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Ivor Anthony ROBERTS (born 24 September 1946)

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interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Friday 11 May 2007 at Trinity College, Oxford for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.

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Education and decision to join the Diplomatic Service

MM: Would you start by telling us about your family, your education and your decision to join the Diplomatic Service?

IR: Yes, well I joined the Diplomatic Service straight from University almost without a break; I had a few weeks off in which I spent some time acting at the Fringe of the Edinburgh Festival. Some might say it was a seamless transition from the stage to diplomacy. But I had passed my Foreign Office exams in the previous Spring, subject only to getting a reasonable degree. I think I'd been interested in international affairs, partly because I was a linguist I suppose, which naturally brought me into contact with the outside world.

My mother was Italian so I spent a good part of my childhood in Italy. I probably travelled more than most children of my age. I also was stimulated by a couple of diplomats I met, one on a theatrical tour of Italy, which involved our being received at the Embassy in Rome where strangely enough I ended my diplomatic career forty years later. One relatively young diplomat I met there asked me what I was going to do after Oxford and I said I was still undecided, and he said, "Well, with your languages and your background, you should seriously consider the Foreign Office." That was in 1967.

So I took the exams the following Winter and the Spring - the whole process was fairly protracted – so it was I joined.

MM: Excellent. What was your father?

IR: My father was an accountant. One lasting piece of his advice to me was never to become an accountant! I followed his instructions strictly.

First assignment in the Diplomatic Service in 1968

MM: So you joined the Diplomatic Service in 1968. Where were you assigned?

IR: I was immediately assigned – and in those days we had a very brief induction period, maybe ten or eleven days – I was assigned to West African Department. The Department was almost wholly preoccupied with the Biafran War at the time and my job as the francophone in the Department was to deal with all the francophone countries in West Africa, not many of which mattered greatly to British interests, but which all needed some modest handling even in terms of visitors, monitoring what they were up to vis à vis Nigeria and the Biafran War. By and large, though, I was left to my own devices.

MM: You say that you had an Italian mother, so presumably you had Italian.

IR: Yes, I read Italian and French here at Oxford, which was a pretty easy option in retrospect.

MM: So your introduction to Foreign Office was in West African Department; then what?

IR: Well, that was a one-year assignment; we all did one year in the Foreign Office. Then we all went our various ways. Many of us went off to do hard language training for a hard language and I was assigned to Arabic, although I had originally opted to learn modern Greek or Serbo-Croat. I was told that neither of these languages was wanted. So they pushed me towards Arabic and I duly went to our Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) in the late Summer of 1969. Unfortunately, after I'd been there only a few weeks, I had an accident which required an operation on the base of my spine, which went wrong. I then got septicaemia and was medically evacuated from Beirut. I was off work for three or four months as a result of which I comprehensively missed out on the

Arabic course. So the Foreign Office then decided to forget about Arabic, but put me in Arabian Department for a few months where I was in charge of relations with Saudi Arabia and Yemen, Muscat and Oman as it was called at the time. Then, after a few months there, I was posted to Paris.

MM: So that was hardly a punishment!

Posting to British Embassy, Paris, 1970

IR: No, it was a particularly interesting time to be there; by then we're talking about the late Summer of 1970. This was interesting on several counts: first of all, it was still relatively soon after the events of 1968, which had shaken the French institutions and Government to the core. It had debilitated General de Gaulle and ultimately led to his retirement from politics in 1969.

This was very timely from our point of view because the Ambassador in Paris at the time was Christopher Soames, Churchill's son-in-law, who had been sent out by the Labour Government to be the Ambassador I think in 1968, and had immediately become embroiled in what became known as the Soames Affair. I don't know if you would like me to rehearse that very quickly because I was in the Foreign Office, not in Paris at the time, but I was watching it with a mixture of shock and awe, I suppose.

First of all, I remember reading the reports from the Paris Embassy of his meetings with de Gaulle, which seemed fascinating and to offer a way forward to British entry into the European Community. But a garbled version of the Ambassador's interview with de Gaulle appeared in *Le Monde* which led to the Labour Government, I think inadvisably, making it clear that they were going to put the record straight and issued a very firmly worded statement which went down very badly with the French. As a result of this, de Gaulle's relations with Soames became non-existent and, had de Gaulle remained in power, it would have made Soames's life as Ambassador very difficult, indeed impossible.

After a failure of a referendum on regional power, de Gaulle withdrew to sulk in Colombey les Deux Eglises and President Pompidou took over. Soames and Pompidou were able to pick up the pieces, and I suppose the really big breakthrough in my time in Paris was the meeting between Pompidou and Edward Heath which led to a real breakthrough in terms of British entry into the European Community.

MM: Could we go back over that to the extent that you explain what the Labour Party – or was it Government ..?

IR: Labour had been in Government up to 1970 and then fell from power when the Heath Government came in.

MM: So what was their standing in the matter?

IR: The Heath Government, as you would know and expect from Edward Heath, were very keen to press ahead after the double negative from de Gaulle. They could see they had a real chance with someone like Pompidou who didn't come with all the historical baggage of de Gaulle, and they thought that Soames was the man to help crack it; prepare the ground for what would be the ultimate test. It's hard to think back now to those days where meetings between leaders of France and Britain were quite widely spaced and had to be very carefully orchestrated. To-day as we speak, Tony Blair is going to see Jacques Chirac and his successor Mr Sarkozy, and this is the sort of small change of politics these days; but in those days, back in 1970, it was quite different. The Heath/Pompidou meeting aroused enormous expectation and interest. I remember listening to the radio on the morning of the visit and they kept on referring to someone – I could hardly work out what it was, and then it turned out to be Mr Heath; 'th' gives enormous difficulties to the French and he was therefore 'Monsieur Hiss'. For a long time afterwards he was known as 'Monsieur Hiss' in the Embassy.

MM: The Soames affair – it arose, surely, out of the report by Christopher Soames to the Government based on a conversation that he'd had with de Gaulle and a speculative sort of conversation.

IR: I think it was more than that. I think de Gaulle seemed to be suggesting – and I'm trying to remember back nearly forty years now – seemed to be suggesting that there could definitely be an accommodation of Britain which could lead to our entry. It certainly seemed the most optimistic account but it was obviously something that needed to be kept confidential and prepared very carefully.

MM: Let's leave that. What job were you actually doing in Paris?

IR: I was Third Secretary when I arrived, dealing with internal politics. It was a great job to have for a young diplomat, especially in the aftermath of the events of 1968. Later on, I broadened my portfolio, or had it broadened for me, to take in aspects of foreign affairs, including, interestingly in view of my later career, dealing with the New Hebrides which was at the time an Anglo-French condominium. Little did I think that I would end up serving there in years to come.

My job largely on dealing with internal politics was to take the pulse of young France to attempt to detect, if I could, whether the events of 1968 were likely to repeat themselves, and whether the reforms that had been introduced, particularly in the education sector which was one of the main causes of malaise, had been addressed. I concluded that they hadn't in a memorandum I wrote for the Foreign Office, which was then forwarded to them under cover of the dispatch from the Minister, Michael Palliser.

MM: Quite a Minister!

IR: Well yes, he was the lynch-pin of the Embassy; Christopher Soames was very much the public figure but, in terms of running the Embassy, that really was Michael Palliser, who did a splendid job.

MM: After that you returned to the Foreign Office.

London and East European and Soviet Department of the Foreign Office 1973

IR: I had three happy years in Paris; that was where I met my wife who was an Australian diplomat, and my opposite number. It was a very happy place. And then I returned to the Foreign Office in the Autumn of 1973 to deal with the Balkans; Eastern European and Soviet Department. There were two of us who dealt with the Balkans. It's extraordinary now when I think of the number of people who are involved in dealing with the Balkans; in those days there were just two of us, a First Secretary and myself, a Second Secretary by this stage.

MM: It must have been a rather fascinating political job.

IR: Yes. One kicked around ideas on what would happen when Tito died. Most of the ideas were quite gloomy but none of us, I think, predicted how ghastly it would all be.

MM It certainly lived up to that prediction.

IR: Yes. That was a busy period. Bulgaria and Romania were my main preoccupations. Albania was part of my responsibility but, as we had no real relations with Albania, I hardly had anything to do on that front. Romania was an interesting case because it seemed to be paddling its own canoe as far as foreign affairs were concerned. They were often taking positions on foreign affairs under Ceausescu which were welcome to the West and, almost by definition, unwelcome to the Soviet Union. Hand in hand with this open approach to foreign affairs went a very repressive approach to domestic, internal affairs. It was a paradoxical regime.

MM: A very interesting time to study it, but presumably not too much information coming out of the Embassies.

IR: No, it was difficult for them, but they did a valiant job, I remember, in the circumstances.

MM: Your next move?

IR: My next move was on promotion to First Secretary to the German Desk. That was a very pleasant job; I was only there for a year. It was pleasant but frustrating, I think, because the real meat of work on the German Desk was not in my portfolio but in that of the person doing Berlin. This was at the time when we had just renegotiated the agreements on Berlin and the new Quadripartite Agreement had come into force which we confidently expected at the time to endure for the next fifty years; we didn't think that within ten or twelve years it would be completely irrelevant. But all the interesting work was really on Berlin; bilateral relations between West Germany and Britain were unproblematical and mainly involved rather tedious financial negotiations over the terms on which the British Army of the Rhine were compensated by the German Government for being there. That was a rather heavy exercise, which the Foreign Office led on but involved enormously tedious discussions with the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence. The process was known as the Anglo-German Offset.

MM: The mind boggles! Have we still got troops in Germany?

IR: Yes, we do have troops in Germany but of course nothing like the 1970s. We had a treaty commitment at the time under the Brussels Treaty to maintain 55,000 troops on the Rhine; I don't know what the current figures are but they would be a fraction of that. Well, the British Army is so stretched in so many areas that there's a very modest presence there now.

Transfer to European Integration Department (Internal)

That was only a year, and the Foreign Office carried out an inspection of the Department during my time there in which they rightly concluded that most of the work on my desk was not really First Secretary work and could be done by a Second Secretary. I didn't disagree with them, but that led to my being transferred

after only a year to my third job in a row in the Foreign Office, which was in the European Integration Department (Internal) – EID(I). I started off doing the European Parliament which was an interesting time because, after the referendum in 1975 in Britain on British membership of the European Community, pressure then grew for us to move towards direct elections to the European Parliament. A great deal of my time and energy was put into dealing with that very ticklish issue. Direct elections was a very divisive issue within the Labour Party, at the time. Most people now won't remember what it was like; it was very difficult to predict. Cabinet was very split on it. There was also the vexed question of what kind of voting system we should have. About that time there was what was known as the Lib-Lab Pact, if you remember, and the Government was forced to concede to the Liberals an open vote on the issue of Proportional Representation to the European Parliament.

After a while, I also took on responsibility for the Common Agricultural Policy and I remember that David Owen, who had become Foreign Secretary after Antony Crosland's untimely death, commissioned a paper from the Department on how to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, which it was my pleasure to produce. It took quite a few weeks. It was quite a long paper, as I remember – thirty or forty pages. I consulted all sorts of experts from other Departments in Whitehall, of course, and farming organisations; I read widely, and I produced my paper. When it came back from David Owen, he'd written on it in red ink, "Good on analysis, short on solutions"! Just the six words! I thought this was a bit rough; I actually thought that I'd highlighted the one area where one could make very substantial progress in reforming the Common Agricultural Policy by having a quota system so that, if you exceeded a certain quota, you wouldn't get the price support; I think that's been adopted in quite a lot of areas in agriculture. Anyway, that was what he wrote on the paper!

I had responsibilities for agricultural policies for the Parliament and also for organising European Council or Summit meetings.

MM: That's a pretty formidable area of responsibility really.

IR: Yes, it was certainly the toughest time in the Foreign Office in terms of workload. I remember getting in one morning and found that I had requests to produce four papers for Cabinet by close of play that day. In those pre-computerised days, even producing one paper in a day was quite agonising because you had to prepare your own draft, clear it at your own level through Whitehall, then put it up to your Head of Department or Assistant Head of Department who might then agree it or want to mark it to the Under Secretary for his views; then the whole thing would have to be retyped again. Mistakes which had been ironed out at an earlier stage might re-appear and one had to be eagle-eyed to check that new mistakes hadn't been made. Without word-processors and computers, this could easily happen. Four papers in one day was quite ghastly!

MM: It makes one tremble to think of it!

IR: It's left deep scars. It was also the time of our first Presidency of the European Community, and the Foreign Office and Whitehall took it all very seriously. We had huge task forces assembled and it was all rather top-heavy, I thought. But it meant that none of us was allowed to move jobs and nobody was able to take any leave. I remember one day, towards the end of our Presidency, when there wasn't a lot to do and a friend of mine at the Australian High Commission had offered me a ticket for a day's play at Lords in the Centenary Test, I asked my Head of Department if it was OK for me to take the day off. Normally, these things would be approved but, instead, I had a half-hour grilling on whether I really felt I could justify taking a day off at this stage. I said, "My desk is pretty clear and I don't think anything will come up. The heavens won't open, the roof won't fall in if I'm not there." Anyway, he eventually agreed that, if by lunchtime I was confident that all work had been cleared for the day, then I could have the afternoon off. I got there for 1.30, I suppose; I watched nine balls being bowled and then the rain started and that was the end of the day!

MM: Who was your Head of Department?

IR: Peter Petrie; subsequently Ambassador in Brussels.

Posting to British High Commission Canberra

IR: At the beginning of 1978 I was posted to Canberra, which, after the burden of the EID(I), was an enormous relief.

MM: But still, the shadows of the Common Agricultural Policy must have followed you.

IR: Absolutely! I spent a lot of time dealing with the Common Agricultural Policy. My main interlocutor in Whitehall at the time was a man called Brian Bender, who is now the Permanent Secretary at the DTI. The beauty of Canberra, however, was that we had very little contact with Whitehall other than on paper. I think I had about three telephone calls from London in four years; the time zones simply worked against having conversations at all, unless there was something absolutely dramatic. So I started off doing external policy into which I assimilated the Common Agricultural Policy, given my background. After two years doing that, I went home on mid-tour leave, as it was called; I'd had no leave for two years, so you went home usually for about three months.

While I was about half way through my leave, I was rung up by the Foreign Office one day and asked if I could get to the New Hebrides, and I asked why I would be doing that, and they said, "Well, it's just becoming independent. It'll be becoming independent in the next few days and will be called Vanuatu." "Yes," I said. "I've read about that and what has that got to do with me?" "Well, there's a rebellion on the island. The new High Commissioner has never done any political work and there are British troops being sent there since the situation is very delicate, and the French are sending les paras; you're a French speaker, you've been to the New Hebrides" (which I had, on some courier visit), "and you used to deal with it in Paris." I couldn't deny any of these things and I asked when they wanted me to go, and they said, "How about tomorrow?" So I said, "Actually, we've just bought a new house and we're moving into it on Saturday, i.e. in three days' time. I think it would be courting divorce to tell my wife with two young children under the age of four that I was disappearing to 12,000 miles away at

twenty-four hours' notice." So eventually we agreed that we would move into our new house on Saturday and, on the Sunday, we would leave as a family for the New Hebrides; which is what we did. It was a nightmare journey, particularly with two little children. It seemed to take days; indeed it did take about two and a half days. We had to go via Los Angeles, Hawaii, Fiji, New Caledonia and finally Port Vila in New Hebrides, where there was indeed a rebellion going on. The 42 Marine Commando were our forces there, who were deeply suspicious of what the French paratroops were up to – rightly so. It was suspected that the French had in some respects been supporting the rebels because the rebels were all francophone. The condominium had really split linguistically rather than tribally. This division between the francophones and the anglophones was felt very acutely. A bull-dozer driver called Jimmy Stephens, though he had an English name, was the leader of the francophones, and we suspected that the French Residency was supporting and indeed encouraging him.

So I was there for a few weeks, helping out. It is the most idyllic place; it's where James Michene set *Tales of the South Pacific*, of which the musical was subsequently made. It was a wonderful tropical paradise with active volcanoes, with cargo cults on the island of Tanna, where they worshipped Prince Philip as a God; the island of Ambrym, where bungee jumping was first conceived, except there the idea was that it was a manhood initiation rite where you had vines from the tree tied around your ankle and you had to jump from the top of the tree to the bottom. The idea was that the vines would protect you from smashing your head and killing yourself. Anyway, it's now done more scientifically with rubber! It must have been a fairly hair raising initiation rite.

It was a very colourful place, and we had magical times there.

MM: So that was some slight compensation for dragging your wife and children away from your mid-tour leave.

IR: When we'd done our duty there, we went back to Canberra and we were there for another two years, although my job had changed quite dramatically. While I'd been away, some inspectors had arrived from the Foreign Office and cut the

Minister Commercial's job, the Counsellor Economic and Commercial and the First Secretary Agriculture, and replaced all these people with me. So I left the Chancery and the Political Section and I became the new Head of the Economic and Political Section as a First Secretary. This meant that, again, not only had I responsibility for trade negotiations in terms of the Common Agricultural Policy, but I was also supposed to be the Agricultural expert, the Agricultural Attaché, going round the wheat fields of Australia able to predict what the output would be. That was quite testing. There was a group of Agricultural Attachés in Canberra, all of whom were agricultural economists or experts. We had a Russian, for instance, who was a world expert in animal husbandry; we had a South African who was an absolute expert in different grasses and could tell at a hundred yards the difference between a Kikuyu blade of grass and an alfalfa grass or whatever. They were seriously expert professional people. I had a very steep learning curve.

MM: It's astonishing that the Foreign Office should slash the size of the machine in that way. Was that still Labour?

IR: That was 1980.

MM: So it was Mrs Thatcher.

IR: Mrs Thatcher had just started, yes.

MM: Was there a feeling in the Foreign Office that these former Commonwealth Relations Office posts were over-staffed?

IR: Yes. That was the very strong feeling. When I joined in 1968, it was a month in which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office amalgamated and, as far as I was concerned, and it was purely anecdotal as I had no experience of it, it was felt they were over-staffed. But even so, it was a fairly radical cutback and it was one that the High Commissioner himself encouraged in fact. It was the only instance that I can remember of an inspection where the High Commissioner encouraged

the inspectors to cut more than they wanted to cut. But that was his particular style.

MM: Which particular High Commissioner was that?

IR: His name was John Mason. Anyway, as I say, I was the beneficiary of all this because it meant that I had a very wide and interesting portfolio.

MM: You had married an Australian diplomat; where did she come from?

IR: She was from New South Wales. Her father, actually, was a grazier in New South Wales so it meant that, if I needed advice on agriculture, I could ring him up and say, "Tell me what the difference is between a Santa Gertrudis cow and a Droughtmaster." He would explain the difference. What was involved was a mixture of Brahmin to the Durham Shorthorn.

Towards the end of my time in Australia, during the last few months in 1982, the Falklands War took place. I mention it only because I remember that led to a great frostiness between myself and my Agricultural Attaché colleague from Argentina; previously we had always enjoyed very cordial relations. I remember the day after the invasion I was at a reception at the Spanish Embassy and all my colleagues were asking me what we were going to do. I said, "Well, we shall send a task force of course and recover the Falklands." They all said, "Task force! But that's 8,000 miles; how can you manage that?" And I said, "Well, we will do it." On the way home that night, my wife said to me, "That stuff about the task force! Did you get a telegram from the Foreign Office saying this is what's going to happen?" "No!" I said. "Well, where did you get it from?" I said, "Well, I just made it up!" "Do you really think we're going to send a task force" "Of course not!" I said. "Way beyond our capability!" Anyway, the next day Mrs Thatcher made her announcement and a task force was duly sent, and my street credibility in Canberra soared!

MM: The Australians, I presume, were pretty solidly behind us.

IR: Yes. Some of them were almost cross that we were going to war without them. It was apparently the first time that Australian soldiers had not been involved in action with us since the Indian Mutiny; whether it was the Boer War, the First War, the Second World War, Korea. And of course they went into wars where we were not present, like Vietnam. But there was one letter we got in the High Commission which said, "You Brits really are the most belligerent race on earth. I will now list the wars you've been involved in." It started off with the Roman invasion and, for about the first thousand years, I thought this was terribly unfair; we were busy minding our own business in Britain when we were forced into war, whether it was Boadicea against the Romans, or the Norman Conquest. But as one got into the 19th Century, you began to think that he had a point because there seemed to be so many wars we were involved in in different parts of the world which can't have been entirely of other people's making. Anyway, that was a rare dissenting voice. And indeed the Australian Prime Minister made a promise, which he subsequently regretted, that he would not hold us to the purchase by the Australians of HMS Invincible; he said we would certainly be able to keep Invincible during the conflict and, if we wanted to keep her after the conflict, he wouldn't hold us to the contract which had been signed only a few months earlier.

MM: So did we keep Invincible?

IR: Yes.

MM: Very useful too! So that was a nice little interlude in Canberra.

IR: Yes, it was quite a long one.

MM: What about Anglo/Australian relations?

IR: Well, I was very lucky, of course, in having an Australian ex-diplomat as a wife. That meant that as she knew a large number of the Australian Foreign Ministry, it made introductions for me very easy. The access I had was extraordinary, not only in terms of being able to get information from people, but in terms of

physical access. I wandered round the Foreign Ministry without any control at all and one or two people thought I was actually a member of the Australian Foreign Ministry; they hadn't twigged that I was actually just visiting. I used to go there almost every day to drop in on by then my friends to exchange information and so on.

MM: A wonderfully close relationship. So back to the Foreign Office in 1982.

Return to News Department of the Foreign Office in 1982

IR: Yes, to a very different world. The Foreign Office was in bad odour with Downing Street for quite a lot of my time there. I was the Foreign Office Deputy Press Spokesman, Deputy Head of News Department. A large part of our difficulties stemmed from Bernard Ingham, the Prime Minister's Press spokesman, who enjoyed Mrs Thatcher's complete confidence and support and who would think nothing of bucketing other members of the Government or other Government Departments. Any sign of criticism or dissent was very heavily stamped upon.

I remember one epic occasion. We used to have these meetings of Information Officers from Whitehall, and I was the Foreign Office representative. These were chaired by Bernard Ingham. One day he was talking about an occasion when Mrs Thatcher had criticised Garett Fitzgerald, the Irish Prime Minister. She'd rejected some proposals he'd put forward for a New Ireland Forum, and it was known as her 'out out out' speech when she went through his proposals, saying, "Well, that's out! And that's out as well! That's out of the question!" This had undermined Fitzgerald's position and I think had been very damaging. So, when we were talking about presentation of Government policy, Bernard referred to this in passing and said, "Well, I think we've had a few difficulties but they're smoothed out." And I said, "Well, I'm not sure they are smoothed out. From the reporting I've seen from Dublin, it's done a lot of damage to Garett Fitzgerald who's one of our staunchest allies. Really, we shouldn't be doing anything to undermine him at the expense of the Provisional IRA or extreme Unionism."

Bernard huffed and puffed and said he disagreed; I stood my ground, but then we moved on to other matters and I thought nothing more of it.

Next morning, the Permanent Under Secretary's Private Secretary came into my office and said, "What on earth did you say at yesterday's meeting of Chief Information Officers?" I asked why. "I've just had Charles Powell, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, on the telephone saying that, at the morning meeting with the Prime Minister, Bernard Ingham said you'd roundly criticised her Irish policy!" I said, "Nothing of the sort! I wasn't criticising the policy; I was criticising the presentation, and that's what we were there to discuss as Information Officers and Press Officers. Otherwise there's no point in having the meetings at all." So I set out a full account of what I'd said, and the context in which I'd said it, and said that, if they didn't like that sort of comment, then I would send a junior member of the Department who would be prepared just to discuss the calendar and dates of speeches and things like that. Antony Acland, the Permanent Under Secretary, was extremely supportive and said that I'd behaved entirely correctly and that I should continue to go and express my views. On the other hand, he said, we must be careful of Bernard Ingham and that he could not be trusted.

MM: I'm sure that's right!

IR: So I was Deputy Head of News Department. Of course it was a very fascinating job because, while other parts of the Foreign Office had their crises, every crisis was News Department's crisis. Events like the Libyan Embassy siege, and the killing of WPC Fletcher, the banning of Trades Unions at GCHQ; the deaths of three Russian leaders in my years because one died every year, Brezhnev, then Shelepin, then Chernenko. I'd organised a briefing with the diplomatic correspondents after Brezhnev died to meet some of our Research Department experts on Russia and Soviet affairs. I remember one particularly graphic briefing with Martin Nicholson, one of our researchers, who said, "I'm sure he won't get the job this time round but he's really the brightest star in the firmament, he is a man called Gorbachev." This was I think 1982. Nobody had ever heard of him – nobody at all. And they said, "Who? How do you spell his name?" and so on.

And he duly didn't get the job – Shelepin then Chernenko got the job – but Gorbachev became head of some parliamentary grouping which brought him to London. That was when Mrs Thatcher famously said that she thought he was a man one could do business with. Anyway, within less than two years, he was top man. So again it was a very interesting time. It was also the time of the shooting down of the Korean airliner, which showed the Soviet Union in its worst light.

The aftermath of the Falklands War was ever present. When I arrived, of course, Carrington had resigned together with, I think, three other Foreign Office Ministers, including Richard Luce. Francis Pym's position was very exposed since Mrs Thatcher didn't think he was the right man for the job, although she'd appointed him. As soon as the General Election took place in 1983, she got rid of him in a very callous way which left him feeling very hurt and bruised, and she put in Geoffrey Howe who was keen to do the job; he was of course a complete contrast in style to Francis Pym. After a while she certainly made his life hell, particularly over South Africa. He was repeatedly sent on missions to Southern Africa to explain the merits of our policy over dealing with apartheid as opposed to everybody else's.

MM: Not to mention the EU!

IR: Not to mention the EU, which became her nemesis once she confronted both Howe and Lawson over that. That's a story for a bit later on.

So I did News Department for just about four years.

<u>Visit to Australia with Sir Robert Armstrong for the Spycatcher case</u>

I was there from September 1982 to the end of 1986. When I finished there, I had a brief interlude of six weeks in Sydney with Robert Armstrong for the Spycatcher case, which of course was again a Mrs Thatcher obsession, which went badly wrong; we lost at every conceivable level of the courts. We lost on appeal as well. Anyway, the main events would be the hearings in the Equity

Court in Sydney from late October or early November to December of that year. Although it was very pleasant to be in Sydney, it was a pretty disastrous time.

Anyway, when I came back, I'd changed jobs and I'd become Head of Counter Terrorism, known as 'Security Co-ordination Department' at the time.

Head of Security Co-ordination Department in the Foreign Office

MM: Do you have anything to say about that? It sounds a bit sensitive and important.

IR: Yes. I'm not quite sure how much I should say about that. I'd only been there a couple of weeks when Terry Waite disappeared. He had been warned not to go to Beirut, especially after the revelations about his involvement with Ollie North, which must have made him a big target. But he was very confident of his own invulnerability. He'd been warned that, if he were to go to Beirut, he must under no circumstances remove himself from the protection of the Druse, who were looking after him. But, in his attempt to secure the release of some American hostages, he accepted an invitation to visit some Shia doctor, I think, in West Beirut and he'd been told not to bring anyone with him. So he walked into the night. That was that for five years; a terrible error of judgement.

Anyway, that was a huge preoccupation in my early weeks and months. We twisted and turned trying to think of ways to spring him but there were no really good lines of intelligence as to where he was.

MM: Pretty well impossible!

IR: And Hizbollah, who held him, we subsequently found out, as we'd rather suspected, were moving him and other hostages very regularly, usually in ghastly circumstances, strapped to the exhaust of the car, that sort of stuff. And of course they never knew what was happening to them.

I think that much else which happened on that watch is probably best left with a veil over it.

MM: After that, you were posted to Spain.

<u>Posting to Spain as Minister and Deputy Head of Mission 1989-93</u>

IR: Yes. I didn't know any Spanish so I had to learn it from scratch. Knowing Italian and French, and having studied Latin it was no big deal. I went to Granada to do some language training with a family there, and then came to Madrid shortly before what subsequently became a really pivotal meeting; the European Summit, the European Council held in Madrid in May/June 1989. It was a few days after Howe and Lawson had fronted up to Mrs Thatcher together to deliver their ultimatum that she must warm up the language on British entry into the European Monetary System; her present language was clearly a device designed to put off any decision. So they insisted on language which was much more specific and much more forthcoming. And they made it clear that, if they didn't get their way, they would jointly resign, which would have created a huge Government crisis of course; two of her most powerful Ministers walking out. So, through gritted teeth, she accepted this. She flew to Madrid the following Sunday with Geoffrey Howe (the showdown with Howe and Lawson had taken place on the Thursday or Friday), and they were due with their entourage to come to dinner at the Ambassador's Residence. Anyway, the Ambassador met them at the airport and then got hold of me and said, "The Prime Minister isn't coming to dinner." I said, "Why not?" "I don't know," he said. "She's just announced that she wants to have sandwiches in her room with Bernard Ingham and Charles Powell, and that's that." So we had to rearrange the dinner. We sat down and Stephen Wall, who was the Private Secretary in the Foreign Office at the time and an old friend of mine, said to me, "It was a terrible journey. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary sat together in the front of the RAF plane that had brought them, and exchanged not a single word in the two and a half hour flight. Not a word!" So I said, "Was all this about the Howe/Lawson thing?" and he said, "Yes. She's absolutely spitting mad." So that was also a meeting that led to the Maastricht Treaty, and indeed discussion of the creation of a single currency. So it was quite a momentous meeting, but it was about as bad tempered a lead-up as

one could imagine. So that was an interesting start, and perhaps one of the highlights.

Gibraltar was something that had me fully occupied. It was one of those problems a bit like an iceberg of which most people see only the tip. In fact it was a huge problem in our relations across a very wide swathe and wasn't helped by the very aggressive policies and rhetoric of the Gibraltar Chief Minister, Joe Bossano. It was a big problem for us, but not one that surfaced in public that often.

MM: What did the Spaniards want?

IR: Well, they wanted sovereignty back essentially. But, if they weren't going to get it fully back, they were interested in some other proposals. I drafted a paper on shared sovereignty along the lines of Andorra, sort of dual sovereignty. But after the Ridley plan for the Falklands, which had been so heavily criticised and shot down, Ministers were very reluctant to stick their heads above the parapet so relatively soon after that.

MM: It would be difficult for them, I suppose. Had the Spaniards any idea how public opinion in Gibraltar itself might be moved in favour of Spain?

IR: Well, we tried to explain to them that, behaving as they did – and of course they'd been isolated by Franco for so many years – the Gibraltarians needed to be wooed and encouraged, not kicked and isolated. But this was a theological point which they could never accept. When you pointed out to them the paradox that here they were, arguing for the integration of Gibraltar into Spain, but they didn't seem to mind that Spain itself had two enclaves in North Africa, which might reasonably be integrated into Morocco. "Ah! That's different!" they would say. "Morocco didn't exist when we were occupying Ceuta and Melilla." That may have been the case, but if you allowed self-determination to play its part, there would be no doubt as to which way that would go.

MM: Argentina didn't exist when we settled the Falklands.

IR: No, although that's much more murky territory, I think.

MM: Very tricky. Anyway, we seem to have had a pretty satisfactory outcome in Gibraltar finally.

IR: Well, it's a sensible half-way-house at the moment, although I think it will be revisited at some stage. No Spanish Government will give up the idea of some form of sovereignty.

MM: Does that conclude Spain?

IR: Well, probably.

MM: Who was your Ambassador?

IR: I had two Ambassadors: Nicholas Gordon-Lennox at the outset for my first six or seven months, and then Robin Fearn, sadly both now dead. I was Minister there, so I had a general co-ordinating role as well, which was great fun. I greatly enjoyed visiting our consulates, seeing people in the front line who were dealing with eight or nine or ten million visitors a year. It's as though the whole population of London came to Spain each year! In some of those places in Palma and Tenerife the consulates had really tough times.

MM: With the British visitors.

IR: Yes. Ibiza and Magaluf, Playa de las Americas …

Posting to Belgrade as Chargé d'Affaires and later as Ambassador 1994-97

So that was Spain. Then I was asked if I would go to Belgrade. It was in the middle of the Bosnian War at the time; a very tricky time. I think it was clear to me that, if I'd said 'no', nobody would have held it against me or forced me to go. Circumstances were quite difficult in the sense that there were sanctions against

the regime in Belgrade and there were no international flights, so you couldn't fly anywhere or go anywhere that involved leaving the country. That was also very tough on our children who by that stage were all at boarding school.

MM: Did they come out for the holidays?

IR: They did, but they couldn't come into Serbia; they had to go to Budapest and then bus down, which made the whole process agonising.

MM: Was it safe?

IR: I didn't feel unsafe. I went into Bosnia quite a few times and that was rather different. When you were in Bosnia, you could actually hear the fighting occasionally.

MM: Where did you go to in Bosnia?

IR: I went to Pale sometimes to negotiate with the Bosnian Serbs. I often met them just over the border at a hotel, sometimes accompanying visitors from the Foreign Office, but mainly on my own. On one occasion I had to try to secure the release of British UNPROFOR soldiers who had been taken hostage by the Bosnian Serbs, and that was quite tricky because of course it did occur to me that one of their plans might be to take me hostage while I was there. There was no protection or anything to stop them doing so. Anyway, they eventually got out.

MM: Who, the UNPROFOR people?

IR: Yes. And I went to see Milosevic and impressed on him how much we needed the British soldiers out in once piece and, when I went to Bosnia to see the Bosnian Serbs, I said to them, "It's a matter of prime national interest and the consequences of any harm coming to them would be visited on the Bosnian Serbs if you do not release them." They got the message.

MM: Who were you dealing with?

IR: A whole range of war criminals, really; almost everyone I met was an indicted war criminal: Milosevic, Milutinovic, who was the Foreign Minister for much of the time and whose trial is going on now I think; Karadzic and Krajisuik also on trial now I think. Karadzic has disappeared, heaven knows where, but I suspect he's in some monastery somewhere; Koljevic who was the Bosnian Serb Vice-President committed suicide. Most of the people I dealt with are either dead, some by their own hand, in prison or on the run! Mladic, of course; I met him once. I thought he was actually deranged, but people say he's in Belgrade, but I don't know if that's accurate.

MM: What language were you able to use?

IR: Well, I used Serbo-Croat and English.

MM: Do you speak Serbo-Croat?

IR: I did; not very well because I had to learn it from scratch at rather short notice, but I learned enough to do business. I don't think any of the Montenegrin politicians spoke English, so I had to speak Serbo-Croat to them. It was hit-and-miss with the Serbs; Milosevic spoke good English, Djindjic spoke no English though we subsequently arranged for him to have some English language tuition through the British Council. We spent some part of every day speaking Serbo-Croat, although it was never called that; everyone called it his own variant. I said to the Bosnian-Serb Foreign Minister, whose name was Buha, when I first met him, "Shall we speak Serbo-Croat or French?" because I knew he spoke French. "Serbo-Croat" he said, in Serbo-Croat, "that language doesn't exist!" To the Bosnian-Serbs and the Serbs, it was known as 'Serbian'; to the Croats it was known as 'Croatian', and even the Bosnians joined in this nonsense by calling it 'the Bosnian language.' Of course they were all exactly the same language with fewer variants than between say, English spoken in London and that spoken in Lancashire. The whole thing was a farce.

MM: When you were talking to them, were you able to convey the idea that there was some military back-up for what you were trying to say to them?

IR: Well, we had a military presence.

MM: But was it credible?

IR: Well, it was there under a UN mandate, which had quite limited objectives and conditions, so there was no point in displaying weapons which were basically sheathed. Control of the military was not in my hands but in the hands of the UNPROFOR commanders in Bosnia. There was a dual command between the French and the British. Milosevic, for most of the time I was there, was actually doing his international statesman bit: "I'm trying to bring this war to an end." And I think he'd clearly decided after the rejection of the Vance-Owen Plan in 1992 that he would have to try to mend his fences with the international community and try to bring the Bosnian-Serbs to heel. The trouble was that it was rather like Frankenstein's monster, in that they were no longer under control. Karadzic and Mladic were not under control. The border was eventually sealed between Serbia and Bosnia and Bosnian-Serbs were not allowed to come into Serbia. Milosevic was I think genuinely furious with them for defying his wishes. He was humiliated at Pale. He had advanced the peace proposals, and the international community had backed the Vance-Owen Plan. He had taken the Yugoslav Federal President and the Montenegrin President with him and – the three Presidents and the Greek Prime Minister – all spoke in favour of the Vance-Owen Plan. Then one of the Bosnian-Serb political leaders, Mrs Plavsic, spoke against it, as did General Mladic, and the Bosnian-Serb Assembly rejected it. It led to a distinct cooling.

So Milosevic was happy to co-operate with the International Community, though not in a way which weakened his influence. There was a prolonged period of international negotiations in that period at the beginning of 1994, when I got there, until the end of 1995 when the Dayton Agreement was signed. After that, the implementation date, and the follow-up. I was often used by the international Contact Group as their reference point or point of contact with Milosevic, and the

instructions were sent to me and I would deliver them. I probably met him forty or fifty times over nearly four years.

MM: Even so, that's a lot of meetings. What did you think of him?

IR: I think he was a ruthless power-broker who was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. You couldn't think of him in other than negative terms. But my job was actually to get inside his mind and to find out what he was doing. However distasteful I found it, my job was to have a professional relationship with him, to find out what motivated him; and see what levers we could pull. In other words, I had to corral him to a pattern of good behaviour. This would work for a while, with a lot of carrots and sticks I suppose, the carrots being the removal of sanctions. We made some progress, but occasionally his autocratic style would break through as when he annulled the results of local elections which had gone against him, in 1996/97. Eventually I had a series of very stormy meetings with him, culminating in one in which he virtually threatened to expel me, to another where I said to him, "If you'd only listened to my advice throughout the four years I've been here, you wouldn't be in the mess you're in now." This led to a counter-blast, "if you are here to interfere in the affairs of Serbia, Mr Roberts, you are no longer welcome!" So it was a difficult passage, one that someone like an international negotiator like Dick Holbrooke wasn't subject to because he was an international figure who could fly out and fly back in again. My job was not to push things to the point where Milosevic expelled me as that would have made our position, in terms of influencing him, much more difficult. It was a careful balancing act.

MM: One gets the impression from the Holbrooke book about Bosnia that the Europeans were pretty feeble on the whole, whereas he was disposing real power and authority.

IR: Well, that is his take on it. His book is almost a caricature in a way, because every European is spineless, weak and hopeless and every American is one of the finest servants of the United States you've ever come across. The reality, of course, is very different. Holbrooke behaved like a latter-day Metternich,

endlessly wheeling and dealing and not entirely trusted by anyone, including and indeed especially perhaps by his so-called Allies. Certainly he was a very tricky customer, with whom I enjoyed perfectly reasonable personal relations but I wouldn't have trusted him. And indeed subsequent events demonstrated that I was right not to trust him. He was telling us one thing and doing something quite different.

MM: Is that something you know from your own experience of events or from his book?

IR: A bit of both. There was one example: I can't remember the details now but we were trying to negotiate some ceasefire in the Security Council and, at the same time, he was urging the Croats to continue with their offensive. Things like that.

Anyway, that was a very difficult time, not least because dealing with one's Allies was almost as tricky as dealing with the Bosnian-Serbs. And relations between the United States and Britain were very poor on the political front at the time.

MM: What about our relations with the French?

IR: They were correspondingly very good. Maybe there's a kind of automatic correlation between them. My French colleague and I were very close and worked very successfully together. Our German colleague was totally detached from what we were doing, and the Americans were playing their own game.

The other thing I would say about Holbrooke and what he did, and his criticisms of the Europeans, is that his agreement, the Dayton Agreement, built heavily on work which the various Europeans, including David Owen and Karl Bildt, the two EU negotiators, had been doing for years. It wasn't as though his plans came out of thin air. But there was no acknowledgement of their role; I thought that was particularly ungenerous.

MM: You then became the Ambassador.

IR: Yes. It didn't make much difference; same job, different title. The pay remained the same! Absolutely no change. I'd been promoted again by this stage, after I'd been in Yugoslavia for about six months when I was still called a Chargé d'Affaires so, when I became an Ambassador eighteen months later, it made no difference.

MM: Was there much of a diplomatic community?

IR: Yes, there were about fifty Missions. The problem with Belgrade at the time was that it was impossible to escape the atmosphere of war and conflict, so it was quite gloomy. There were problems of enormous proportions to be addressed every day and there was not much small talk. You could get exhausted by spending all day and every evening talking about something, the so-called National Question. The Serbs have an infinite capacity for talking about their problems and we all got drawn into it; very tiring after four years of it. I was originally promised that I would do only two years but, when it was extended to three and finally to four, I was very glad to go.

MM: That's understandable; it must have been very draining for you. So your next post was …

Sabbatical year at St Antony's College, Oxford 1997-98

IR: I then had a sabbatical year at St Antony's here at Oxford, as none of the jobs I was interested in doing next came up, so they said why didn't I have a break. So that's what I did. While I was having my sabbatical, I was called up by the Foreign Office a couple of times asking me to go back to Belgrade to see Milosevic as a personal secret emissary of Robin Cook, then the Foreign Secretary. I was to find out what he really felt about Kosovo, and after three hours' conversation it was clear he was determined not to allow foreign troops into Serbia because he believed that we were trying to dismember his country. I went back a few months later; there'd been a massacre, and I think he was decided on an aggressive policy in Kosovo then, to which I said, "Any aggression

in Kosovo will be matched by aggression by NATO and the West." I left him in no doubt as to what would happen. But he seemed curiously detached by then as though he'd already discounted all that. And so it proved. Anyway, that was the last time I saw him; it was July 1998.

So then I went back to Oxford after these short interludes, and I wrote a book called 'Conversations with Milosevic' which the Foreign Office initially seemed perfectly relaxed about my publishing. They then had another think and decided that they weren't going to agree, so it remains unpublished, although last summer they said they were withdrawing their objection; rather late in the day when Milosevic himself is dead of course. It may get published, but I don't know.

MM: That remains with the publishers.

HM Ambassador, Dublin 1999-2003

IR: After that, I went to Dublin. That was about a year after the Good Friday Agreement, so the expectation was that we were in the broad sunlit uplands and life would change forever. Typically, life isn't like that. The Good Friday Agreement soon got bogged down, as we know. It is only now that it is being successfully – apparently – implemented. But it was a difficult few years. I had four Northern Ireland Secretaries in my four years in Dublin, and I had much more interaction with the Northern Ireland Office than I did with the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office dealt with the EU work and that was about it; that was one of the major subjects still on the Foreign Office net. We were busily involved in Northern Ireland, and I used to go up and see people there or the Northern Ireland Secretaries often came down to Dublin to see their opposite numbers in the Republic. I had Mo Mowlam when I arrived, then Peter Mandelson – two radically different figures with radically different receptions in the Republic. Mo Mowlam was heroine-worshipped and, if she went for a walk in the streets of Dublin, people would come up and want to touch her garments as though she were Mother Teresa or someone. Peter Mandelson aroused no such sentiments and was regarded as far too Unionist, so the Irish were pleased to see him go. We then had John Reid for quite a long time, maybe two years; in the fact the

longest time he ever held a job! He was very good, and robust. And finally I had Paul Murphy who was delightful and very careful to be even-handed. He did a great job.

MM: Good name for a job like that!

IR: Yes. Anyway, it was slightly frustrating because the key decisions were made in Downing Street rather than even in the Northern Ireland Office, and they didn't make as much use of me as I would have liked. That's just a question of style, perhaps. No.10 wanted to keep negotiations in their own hands. But I felt somewhat frustrated and a bit like a trained interpreter in a room full of native English speakers. You felt that your expertise should be put to use when dealing with international negotiations. When you had dealt with the Bosnian-Serbs you ought to be able to deal with Sinn Fein and make sure that they didn't put anything across you. I think my overall feeling was that we made too many concessions to the IRA and the Good Friday Agreement itself was flawed. I think the real problem that undermined Trimble eventually was the IRA's unwillingness to decommission their weapons. I still believe that, from the IRA's point of view, the prime objective was to get their prisoners out and ultimately they would have been prepared to sign any agreement to get their prisoners out. So I think we had a much stronger card to play in terms of an articulated process: for every prisoner released, they would have to decommission, say, a quantity of weapons. So number one came out, so many weapons were destroyed. They could never pull the wool over our eyes because the whole process had to be completely transparent. I think that could have been negotiated because, for any terrorist organisation, it's fundamental to get your prisoners out. I think that you'll see, when the Spanish Government eventually has a peace agreement with ETA, that that same thing will come to the top of the agenda.

MM: Would they be switched on to that kind of negotiating tactic?

IR: I don't know. It's too early to say. But I remember, when I was dealing with terrorists, one of the main aims of the group who held Terry Waite and others was to secure the release of terrorist brothers in a Kuwaiti jail. Eventually, these

people were released when Saddam Hussein overran Kuwait, and that's really the point at which people like Waite lost their value for them and that's why they were released.

About my relations with the Irish Government: there was a leader in the Irish Times when I was leaving Dublin, 'Roberts moves on', and it was quite perceptive in that it pointed out that there were some in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs who would have been pleased to see me go as I was capable of saying things which they found hard to take in terms of frankness. I found that generally I'd had a very warm welcome in Ireland but some people in the Department of Foreign Affairs had a theological problem with the Brits. They were needled by comments that I would make, such as that we needed to look forward and stop scratching at the scabs of history; that slightly upset them! For some of them, scratching at the scabs of history was just what they enjoyed most.

MM: It is slightly alarming that our relations were being master-minded from Downing Street rather than from the Department, even if the Department was the Northern Ireland Office.

IR: I agree. I don't think the balance was quite right. And I think that we would have reached where we are to-day sooner, had we been more robust. I don't think there was any real danger of the IRA going back to war; this was held out as something we had to accommodate and was something the Irish Government was very keen on saying. Of course, it cuts both ways. The Irish Government was also keen not to see the IRA and their front organisation, Sinn Fein, becoming too powerful because they didn't want them to become too strong a force in the Republic. But it's interesting that Sinn Fein are doing awfully well in recruiting support in universities north and south of the border. I think it's partly the glamour of the whiff of cordite coupled with the 'we are not corrupt like the current Irish Government who have been involved in scandals over the years, from Charlie Haughey onwards.' They are able to project the clean-living image and they are very good at local politics. If you want your plumbing sorted out in your council house, Sinn Fein are your chaps. On the other hand, their economic

programme is barking mad; it's the sort of thing you would expect to be coming out of Pyong Yang rather than out of a modern western democracy.

MM: And yet Ireland has been doing so tremendously well.

IR: Exactly! Because they haven't paid any attention to the IRA or Sinn Fein's economic programme. I think that is what will ultimately keep Sinn Fein out of Government. They embrace a form of extreme socialism which the Irish have never been sold on and, while the economy continues to do so very well, I don't think they'll put it at risk by allowing Sinn Fein to get their hands on the economy.

MM: Well, one hopes not for their sake. So when did you leave Dublin?

HM Ambassador Rome, 2003-2006: valedictory despatch

IR: I left in 2003 and then went to Rome, which was in many ways my least demanding post, certainly as Ambassador. Mr Blair and Mr Berlusconi enjoyed such a warm relationship that bilateral problems were non-existent. If you did need anything done, the Prime Minister could just get it done. Berlusconi was very enthusiastic to accommodate Tony Blair.

MM: Why was that?

IR: It's just something about personal chemistry, I think. You can never explain these things. Berlusconi can be very charming and he's very funny. The two men nearly always spoke in French; Berlusconi speaks very good French and I believe worked in France for two years, and the Prime Minister's French is perfectly workmanlike; not as fluent or proactive as Berlusconi's but he's still well able to hold his own.

MM: That is interesting. I wonder how Berlusconi copes with the Americans.

IR: I think he gave a speech in English in Congress recently; I can't quite remember. By and large, Blair and Berlusconi spoke French.

MM: And of course you speak Italian, so …

IR: Yes, I met Berlusconi first in No 10, just before I'd taken over as Ambassador, so it was quite easy for me to make a good start.

MM: Did you speak to him in Italian?

IR: Oh yes. My Italian is better than my French but I would have wanted to speak in Italian anyway.

MM: Did you like Rome itself?

IR: Well, it's the most wonderful city; if you can't enjoy Rome, then you've got serious problems. I loved Italy. We travelled extensively and there are so many things to do throughout Italy. We had very few problems.

MM: It was a jolly good way to end your diplomatic career. Have you got any observations about the way the Foreign Office has developed over the years?

IR: Well, I covered a lot of this in my valedictory dispatch, elements of which appear in print from time to time.

MM: Who puts them there?

IR: In the system it is said that, if you send out a valedictory to all diplomatic posts, there are 4,000 copies of it around. Anyway, it caused quite a lot of comment; I've had lots of reactions to it from colleagues.

MM: What did you say?

IR: I think its two main messages were these: I think I regretted the way that management change has now become the most dominant item on the agenda; the second thing that flowed from that was that we didn't spend enough time on offering objective, and often unpopular, foreign policy advice to Ministers and the Prime Minister. One was partly a function of the other; the other problem was that our advice was neither sought nor welcome. This marginalisation of the Foreign Office was something that I regretted. There were many things that were clearly ripe for change, and change was massively for the better: the status of women in the Foreign Office was one thing. When I joined, women had to resign on marriage, and it was quite difficult for people to come back into the Foreign Office after maternity – all that sort of thing. All that is now changed, and women are very much encouraged. But although we can aim at complete parity of numbers and women in the higher circles, ultimately you can't force women to come back in after they've had a career break to have children or whatever; some of them don't want to come back. But you must make it as free and open as possible. That's one of the great changes that have been made.

But when I left the Foreign Office last September, I think there were thirty-four separate management reviews going on into various aspects of the organisation, and that cannot be right. It distorts the whole balance of the organisation if you are endlessly pulling the plant up by the roots. You have to say 'this is as far as we are going for the moment. We'll allow things to bed down. We won't look at anything in this area for five years, and see how it's gone.' That is the normal way of conducting business. But when you are buried under an avalanche of management reviews by less than impressive management consultants who are charging huge fees for their services, and then have to undergo follow-up Treasury-led reviews and things called 'skills audits' or 'capability reviews', 'zero-based reviews', 'comprehensive spending reviews,' exhaustion sets in together with a sense of demoralisation that you don't actually know where you are going to be, or if you are going to have a job, or what direction the Foreign Office is taking, I think it has been very negative.

I think the other failure has been to impress on people like the Treasury and the Cabinet Office that diplomacy isn't something measurable, like hospital waiting

lists, but you have to expect that diplomacy is largely a matter of failure, in the sense that it really is the ultimate Sisyphean task of pushing your boulder up hill while lots of other boulders are going down hill as fast as possible. I remember my earliest days when I was in Arabian Department, my Head of Department saying, "Dear boy, you mustn't think there is an answer to the Middle East question." Forty years on, there isn't one yet. In many ways, the answer seems to be further away. So it is a difficult task; very often we're not capable of finding solutions. How do you find solutions to the war on terror anyway? When do you declare the war on terror won? I don't know. Democracy in the Middle East? Well, that's something that will be debated for another thousand years, I think. There are plenty of other areas where we can't expect to see concrete outcomes, and I think we fool ourselves and delude the Treasury if we think that we can always reduce things to neat objectives which can be met.

I remember the first time this objectives exercise began I set myself a goal to bring the Bosnian War to an end, and of course at the end of the year I hadn't, so that was a total failure. These things are absurd and we really must put these things in proportion. I think we spend so much time trying to measure the unmeasurable that we don't allow enough time for those people who have good long-range diplomatic grasp to address questions such as Iraq, how we got into this mess and how we extricate ourselves. Those are the longer-term questions we ought to try to address.

MM: Do you have anything to say about the Iraq situation in particular?

IR: I think it was a terrible mistake. I believed in the argument about weapons of mass destruction because how could I know otherwise? I was told that it was the case and I thought that, if Saddam Hussein was preparing weapons of mass destruction, we ought to do something about it. But I was equally very uneasy about second-guessing Hans Blix, the Chief Weapons Inspector, who said he needed more time. I couldn't see the argument that to have troops there meant that Blix couldn't have more time. The argument that we had a build-up of troops, that we had marched our troops to the top of the hill, that we could not keep them there, that we could not march them down the hill again, meant that we had got to

do something. You should not take those decisions when you're putting the lives of your own soldiers at risk, as well as the lives of innocent Iraqis who have nothing to do with the regime. It is a terrible decision to take against the advice of someone like Hans Blix, a respected international figure, and against the wishes of the United Nations. I think at that stage I was very uneasy about the whole thing, but it was clear to me that Bush had decided to go ahead. I think that our supporting him was the biggest mistake made in the course of my diplomatic life. We have failed on every count: we have not unearthed weapons of mass destruction because, as we now know, there weren't any. We have brought terrorism where there wasn't terrorism. Al-Qaeda is now actively operating in Iraq when it wasn't there before. And this is I suppose the most painful thing – we have visited absolute misery on the Iraqi people. The brackets of those who have been killed is between 60- and 600,000. I don't understand how figures can be so wide, but at the moment the figures suggest to me that about 30,000 Iraqis a year are dying, so the figure would be maybe nearer 60,000 - but probably still be in six figures. 40,000 Iraqis a month try to get out of Iraq, which of course is what I would be doing if I were an Iraqi, and I think that what we are ultimately facing is partition. We were responsible for bringing three disparate Ottoman provinces together. Maybe we should preside over the re-division of Iraq.

MM; As you say, a reflection of the whole nightmare really.

IR: Yes.

MM: It is a very sad business that one's life-work should end on such a low note. I suppose it's in the nature of things, and we just have to do our best.

IR: As I was saying about diplomacy in general, it is a Sisyphean task; a task that one never anticipated one would be dealing with. I never anticipated the fall of the Berlin Wall or the recrudescence of nationalism in Eastern Europe, and I never thought that terror would take on the global aspect that it has done. And of course I never anticipated the problems of climate change. Some things remain eternal, however: the Middle East question for example. The development of the

European Union has been a relative success; unifying Europe both East and West is something I could never have imagined and is something I think we can rejoice in. So it hasn't been an unrelievedly gloomy picture.

MM: I am told that the Foreign Office have decreed that, when the Heads of Mission leave post, they shall no longer produce valedictory despatches. Have you heard that?

IR: Yes, I heard that. The timing is interesting but I don't think it reflected my despatch. I think it was a decision that had already been taken but my despatch was issued before any edict came down.

MM: Interesting thought! Well, I think we can conclude this interview. Thank you very much indeed, Sir Ivor.