Russian expertise in Whitehall at that time. Do you think that's still the case, more than a year on? Do people understand Russia better now; are there more experts around?

LB: I think government has got a need to systematically build expertise, not only across the big geographical regions, but also about how geography intersects with the big political issues of our age. We need more people who understand Russia, we need more people who speak Russian, we need people who understand [Ukraine] and speak Ukrainian. That is another part of this now, it's not just a subset of Russia studies.

The same is true, obviously, of big countries like China, I would say the United States too. And our closest, biggest, most important ally, Europe. The UK has taken a view on where it wishes to be with regard to Europe. That doesn't mean that we need less expertise on how the European Union and its member states work or how to deal with them effectively any more. And if you overlay on that, things like the dawn of the artificial intelligence age, the opportunities and risks that brings, big data, disinformation. And to spell it out, the role of lying in domestic and international policy. These are really, really big issues.

PS: Yes. And government is not sufficiently served by expertise, then, at this stage; we need to develop much, much more: that's your conclusion?

LB: I think I'd put it in a slightly different way. I'm looking at it now from the academic side of the fence. I think there is a serious point here about how, as a country, we mobilise and use the resources that we have. One part of this I'm particularly interested in is how the universities, how the think-tank world, makes its knowledge, its resources, its analytical power available to policy makers in a way that they can use. It requires both sides to want that to happen. It needs a customer who knows how to use those institutions and values what they can do, and the willingness to make that offer into government in a way that government can use.

PS: Well, I think we're probably reaching the end now, but at this point people are often asked to reflect on their diplomatic career. What thoughts occur to you? What do you say about that career that you've had, and you've now left behind?

LB: My overriding sense is that I just got incredibly lucky. First of all, in joining the Foreign Office at the time I did, as the Cold War was coming to an end, and then in the sequence of jobs I did. I don't know whether it's luck or something else, but I cannot remember a single role where I was bored or thought this doesn't really matter, or where I wished I was doing something else.

PS: I think that's probably a good point to end. So, Sir Laurie, thank you very much.

LB: Thank you.