

**BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

**RECOLLECTIONS OF JAMIE BOWDEN CMG OBE MVO  
RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS**

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**SR:** It's 22 August 2022. I'm online via Skype with Jamie Bowden.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Secretary, Republic of Ireland Department, FCO, 1986–88**

Jamie, the normal first question that we ask people is, 'Why did you join the Foreign Office?' But you had a rather unusual route to get to the Foreign Office? Can you tell me a bit about that, please?

**JB:** I started my career in the Army and in 1984 I got a posting to Egypt to be Adjutant of the British Contingent with the peacekeeping force there, the Multinational Force and Observers. I did a bit of reading up on regional history before I went and I was hooked. Soon after that four of us went to Jordan. We covered about 1,000 miles of Lawrence's routes: we did it by a camel and we were living with the Bedouin. It all sounds very Doughty and Lawrence and all the rest of it, but I was absolutely gripped by the Middle East. So I decided that I would only do seven years in the Army because, as an infantry officer, there were not many options for places in the Middle East. I decided that I would find another career with a Middle East focus. I was actually looking at the tobacco industry, not just because I smoked like a chimney in those days, but the big tobacco companies had offices with very extensive networks in the Middle East. So I thought this would be a good way to get back there. I hadn't quite got to the stage of starting to job hunt. We were having a General visit – I was in Shrewsbury at the time as a Green Jacket. A delightful Green Jacket General, now sadly dead, called David Mostyn. I sat next to him and he was asking what I was going to do when I left. When I told him, he said, 'I think you ought to speak to somebody I can put you in touch with in London.' And the next week I got a letter from the Foreign Office. I decided that the Diplomatic Service might have variety. I remember I went down to see Personnel Department. I had to almost force my way through the door. I explained that I was in the competition and would like to go to the Diplomatic Service. The first thing the person I saw said was that I couldn't enter the competition, because I wasn't a graduate. Luckily I had

read my Civil Service Commissioners handbook on the selection board carefully. And it did say that you either needed a degree or two years commissioned service in the regular armed forces. So I showed this to the person, they rushed off, came back and made a phone call to confirm I could do the competition.

So I went into the Office, not because I was interested in diplomacy as specifically to work in the Middle East.

**SR:** So you went to the FCO. Were you assigned a Department? Were you in a Third Room?

**JB:** Well apparently it was rather unusual. My intake was, I think, about 20 people. For the induction training, sixteen of us were the Fast Stream and four the Main Stream.

Interestingly – this was 1986 – the Fast Stream intake was exactly evenly split between men and women. It was still Oxbridge dominated, but it was 50/50 men and women. If you'd looked ten years later, I think you'd have found that, whilst most of the men were still in, quite few of the women had left, usually for the classic reasons in those days that they'd married someone and gave up their career for their husband's career and decided not to stay in. We actually did about six months' training that included a couple of months of French language training, some economics and some really good stuff on sort of politics and constitution in the UK.

And then I went to my first job in RID, Republic of Ireland Department. For a long time it had been a classic first job. I know quite a few people who've done that. It was an interesting department but, in some ways, I think it wasn't a good first job because it was so atypical. It was the smallest department in the office with a Head, a Deputy and two desk officers and I think four support staff. If you can imagine a triangle with London, Belfast and Dublin, the Northern Ireland Office did the London-Belfast side of it. The other desk officer in the FCO did the Belfast-Dublin bit of it and then I did the traditional Dublin-London link. So whilst a lot of what I did was to do with Northern Ireland, inevitably, I did the normal bilateral relationship. But, of course, the bilateral relationship in Ireland is so abnormal in some ways, because it's so extraordinarily close historically and personally. That first line of the 1949 Ireland Act is *Ireland is not a foreign country* and that rather sums up the relationship.

We had a very close relationship with the Irish Embassy. Quite a lot of the most useful business was done in the pub around the corner from the Embassy after working hours!

To this day, I think the Irish diplomats are some of the best I've ever worked with. As well as being really nice colleagues, they're also really high calibre colleagues.

And the sort of things we were dealing with, again, were quite atypical because we overlapped very much with domestic policy and domestic departments. A big thing on my plate was Irish prisoners, criminals in jails in the UK which, for one reason or another, took up a huge amount of my and the Embassy's time. I got to know the prison side of the Home Office very well. One of the very first things I did –and this was very unusual for the Office to be involved – was drafting legislation. At the end of the First World War, a trust had been set up (before Irish independence) to provide housing for Irish veterans of the First World War. And whilst the veterans, the ones who had these houses, even by then were mostly dead, quite a lot of their widows were still living in these houses. So, basically, it was a bit of an anachronism for the British government to be running a trust in the Republic of Ireland, for former service people from the British government. But, at the same time, we didn't want to leave them suddenly homeless. So we actually had legislation to hand all properties over to the government of Ireland, which had done its own legislation which would ensure continued tenure for the veterans and their families until they were all dead. So I remember sitting in the civil servants' box in the House of Lords: that was an unusual thing to be doing at the beginning of one's career in the Foreign Office. Quite a useful experience.

**SR:** Who was your Head of Department?

**JB:** Someone called Timothy George, who was a Sinologist. I really liked working for him. He'd been head of Chancery in Beijing before he came to RID. He was very capable. He had a reputation as a rather solemn character, but I didn't find that at all. He had a very lively sense of humour.

**SR:** Were you given help in learning how to draft and put up submissions and so on? Or was it learning on the job?

**JB:** Not from Timothy. But our Deputy was a very interesting character called David Barrie. A very likeable chap who was really supportive and helpful to a new entrant.

**SR:** So how long did you spend in the Republic of Ireland Department?

**JB:** 18 months. In terms of the politics, by Irish standards, it was a relatively quiet time. We were about a year after the Hillsborough Agreement. So the political relationship with Dublin, compared to what it had been at times in the 70s and early 80s, was better. And

Charlie Haughey was the Taoiseach for most of the time. Garrett FitzGerald was there for some of it. We were actually getting on reasonably well with Charlie Haughey, I think, better than at other times. On my side of it, the Northern Irish dimension probably was less ... I mean, it was a major part of the relationship, but probably less dominant than it had been for the previous couple of decades. The other great thing about being in RID, of course, was that it was easy to pop over to Ireland. So I think I went over two or three times, including to attend party conferences there. That was great fun because, of course, lots of young party activists were very keen, they were very friendly.

One thing I just would mention. You and I talk about the Third Room. When I was in Santiago, I used the phrase and got completely blank looks! It's an expression that's gone out of use. I think it must have done some time ago because there are people who've been in the Office for quite a few years and have never heard the expression.

**SR:** This is why it's good to explain these things in the context of this project, because although it's talking about the recent past, it's ancient history to many young researchers and historians!

### **Arabic language training, SOAS and Cairo, 1988-90**

So then it was time to do your Arabic language training. At that stage, they weren't sending people to the Army school at Beaconsfield or MECAS. You went to SOAS, didn't you?

**JB:** Yes, we were in a sort of intermediate stage. MECAS had closed for security reasons I think about two years before. Well, every year they would do something different for the Arabic language courses. They didn't have a set plan.

We did from October 1988 until June 1989 in SOAS but actually with a private company teaching us. SOAS was very good about allowing us to actually attend some of the lectures on Arabic and Arab Middle East issues. But it was a private sector company run by a chap called John Harding, who was an ex-MECAS teacher. So he knew exactly what we needed. There was a small team of all native speakers, Arabs living in London. Quite interesting because they came from different countries and they used to build in quite a lot of what was going on in their countries into the course. It was a good course.

The second part, which was really one of the high spots of not just my career but my life, was going to Cairo, again for about nine months in a private language institute which in fact was very good. They were the ones that took on all the Arabic teaching for a few years after that.

It was great to be in Cairo. As it is the major city of the Arab world, by far, historically, culturally, politically, it's the centre of gravity. So I felt very lucky to learn Arabic there, because when you're learning language, you're doing a lot of reading the newspapers and you actually learn a great deal about the current politics. Even though I knew I wasn't going to be working in Egypt, for the rest of my career having some understanding of how Egypt works and what goes on there was actually extremely useful. One of the things that was so brilliant about this place we learned Arabic was its much more relaxed and informal approach. So it was quite normal for them to say on Wednesday afternoon, 'Well the weekend is Friday and Saturday, so don't come to school tomorrow, don't come back until Sunday morning. There's no homework this weekend. But I want you to come and tell us about the price of meat in different parts of Cairo and do a bit of analysis.' This meant that the only way you'd be able to do this was to go out to different bits of Cairo, including some of the slum areas, speak to people in the street, speak to butchers, do a bit of research on the sort of supply chain for meat. It was the most brilliant way to learn Arabic. And to get to know quite a bit about Egypt. We used to do a lot of that.

At the weekends, I sometimes used to get on a microbus out to the villages of the Delta. The other thing I got very interested in was Islamic architecture which Cairo is brimming with. So I spent many weekends wandering around these mosques again which also took you into bits in the city you would never normally see. Egyptians are just fabulous anyway – they're the funniest people. So that really was a wonderful nine months.

**SR:** Were you staying with a family?

**JB:** We stayed in flats. Staying with a family can be difficult because of the men/women thing. So it was a flat: we each had a one-bedroom flat in a block. The owner of the block lived there with his family: they were very friendly so we saw them every day.

### **Deputy then Acting Consul General, Aden, 1990-91**

**SR:** So then the next stage was going to Aden. It must have been an interesting time!

**JB:** Yes, it was fascinating. The job had come up at short notice. I was posted as the DHM (Deputy Head of Mission) to the British Embassy in Aden. I arrived in July 1990. In May 1990, the former North Yemen and South Yemen unified so suddenly the Embassy became a Consulate General. So I arrived as Deputy Consul General with no one in London really quite knowing what the Consul General would do and what the point of it would be. The ex-

Ambassador/now Consul General was a super chap called Doug Gordon who was a really good Ambassador in a rather out of the way place. It seems incredible now but I think there were seven UK-based staff there.

I arrived in this effectively new country, the former People's Democratic of Yemen. It had been a Marxist state and a Soviet satellite – and a really nasty one. Every few years, they would have a civil war which could be unbelievably brutal, thousands of people could be killed.

There'd been a particularly horrible fight in 1986. We used to go running and lay paper trails, which was a popular thing to do. The British community was seven strong so we tended to do things together. There was one place just outside Aden where we used to go and it was just covered in human bones. It was where they'd taken all the bodies and just buried them in a shallow grave.

There were a couple of things that struck me. One was how many Yemenis showed their rejection of the old system by very ceremoniously and publicly reading their Koran, including staff in the Embassy. Other Brits in the Embassy said one of them at least was a bit of a worry, because we were pretty certain he had been the Party's man in the Embassy who used to pass on everything that was happening. The other thing that was extraordinary was how they viewed the Brits. We'd left in 1967 after a one of those really vicious wars of extraction from Empire. Horrible things were done certainly by the other side and, frankly, occasionally by our side as well. There's nothing like 23 years of a dogmatic Marxist government to suddenly make colonialism look quite attractive!

The reason he'd said that was that when I arrived about two months after unification, everybody was on a high. It was a very happy city. Quite quickly, though, people started to grumble. The plan was that Sana'a would be the capital city, but Aden would be the economic and commercial capital. So there was going to be massive investment into Aden: it's a natural commercial centre as it has a fantastic harbour and there was certainly plenty of business acumen amongst the Adenis. But it became quite apparent quite early on that what the government was actually doing was favouring other cities in North Yemen and money was seen to be going into those cities and not coming down to Aden. Quite a sensible thing they did was to deliberately muddle up the civil service, the judiciary and the armed forces and sent the northerners south and the southerners north, to try and bring it all together. One of the good things the Marxists had done was to greatly improve the position of women. It

was nowhere near equal, I don't know there were ever women on the Politburo, but a lot of the judges, a lot of senior academics and some of the people running state agencies in senior positions were women. And the northerners came down and that all suddenly stopped: women judges suddenly found that, whilst they were not actually sacked, they were never brought into court. So that caused resentment certainly amongst the most educated bit of the population.

The other thing in the south was that you hadn't had low level corruption under the Marxists – they were very hot on that. I think high level corruption may have been a different thing. But for the man in the street, they didn't have to pay backhanders every time they got a bit of paper. It was completely opposite in the north. So when the northerners came down and the ordinary man in the street went to get his driving licence or something, he found that he had to slip a few quid to the chap to do it. And in a society that's not been used to that, that made people very angry indeed.

So this sort of sentiment, I think, was really building and building. The most extraordinary experience I had was meeting with a senior official, Adeni but appointed by the President. He had been against the British in the 1960s. He never picked up arms against us, but was one of the leading political agitators. And he was sitting there with a chap who was his right hand man, who had been one of the leading trades unionists. The unions were one of the most powerful organisations looking to get rid of the British. They were both on the wrong side at independence. There were two groups: they, the more moderate group lost out, so they'd gone to live in Jeddah. They came back after reunification. I was sitting with this chap, having a very nice chat. He had a sort of glass wall looking out northwards over the harbour and then, on the far side of the harbour, you had the coastal plain going into the interior. And, bearing in mind that these two had been the ones who loathed the British in the 60s and wanted us to go, he suddenly said, 'If Aden decided to unilaterally declare independence from Yemen, what would be the chances of my looking out of this window that morning and seeing a Royal Navy frigate, with its guns pointing northwards?' And I said, 'Well, that's beyond my pay grade, but I don't think you should write that into your planning assumptions.' I think that, over the passage of time, suddenly British rule looked quite good. Certainly materially Aden was possibly the richest, most developed city in the Middle East towards the end of the colony, and they remembered that even if they didn't like the colonial system.

I do remember, when I left in October 1991 (I had been there for 15 months), the last thing I sent was a teletype to say that there was trouble coming. If the north didn't start to address these issues, you could feel the anger growing. I didn't predict that there would be a civil war only three years later, but I did say there would be some sort of unrest. That the situation wasn't tenable was clear.

The thing that put all of this off to the side was Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, which was about two or three weeks after I'd arrived. It was one of those things which, when you'd heard it on the World Service, you knew immediately that life would change from that day and that it would affect all of us hugely. The Yemeni government, despite what they said subsequently, essentially backed Saddam from the beginning. But this created another source of tension between north and south, because in the south the Ba'athists in Iraq had always had a terrible press, in a completely controlled press. Aden was one of the main refuges for Iraqi Communists, so there were quite a lot of them living there. And the controlled press every day would have stories about how dreadful Saddam was and how awful Iraq was, so that there was a widespread antipathy to Iraq. Conversely, they rather liked Kuwait. I think the reason was that even that ultra-dogmatic, Marxist government knew they needed one doorway to the wider Arab world and – I don't know why or how – but they hit upon Kuwait. So, funnily enough, the ultra-rich monarchy had quite a warm diplomatic relationship with South Yemen. That manifested itself in some generous aid programmes as well. I remember when you drove around Aden there was a Kuwaiti hospital and a Kuwaiti this and a Kuwaiti that. I think there was a generally positive image in people's minds of the Kuwaitis. So you had this tension with the north backing Saddam and this was not just the government, there were huge pro-Saddam demonstrations right from the beginning, whereas in the south people were much more equivocal. So we, in the Consulate General really barely had a role. We did our contingency planning because it became obvious from the beginning that they would be pushing the invaders out at some point. We evacuated most of our staff. We were down to just me plus one.

Oh, sorry, there's one thing I should have mentioned. I'd only been there three months and Doug Gordon, the Ambassador had already been found another job as the High Commissioner in Georgetown. He was due to leave, I think, in September and they found a successor. The successor refused to come out, because he didn't want to come to what he thought might be a dodgy zone. So I suddenly found myself three months in with my own post, which I had the rest of the time I was there. A great experience.

We were doing our contingency planning. One thing that we were asked to do by MoD was to send back reports on Iraqi tankers in the harbour. The Yemeni government had said they'd be happy to host them as they couldn't go back to Iraq because of sanctions. We were told to do it overtly. All the other Europeans were doing the same. So every morning I'd be there with my German, French and Italian colleagues, with our binoculars, deliberately being seen so that nobody could accuse us of spying, trying to distinguish the details of one tanker from another.

Once I'd been doing this on my own. I was coming back into the city from one of these visits – it was a bit offshore, not the harbour. I noticed a taxi driver parked up nearby. It was quite common in authoritarian states for taxi drivers to be informers. There happened to be a police station at the first set of traffic lights I stopped at. The taxi suddenly swerved in front of me and braked. The driver ran into the police station shouting, I was taken into the police station despite having diplomatic plates. I had my binoculars and they searched the car. I told them they shouldn't really be doing that as I had diplomatic plates on the car. Actually they weren't threatening and I didn't feel any way endangered. They held me for about an hour and gave me a cup of tea. The taxi driver was walking around preening himself, obviously very pleased. He kept saying *jasoos* which means spy in Arabic. Then they decided to let me go and that was the end of it.

So we had got to the stage where we were waiting for things to happen in Kuwait. We ran a bar at the Consulate General. Anyone could come apart from Yemenis (because the Yemeni authorities wouldn't allow that) and people from the Eastern bloc (for security reasons). We were determined to keep this thing running as long as we could, so we opened twice a week. It became a sort of focal point for the foreign community. It was useful because some of these people worked in places where they were picking up gossip which was good for us to know, not least in terms of contingency planning.

What was very interesting was that whilst the southerners had been sympathetic to Kuwait and quite often you'd have conversations with Yemenis whose main source of news was the BBC Arabic service, in which they had a huge degree of trust, they'd totally dismiss what the Yemeni state media was putting out. Until the first Western bombs started to fall and opinion flipped almost overnight. There were two or three young academics I was quite friendly with and even people like that suddenly said that when the BBC said one RAF aircraft was shot down and the Iraqis said ten, the BBC was propaganda.

We'd obviously had plenty of time to prepare for this moment and we'd set up a radio network. I should say there was no national telephone system in Aden. You had to rely on radios or just going to see people which was great for quality of life. So we set up an EU radio network. There were two Canadian oil companies there too, so we set up a radio network with them. BP had just started operations there. It was an unusual office: lock and leave but with the highest security threat rating for both espionage and terrorism. We had quite sophisticated cameras by the standards of the day, so you could sit in one room in the Embassy and see the screens and move the cameras around. We also had something like 400 days' worth of military rations in the Embassy in case of another civil war. So we knew we could withstand a very long siege if it came to it. The other chap with me was our Consul, a wonderful chap called Andy Goodwin. He was big north country man, a brilliant organiser and administrator, very charismatic. So we'd set up our little sort of control room in the middle of building and we could watch over the wall via these cameras. We knew we had the food there and we were all ready to go. We'd worked out a plan of how, when the masses scaled over the walls, we were going get up onto the roof to pull the flag down and clutch it to our breasts as they came in! We got the telegram in the middle of the night that the war had started. We were living in flats in the compound so we both went straight to this room. We waited. All was quiet. At about six o'clock in the morning, a crowd gathered on one side of the compound. And it grew. And then a bus came, stopped and everyone got on and disappeared. That was it.

It became very apparent that the war really wasn't a threat to us. There was one big demonstration downtown organised by Palestinians. But it came nowhere near us. A BP chap had stayed behind. He tended to arrive with us in time for breakfast. The day's work was done in about half an hour because there was nothing more than we could really do. We read all the telegram traffic which was fascinating, but we didn't have an input. Then we'd go for a walk down the beach and do a bit of bird watching or something and then just watch a couple of videos in the evening.

I still had about six months in Yemen after all that finished and I did want to get around the country as much as I could. There were a lot of places down in the South that no Brits had actually been to since 1967. The Marxists had required a permit to leave Aden and they very often wouldn't give you one. After unification all that stopped. The good things the Marxists did: women, security, you can travel safely around the countryside. There was almost no crime. Actually primary and secondary education was quite good and primary health care

was good. I wanted to get up to the Omani frontier because I knew there'd been no British official there since 1967. I went with my then wife. We drove and after about a day and a half you're off road with the most stunning scenery. We did get to the Omani border and looked across it. But there was a British vet working in Sana'a for the ODA. He got there three days before us on a government cattle vaccination programme, so I was only the second Brit to get to the Omani border!

When you're travelling in Yemen, you get shot at wherever you go. In the south, they're just saying hello to you but in the north, you're never quite sure if they're just saying hello or trying to kill you! This is just an anecdote, but it's one of my favourite ones. Because the mountains are so close to Aden, at weekends you could drive on the one good road along the coast and then just drive up any *wadi*. You'd soon come to a track and, within a couple of hours, you'd be in some village where they really hadn't probably seen a Westerner since 1967. No electricity or running water or anything like that. But they all had a pub because the Marxists were okay with beer. There was a brewery in Aden which was very good, a Czechoslovak development project. It had a German brew *meister* and produced this wonderful beer. So you had villages with no running water or electricity but you always had a pub, actually a container, with a little generator running a fridge with the Sira beer that came up from Aden. As a diplomat, I found this brilliant because you could go and chat in these 'pubs' in the run up to the Iraq War and get opinion on the ground about what was going on. It was slightly disconcerting, because weapons had to be left outside, so there were all these AK47s leaning against the side of the container.

Anyway, I was driving up to one of these villages and suddenly a bullet shot off the track in front of me. A Yemeni came rushing down towards me with a rifle. I thought I'd had better not try and drive away from this one. The worst he could do is take my Land Rover, which wouldn't be the end of the world. I waited and he threw himself up against the side of the car and said in a broad Scouse accent, 'Are you British?' I said I was. He replied, 'Thank God. The battery's gone on my radio and I can't get the World Service. Do you know if Liverpool won on Saturday?' It wasn't that unusual an experience, because particularly in the 1950s, a lot of Yemenis migrated to the UK for work. Many went into heavy industry so they went to Sheffield, Liverpool and there were much older Yemeni communities elsewhere. The ones who had crossed in the 50s tended to integrate with the white British communities and sometimes intermarried with them. When they retired, they also quite often went back home to their villages in the mountains in Yemen. So this is why it really wasn't unusual to bump

into someone up in these remote villages speaking with a broad Yorkshire accent and sometimes bumping into a Yorkshire woman, born and bred in Sheffield, living up in these villages quite happily.

The only frightening experience I had was travelling in the north, I suppose in the summer of 1991. We were on one of the main roads that runs north-south, north of Sana'a. We were going up the hill round a blind corner. Suddenly a pickup behind me swept past. I thought it was maniac driving. Then they thumped into the side of our car and pushed two wheels over into a storm drain at the side of the road. They stopped in front of us. I was quite cross and got out. There were two chaps sitting in front with their Kalashnikovs between their knees and two in the back. So I just thought I'd let that one ride. They scowled at me and drove off. About a minute later, a police car came around the corner so I flagged it down. I knew there was a checkpoint about five miles down the road so I explained we'd just been pushed off the road by a pickup and suggested that they radioed ahead to the checkpoint. But they weren't going to get involved. Fortunately, a very kind person in a truck came past and pulled us out. And we were fine.

The only food in Aden that never ran out was eggs. But there were days when there was no bread when there wasn't enough flour for the bakeries. Onions you could always get: they had big onion farming projects. But any other sort of fruit and veg was there some days but not on others. There was a Soviet era, duty-free supermarket, with miles and miles of empty shelves, not much in the way of food and these wonderful 1950s type transistor radios that they were still selling.

The other thing that was extraordinary about Aden was that it was a time warp: quite a lot of things were exactly as they had been in 1967. And it was a bit like Dubai at that stage, because all of the liners coming through the Canal and going on to India and the Far East used to stop and bunker in Aden for the duty-free. All the passengers would buy their Rolexes and Kodak cameras and jewellery and whatever else. So you had all of the old enamel signs you used to have for products in the 50s ... Kodak cameras, cigarette brands. There was a military tailor. A lot of the population were of Indian descent and there was a tailor who had pulled down the shutters the day the British left. He was a friend of a senior local member of staff so he gave us a tour. It was amazing, because you had these big wardrobes in the back where the uniforms he'd been making for British officers were still hanging. He had everything from a nearly complete Guards barathea Number two dress

khaki uniform with all the buttons and things waiting for final fitting through to things that hadn't the sleeves put on. It would have been a military collector's dream world, because all of the badges and flashes and badges of rank of the units that were in Aden in 1967 were still there. In one of the civil wars, he'd had a tank shell that had come through the front. Fortunately, it hadn't detonated. Otherwise, it was completely untouched. A very surreal place. But a lot of fun although in terms of a Foreign Office career, probably a bit of a sideline. A great place to start off.

### **British Embassy, Khartoum, 1991-93**

**SR:** Your next posting was Khartoum. Did you ask to go there?

**JB:** Personnel were actually very kind. What happened was we had an inspection in Aden. The team was led by Ian Lewty who recommended that the post be downgraded to LE (locally engaged) staff only and it was purely going to be a commercial office because we still had hopes for some commercial prospects. POD (Personnel Operations Department) offered me three jobs: one was Riyadh, one was Khartoum and I can't now remember where the third one was. I actually quite wanted to work in Saudi because it's such an important country. But any Arabic speaker is going to do a tour in Saudi at some stage as it's the biggest Embassy by far in the region. Whereas Sudan is something completely different with an interesting history. So I opted to go for that.

It was an unusual move for two reasons. One is that the Office had at that time four grades of difficult post. At some point in the late 80s, they created a new thing called SDPA, Special Difficult Post Allowance for six posts that they felt were outside the rules they'd used up till then. Two of which were Aden and Khartoum so I must have been about the only person to do a direct move from one SDP to another. Secondly, it was another no telephone post. There was a sort of moribund phone network and I had a phone in my house. Occasionally you could make calls but it was very difficult. If you wanted to call the UK, there was a satellite phone in the Embassy. For some reason from my office I could always get the American Embassy. That was about the only place. Otherwise, everything was face to face.

Just in terms of the nature of the work, it was one of my favourite jobs in the Office, because it was really old fashioned diplomacy insofar as it was basically 100% doing political work, as a Second Secretary. And because there was no phone network or anything, you actually tended not to be able to make appointments and things. So my days were, frankly, quite quiet. You got people just turning up in the Embassy, wanting to have a chat. You might see

other diplomats. But my working day actually began at about six o'clock in the evening because that's when you did all of your networking and your contacts. There was a sort of a system which we all understood. By six o'clock in the evening, you had to decide whether you were in or out for the evening, because if you weren't out by six, people would start turning up at your front door and you'd end up hosting people. I had a cook and we'd have some food ready and you would end up in a house full of people. But if you wanted to go and see people, you had to be out by six, otherwise you would get stuck at home. You would just turn up and if the person you wanted to see wasn't home, well you'd just keep going until you got to the house of someone who was in. It worked. The Sudanese are the most laid back people on earth. In a way, this is why Sudan is such a mess as they'll put up with things. I used to think sometimes if you tried to treat the Yemenis in the way that the Sudanese government treated Sudanese, there'd be a revolution on the spot. The Sudanese are incredibly long suffering. Very highly educated. Almost everyone you spoke to in terms of political contracts was bilingual. And they're incredibly open – it's a very open society.

It was at a time when our relationship with the Sudanese government was at absolute rock bottom. Omar Al Bashir had just taken over in a bloodless coup, I think about four months before I arrived. Now, classically, in an Embassy, the overwhelming majority of our contacts were liberals, academics, people who lived in the UK so thoroughly unrepresentative. They all said, 'Don't worry, you're only going to have three or four months of this chap and then we'll get back to a democratic government.' Well of course he only got kicked out two or three years ago! At that time, he was pretty much a figurehead and the real power behind the throne was a chap called Hassan Turabi who was immensely well-educated: he'd been to both the LSE and the Sorbonne, fluent in French and English. But he was a radical Islamist. I don't know where in current terms you'd put him on the spectrum although I don't think he ever advocated violence. But he had this vision of a recreated Islamic empire from the Atlantic to the East Indies, in which Sharia law would prevail. Very hostile to the West, but perfectly accessible. I used to go with the Ambassador to see him fairly regularly.

**SR:** Who was the Ambassador?

**JB:** Allan Ramsay. A really great Ambassador. I think he died earlier this year. He was quite Edwardian which was both good and bad. He was quite remote and hierarchical. He'd also been in the army for quite a long time before he joined the Office. So what was good was that he was an incredibly strong leader. Although he was aloof, he was immensely

supportive. What he was brilliant at, if he thought London wasn't giving us the attention needed in a very difficult environment, he really did used to go in all guns blazing and always won his battles. So he was very highly regarded in the Embassy. He was very honest and very straight. I used to love going to see Turabi with him, because Turabi was a highly intellectual character, quite charismatic, but he would sometimes try to weave an intellectual trap for Allan to fall into and Allan never ever did. On occasion, Turabi trotted out some line. The Sudanese had done something bad and we knew it from intelligence. They knew we knew, but it was one of those absurd situations where we couldn't actually say it explicitly. Turabi tried to play this back against Allan, probably knowing Alan couldn't just say, 'Bollocks!' Allan was brilliant. He just looked Turabi straight in the eye and said, 'You know exactly what I'm talking about, Dr. Turabi'. It worked and it just put Turabi into his box.

I had this wonderful access to all these people. In those days, Sudan was still one country. I was trying to keep in touch with the government, obviously, and the former parties from the democratic periods which still existed, and still had a hierarchy. Sudan has got a very strong Sufi tradition. The parties were aligned with different Sufi groups as much as particular political positions. And then the southern leadership who were there. So what I would tend to do for example on a night trying to catch up with southerners, you would go to a southerner's house. And if they weren't in, you'd go to another southerner's house, or one of the political parties and try and get around it like that. What would tend to happen too is because you were trying to meet some southerners, other southerners would start coming in and you'd end up with quite an interesting group of people there. What also happened sometimes is that if the host was reasonably wealthy, he might send his driver out to get some friends and tell them that he had the British Embassy at home that night. Very helpful. It was also very striking that when I had a night in and people started turning up, without any planning that I was aware of, they tended to be a group of southerners or left wingers would turn up or whatever. Not always and, in some ways, the best evenings were where you had a mix of them. So I really went to the office to write reports rather than anything else. It was a fantastic working life.

Turabi had a cadre of young, very bright men. Ideologues, almost all of whom I think had been to university in the UK. Delightful people to sit down and have a meal or a coffee with. I used to see quite a lot of them. When we talked about politics – and they may have said it

in the most smiley, cheerful way – but what they had to say was quite frightening. They advocated a very rigidly Sharia-governed empire.

There was a parliament of sorts, they had MPs, so it was quite easy to get their side of the story. I've always been less convinced than I think most of our colleagues about the benefits of sending people to British universities ever since that experience where the intellectual drive of this movement was almost entirely the product of British universities. Not the first time in history that's happened, I'm sure, but I don't think it did us much good that they became so good at doing what they were doing at that time.

It was very difficult to see outside the capital. The first year I was there, we needed permits to travel outside very often as there was no fuel outside the big cities which were far apart.

I saw a reasonable amount of the south, but only on government-organised trips. That was the only way you could do it. The distances in Sudan are huge and the civil war was still going on. So on some of these trips we were being deliberately taken us to places where there had recently been a battle to show diplomats it was all peaceful and quiet. But the evidence of very recent battles was certainly still there.

One of the most moving and memorable things I did in Khartoum was visiting the camps for the displaced people. These were almost all from the south of Sudan and maybe some from the west, who had been displaced by the civil war and had moved up to Khartoum. They were huge. I've got a memory that there were 2 million people in these camps. It was the sort of place you went to and wondered how human beings could survive. They were in the desert outside the city. They were living in crude shelters, twigs holding up bits of flimsy cloth or plastic sacking. There was really almost nothing there. Donkeys with carts went around to give them water. I think nearly all the food was from charitable organisations.

One of our main focuses there was dealing with the British NGOs and some of the international NGOs. What they were providing was keeping people alive. It was brutal because the government periodically would just clear these camps. They would literally drive a bulldozer through. Sometimes these people didn't even have time to get what tiny amount of possessions they had. And they would usually be pushed further out into the desert and further away from the city.

I'm not actually religious at all, but one of my closest friends there was a Catholic missionary, a Scotsman called Paul Boyle, who actually became my son's godfather. He was from an

order called the Mill Hill Missionaries who were mainly Scots, Dutch and Irish. They were the most remarkable men (although I would have to say they weren't very good Catholics as quite a lot of them had girlfriends). Khartoum was dry, so they found that quite an ordeal. I used to keep an open house for them. Some of them were working down in the war zones so when they came up to Khartoum, all they wanted was a beer or quite a lot of beers. On more than one occasion, I came down in the morning to find a number of recumbent Catholic priests lying around in my sitting room, with pyramids of empty beer cans.

Paul used to alert me when there was a clearance going on. I had no problem driving out from the city to these camps. I was never obstructed. There were a few soldiers and policemen around. I've lost the photograph now, but they had built a very rudimentary mud brick church and a bulldozer had driven straight through it. So I took a picture of him standing exactly where the altar would have been. It was a very nasty regime then, doing very nasty things but unlike most of these situations, as a diplomat, you could actually go and see first-hand what was going on.

Security-wise, leaving aside the fact that while I was there, Osama bin Laden was a fellow resident in Khartoum (I never met him) we did have one excitement. The country is divided into nine states, a federal arrangement. One of the southern states' Khartoum office was just opposite my house. We were home one day and a riot broke out on the street outside. It got quite exciting when they started turning cars over and setting fire to them. The Ambassador had a military police close protection team. So we called them on the emergency radio network and said it was probably a good idea if we got out of the house. In Khartoum nothing much really happened and these military policemen got quite bored. So all their birthdays came together, suddenly being told to drive through a route of burning cars and extract us from the house. Being Sudan, as we drove past all these burning cars, all the rioters gave us a big smile and cheery wave as we went past! A very Sudanese episode.

You'll have picked up I really did love Sudan.

### **Head of Political Section, UN Department, FCO, 1993–96**

**SR:** After all the excitements, the responsibilities and the sheer joie de vivre of being in a difficult post, I think I can see why you said in your notes that going back to the UN Department in FCO was the least favourite job of your career. It must have been quite a shock to the system.

**JB:** Yes it was. I always had a slightly batty view of the scale that we all sat on in the Foreign Office, at one end of which you'd have the hardcore policy wonks and at the other the people who were sort of interested in the culture and political systems, other countries and living in other societies. Most people sit somewhere near the middle and, frankly, the best people sit in the middle and they are very strong actually at both of those things. But there are some of us who are right at the end – I would put myself right down at the ‘seeing the other’ side which always interested me. UN Department was pure policy, really. It didn't play to my strengths, frankly, and it's just not what I enjoyed doing. So I did find that a real grind, that two years. It was a sort of briefing submissions factory.

I took over from someone called Sally Hinds, who was a contemporary of mine. Sally gave me a folder entitled Security Council Reform. She said that it would involve possibly taking on some extra permanent members, maybe enlarging the Council and would probably be my main issue for the first year and then it would have gone. She said that in 1993, it's now 2022 and that debate has no indication whatsoever of coming to a conclusion. It became apparent very early on that it was going to be incredibly difficult because by definition, something that pleased the Indians was going to be opposed by the Pakistanis, who had a very significant lobby in the General Assembly, something that pleased the Brazilians was going to be opposed by the Argentinians and probably the Mexicans. And so on. It did look like an insoluble issue even then.

I did have some superb colleagues. My boss was Glynne Evans, the legendary Glynne who was very delightfully eccentric. I've never known anyone as dedicated to the job as Glynne was. When I say dedicated to the job, it wasn't just dedicated to delivering for ministers of HMG, she actually had a real heart for the UN. It was quite a personal thing. That did come down to us. There were a couple of very strong Deputy Head of Departments: Richard Clark was my first one, and then Tim Morris.

**SR:** It strikes me, Jamie, that you always speak well of your colleagues, unlike some of the subjects I've interviewed for this project who have been, well, vitriolic.

**JB:** The people I've spoken well of, I mean it. There are one or two colleagues I haven't mentioned. And there are one or two particular aspects that I wouldn't mention. Sometimes, when you're overseas, you get to know people, personally and their families and there are some interesting stories which I would never dream of talking about. They may all come out in the fullness of time! But, all of that said, I've had one bad boss and I won't say on record

who it is. They were very good at the job but they were an absolute nightmare to work for. We all found that. It wasn't just me.

People might be able to infer things from what I don't mention!

**SR:** Very diplomatic.

### **First Secretary, British Embassy, Washington, 1996–99**

**SR:** Moving on to Washington, were you given a choice?

**JB:** I can't remember exactly what the system was. I think it was competitive bidding, you didn't do interviews or anything. I bid partly for personal reasons. My then wife was British but had been born in the US and she had had family living in Washington and spent some time there. She had very happy memories.

My tour in Washington wasn't a great success. I wasn't the right sort of person for a very policy heavy job in those big Embassies like Washington and Paris. I did feel that eventually I got into my stride, but it was really challenging. Probably my most difficult job in the Office. I covered the Middle East but also, for some reason, counterterrorism policy. Probably because so much terrorism at that stage was Middle East based and Islamic world based. If you actually look at the weighting for that portfolio, it was absolutely massive.

**SR:** Who was the Ambassador?

**JB:** John Kerr when I arrived, then Christopher Meyer. I never really saw so much of John Kerr. Christopher Meyer I saw quite a lot more, particularly towards the end of my tour. Both supremely capable men, utterly different in style and everything else, but brilliant Ambassadors.

And my boss when I arrived was Tom Phillips. After that it was John Sawers. Again, two completely different people. I learned more in that tour than any other stage in my life, I think. What Tom taught me was attention to detail and lateral thinking. Tom is like a terrier with an issue: he'll work at, he'll gnaw at it, he'll look at it from lots of different angles. It's a very good discipline to learn. I don't pretend I ever got anywhere near the quality of analysis he could do and his focus, but he was brilliant. And then John was the ultimate sort of Private Secretary, really prioritising ruthlessly what mattered, absolute razor focus on outcomes. Put those two together and it's a very great deal. The other person I learned a lot from was my colleague Simon McDonald, doing the bilateral job. Just from chatting to him

sometimes. Simon probably had no idea about this. But, you know, talking about meetings and listening to how Simon was going about meetings. Actually, I learned a great deal from that ... the thought process ahead of a meeting and how he was going to handle a meeting. I used that for the rest of my career.

The downside of my job was it was so heavily loaded. The upside was that, in some ways, it was the best geographical region, because the Middle East, of all the areas, was one where we were operating sometimes as equals of the US. There were some other places, for example Commonwealth countries, where that would apply. But in the Middle East we were the absolute rock solid allies. We were with them at that time militarily, we were doing flights over Iraq as they were, we were the rock solid allies on the Security Council.

I always got the feeling the American system isn't good at coping with more than one big issue at a time. Take Iraq, for example. The ongoing problem was that the sanctions regime was gradually eroding. For a lot of the time, I felt we were almost leading in policymaking. London would come up with an idea, I'd go and put it to State and the next day State agreed. That happened particularly on Iraq, sometimes a bit on some other areas of policy. Until there was a crisis and Iraq suddenly became the issue. So the classic one was the Americans decided they were going to do a strike on Iraq. And then things moved with incredible speed. One saw this unimaginable amount of force being moved across the globe. Out of courtesy, we would be told what was going on, but we certainly weren't even in the decision making process. And then, suddenly, things would go back to normal.

I do remember one occasion, but I can't remember the issue. They had done something on Iraq and they'd blindsided us. Malcolm Rifkind was really upset and he wrote to Warren Christopher, the Secretary of State at the time. It was quite a blunt letter. I do remember that. He got an almost grovelling apology back from Warren Christopher. It was a great relationship to be working on.

If it was Israel, they were very good at keeping us informed. But we kidded ourselves we could have influenced American policy. The most interesting relationship issue was Iran, because the Europeans and the Americans were in a different place. The Americans were much more hawkish than the Europeans. I can't remember the exact issue but it was Iranian misbehaviour in the region and Iranian complicity in sanctions busting in Iraq. The Revolutionary Guard were making quite a lot of money on sanctions busting. Our national position was somewhere in between European doves and the American hawks, so our value

was we were the only people that the Americans felt could reliably transmit their views to the Europeans. They found it difficult to have a really useful dialogue with the Europeans either as the EU or individually. We could speak completely openly and frankly and it helped that we were seeing the same intelligence. That did make life easier. So we started from the same place and they would trust us to pass messages to the Europeans and interpret the American position. I always cited that as a classic example of why Brexit would actually diminish our position in America, because that vital role won't apply any more.

One other fascinating thing. The Clinton administration, I think, was probably more joined up than was historically normal, but still much less joined up than Whitehall tends to be. Partly that was a function of size. On any significant policy issue, if London asked for a report, you had to do all three of the White House, State and the Pentagon because otherwise you just wouldn't have the full picture. With the Clinton administration, you did hear pretty much the same thing or you got little bits of additional detail. But you would also occasionally get completely different accounts. I sometimes briefed State on the NSC line. They did have differences so it wasn't always a uniform view.

The other challenge in the US was that you could hear the government in whatever form expressing a view, but there was absolutely no guarantee that would become policy, because especially on Israel and actually some other Middle East issues, Congress would be the ultimate decision makers. So those relationships with congressional staffers were absolutely critical. Sometimes it was quite frustrating. The administration would be completely aligned with us on what we would have seen as a manifestly sensible, well-reasoned and practical policy. But it would get shot down by the right side of the Republican Party, but not always, and sometimes Democrats who had an ideological view of things and were powerful enough in Congress to derail policy. And this was the Clinton administration which was relatively easy, compared to some other times. But it was an extraordinarily intricate system to work in which made it fascinating work-wise.

### **First Secretary (Economic and Commercial), Riyadh, 1999**

**SR:** So now we go back to the Middle East again, to Riyadh.

**JB:** Actually, I had sort of three or four months in London. I spent about a month of that working in the DTI in London, in the section that covered the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, which was obviously very useful. The Head of that section was very good. That said, once you got

below that level, the team seemed less motivated and less focused on the work and more focused on their expenses and what have you.

I wanted to do a commercial job. It's very important in terms of career development to do a commercial job somewhere along the way. I liked the idea of doing commercial work, too. Obviously, Saudi was a huge market. It was a big commercial operation. The job coming up was the number two of the commercial operation in the Kingdom. So you had commercial section at the Embassy in Riyadh, you had a Consulate General in Jeddah, which was mainly commercial. We also had at that stage a third office in Al Khobar on the East coast covering the Eastern Province, which is where all the oil is. So it was a Kingdom wide effort. Part of my job was to coordinate the nationwide effort. So I had a reason to travel. Part of it was purely doing the traditional sort of commercial work. But the two sectors I had were banking and financial services and oil and gas. Far and away the most interesting, the biggest sectors of Saudi Arabia.

So I was all set up for that. But then the FCO was unable to recruit a successor for the First Secretary (Economic). I was still in Washington, and suddenly got a message saying that I wasn't going to be First Secretary (Commercial) any more, but First Secretary (Economic). I went back and said that I really wanted to do the commercial work but wondered whether it was feasible to do both. They said yes and merged the two jobs.

The job was wonderfully balanced because the economic job was political more than economic work. Because it was such an important market in such an important country, you had a professional economist in London doing all the analysis and the number crunching. I fed him the numbers I could get. It was pretty opaque in Saudi Arabia, there wasn't at all a transparent system. As important was feeding back what you might call economic gossip, speaking to banks, big business and to officials and so giving some context to the sort of the overall economic reporting.

Whereas the commercial work was a certain amount of coordination and management to coordinate the overall effort, but then a lot of it was just the promotion of financial and British interests and financial services and oil and gas, which I really enjoyed. I enjoyed working with British business communities. I was also ex officio on the board of the British Business Group in Riyadh, which is quite a highly geared and well organised business group.

What was wonderful about my job was the timing. So I went there in 1999 and the G20 had just been set up, which was a Gordon Brown creation. The Saudis are members of the G20,

so our stock in the Ministry of Finance was very high indeed. They felt that Gordon Brown personally had brought them onto the global top table, economically. So I had fantastic access. Part of the problem in Saudi Arabia, very unusually for a British Embassy in the Middle East, was access. Normally the only people who really had good access were the Ambassador, the Defence Attaché and the head of station. Everybody else had to fight to get meetings and they tend to be meetings junior to the position they held. I was the only person in the Embassy who regularly met in the Ministry of Finance and Oil and Gas as well people who were above me in the Saudi hierarchy. With the Ministry of Finance our stock was very high with them and they wanted to have a serious conversation. With the Ministry of Oil and Gas, again, they had a message they wanted to get out. Those were the two ministries where all the talent was. These two core crucial ministries coinciding with the health of the Saudi economy were packed with really talented people, many of whom had graduate qualifications from good universities in the UK or the US. They were very focused and very professional. They were happy to meet someone for the Embassy, who was relatively junior compared to them. They were much more open than most Saudis, too. You could have a proper conversation with them.

So the economic job was a great job. It was a very interesting time in Saudi's economic history to be there because the then Crown Prince Abdullah, who became King, was not in any way an economist. But he did understand that things had to change and that the pattern of massive government largesse and massive corruption was just not sustainable. So he was trying to drive through change and giving his weight to the people who really did understand these things. So it was very interesting to watch that process; I don't think, frankly, it had a great deal of success.

So, all said, I really used to enjoy that job which was one of my most enjoyable postings professionally. As I said before, I'm fascinated by 'the other' and the way other countries work. It doesn't get more other than Saudi Arabia: it was endlessly interesting to watch.

It was horrific at times, though, as there were a lot of things about Saudi society that were profoundly unattractive. One of the worst things was the way they treated foreign workers. They had minimal protection and particularly domestic workers were open to horrific abuse. It was a problem that, by and large, the Saudis wouldn't even acknowledge existed, probably because so many of them were complicit in it.

Sarah and I got married. I flew back to Washington for the wedding. And then she came out and spent about six weeks with me at Christmas and New Year. She found it very interesting to be there. But she would not have liked to live there.

I would just like to say that for me, on a couple of occasions when my life was difficult personally, the Foreign Office was absolutely fantastic. My first marriage broke down in Washington and I had two small children. The Foreign Office was incredibly supportive with me over that. Then in Riyadh, my hope was that my children were going to be able to visit fairly regularly, even though they were small. That didn't work out. I'd only been there a year but I asked to short tour. I wanted to go back to the UK to see more of my children.

**GCHQ, 2000-03, with additional roles between 2001-02 as Deputy Head, Afghanistan Emergency Unit, FCO and DHM, Kabul**

John Kerr and Francis Richards had just agreed on an exchange programme with GCHQ. There have always been a couple of GCHQ liaison staff inside the Foreign Office, but this was different. This was getting a mainstream diplomat and mainstream GCHQ people at First Secretary level to spend three years each in the opposite organisation so that the two organisations got to know more about each other. The timing was perfect, starting up in the autumn of 2000. That was exactly when I was getting back to the UK. Sarah managed to get a posting to the UK starting then. I'm a Gloucestershire boy and, at that stage, had an increasingly ill father and elderly mother living in Gloucestershire, so everything was in alignment. I managed to get the job and I'm eternally grateful for the Office for that.

**SR:** What was it like?

**JB:** It was fascinating. The clichés were mostly true: lots of people with unbelievably high IQ but also many with low EQ. They are world class at what they do. I think also precisely because there were so many people who needed very thoughtful management, they did have some superb managers.

I did two jobs. The first one I did was good in something called CESG. Communications Electronic Security Group. When they think of Cheltenham, everybody thinks of the code breaking and the listening and such like and forget that 10 or 15% of the organisation is the gatekeeper, the side that looks after our communications and stops people listening to us, put very crudely. That's CESG. I was Head of a section that dealt with information security policy. We were very outward facing, we worked very closely with the private sector. I also

had two offices, one in Cheltenham and one in Thames House, with the Security Service, because we did work jointly with them on protecting critical national infrastructure. And in fact, while I was there, we set up the first ops room monitoring attacks on the critical national infrastructure, a joint Security Service-GCHQ operation.

The huge event in the middle of my time there was 9/11. It was a life changing event for me, as for so many people. At the actual time it happened, I had some people tracking online paedophilia. A very small, very specialist team, very closely plugged in with the police and lots of international liaison. We were just putting together a plan, a major campaign in collaboration with the Met for a really concerted global drive to crack down on this. We were having a meeting in the headquarters building in Cheltenham with some people from the Met. The ops room was next door. A chap from the ops room came into the room and said to the person chairing the meeting that a plane had just gone into one of the towers of the World Trade Centre. We all wondered why he had come to tell us, thinking he meant a light aircraft. A few minutes later, the chap came back in and said he thought we really needed to come and look at this. As we walked into the ops room, the second aircraft went in to the tower. It was one of those moments when you realised that all our lives were about to change.

Cheltenham, of course, went into overdrive, not surprisingly, as everyone did. But as an intelligence agency it really went into overdrive. Very, very efficient, very impressive response.

I realised after a few days that I was really not giving very much at Cheltenham. I just didn't have that sort of background understanding of IT and IT security to really be able to deliver. I knew at the same time the Foreign Office was screaming out for people to work in the Afghanistan Emergency Unit. So I was rather naughty and I rang up POD. I said that were they to order me back to London, I wouldn't complain. And five minutes later, my boss's boss got a phone call from the Foreign Office saying they needed Jamie Bowden back. My boss told me that he wasn't very impressed with this, but he wasn't going to get in my way. So the next day I was back in King Charles Street in the basement in the Afghanistan Emergency Unit. I was doing that in total I suppose for about three months, after which I did temporary duty in Kabul. After that I went back to Cheltenham.

This time I had a very different job. Essentially, we were trying to set up a very secure system of communication between the agencies so that you could pass highly classified

material around. Extraordinary in 2002 we were the only Five Eyes not to have this. It was a huge impediment. There were still boxes of papers going up and down from London to Cheltenham.

**SR:** So when exactly did you go to the Afghanistan Emergency Unit?

**JB:** About mid-October. I was there until just after the New Year. When I arrived, we were working shift systems. It was very busy indeed. There were two Deputies and I was one of them. Our main role was actually keeping the Emergency Unit running, so a lot of it was being like a DHM in a post. It was sustainability of the Unit which was quite a challenge. It was a real challenge having enough of the right people, liaison with other bits of Whitehall, particularly military and defence. We had two people from MOD embedded in the FCO emergency unit. It felt to me as if it worked quite well. But I think people higher up weren't always so certain of that.

**SR:** Were these people mostly volunteers?

**JB:** Yes, there was a mix. The core were all from South Asia Department. The Afghan desk basically. The Head of Section was Stephen Evans who'd been Head of South Asia Department. The rest were people like me who'd been brought in from elsewhere. But at that time, obviously, the absolute priority was to staff that section so there were plenty of volunteers.

In Stephen Evans, we were very lucky because we actually had a real expert on Afghanistan. Stephen had been DHM in Islamabad but a lot of his job there was actually dealing with Afghanistan, because we had no Embassy in Kabul. So he knew Afghan politics and a lot of the personalities very well. He'd gone to the UN inside Afghanistan so had been on the ground.

We used to have morning prayers chaired by John Kerr, where we reviewed what had happened in the night. This was quite early, about 0630. Then John would brief Jack Straw for what we were not allowed to call War Cabinet. And if Jack Straw, John would attend War Cabinet.

It really started to quieten down quite quickly. By mid-December, we were able to cut back on staff.

In December, we got to the stage where we were thinking about reopening the Embassy in Kabul. It became a point of pride. We wanted to be the first Western Embassy, before the Americans. Stephen was itching to get out there because he was going to be the Chargé.

Ryan Crocker, who was going to the American Ambassador actually arrived at Bagram the day before Stephen, but he stayed at Bagram for some meetings and then flew back to Islamabad. Stephen arrived at Bagram on the next day and went straight to the Embassy to raise the flag. So we think we were the first!

The plan was to have four Consulates: Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad. Stephen asked me if I'd like to do one of those. It was all going to be temporary initially and I wouldn't be signing up for a full tour, just to get the place up and running for a few months. I said absolutely I would. Herat would have been fascinating.

But during Christmas and New Year, it was obvious that this idea had dropped away. Stephen rang up and said he said he actually wanted to get the Embassy looking more like an Embassy early in the new year and asked me if wanted to come out and be the DHM. I said yes. So that happened very quickly. I ended up being stuck in Islamabad for about three days as the weather closed down Bagram. My arrival at Bagram is one of those events I will never forget. Bagram has mountains around it. We landed and there were US helicopters flying in every direction and soldiers, Special Forces types. It was straight out of a film.

We were met by our British military police close protection team. The airport is about 20 kilometres from the city and it got dark as we were driving across a very desolate plain. Getting into the city was an extraordinary experience – driving in a city that has no lights, because there was no electricity. So all you had were some of the shops and places that were open had gas lamps hanging outside.

We got to the Embassy, which was another surprise. Our Embassy in Kabul was built in the 1920s. (I read the wonderful book by Peter Hopkirk, 'The Great Game' about Britain, Russia and Afghanistan in the 19th century. It wasn't a good book to read before coming to Kabul, because some previous British representatives never left, they were cut to pieces before they got out. I hoped we were going to do rather better than that!) It had been quite a large and grand Embassy but had been burnt out so we were in the old Embassy hospital, across a lane. The Embassy was deliberately built slightly outside the city and uphill a bit, the idea being that when the angry mob got to the walls of the Embassy, they'd be so knackered from having walked up the hill that they wouldn't jump over the wall.

It worked as a sort of emergency short term arrangement. The key thing was that it was warm. In Kabul in January, midday temperatures can be minus 10, even though the sun is shining. Night time is a lot colder than that. So if it's warm, you've cracked half the problem. It had a generator and an adequate water supply. So it was perfectly serviceable. We were working on tables and anywhere you could find a flat surface. We didn't have an office.

My job was very much a traditional DHM one, to get the place up and running and sort things out. I really didn't do policy and relationships except when I was Chargé when Stephen went on leave. The FCO hadn't quite done this before, so a lot of shortcomings were apparent very early on. We could only communicate up to Restricted on FCO systems. And there was quite a lot we wanted to say that was higher than Restricted. So we had to rely on the goodwill of others to send anything back to London that was higher than that.

As far as food was concerned, we did have a cook and a wonderful steward who had been in the Embassy before and lived on the compound all through the time we weren't there. We used to get food on the local market. There was enough fresh meat, chickens and things. I was always dreading a visit by the Regional Medical based in Delhi who kept threatening to come. That would have been the end as I'm absolutely sure he'd have taken one look and shut us down. All the butchers are in the same street and they butcher the carcasses on the street. And the street is a mud street with muck and everything ... and this was ending up on our dining room table. But none of us fell ill. It seemed to work. We supplemented it with the help of military rations, courtesy of the head of our close protection team who was a bit like Radar in MASH. He would drive up to the military headquarters, scrounging bits and pieces and come back with a Land Rover full of rations that would also keep us going. But it was a real lesson in the fact that the FCO just wasn't geared at that stage to this kind of thing.

The very first job I had was to find a new Embassy. So actually on the flight I eventually got to Kabul on there was someone from Overseas Estates Department and I think an engineer from the Foreign Office. We went to see four potential sites, three of which for various reasons were manifestly completely unsuitable. The last one we saw was either the Bulgarian or the Romanian Embassy. It had been built in the time the Soviets were there. It was very unattractive, but very good for security with a lot of standoff. The remit was to find a building that, at least initially, UK-based staff could live in, in which you could put an actual Residence. So it wouldn't be a grand Residence, but at least somewhere where there was a bit

of entertainment space for an Ambassador. And then I think three or four other staff flats, a Chancery, space for a commercial section and a consular section. Also British Council and a management section. So we looked at this place. It worked absolutely perfectly. It was a big compound and with staff welfare in mind we could put in a swimming pool and a tennis court. It could have been designed for us.

So that's my legacy. The building was duly bought and done up. But what should have been the pool and tennis court ended up being covered by accommodation pods as the staff numbers kept growing.

Of course, it did not go at all the way that people expected. I was there as a stopgap for three months. Towards the end of my time the UK-based civilian staff complement was growing quite significantly. About four Counter Narcotics people came in because this was a huge part of the programme. By March it was warmer in the day, but night time was still 10 degrees below. These poor people were sleeping in sort of out houses in the compound. They still had the old Edwardian stoves running on wood. They had two sleeping bags. How can you ask civil servants to do that? But they did it very cheerfully. They were all volunteers.

The point about volunteers is really important because it did mean you got very good people, because you had quite a wide range to pick from. You got some of the most ambitious and brightest people, because that's where it was happening. Your product from Kabul was being read by the most senior people in Government, you really wanted to go there.

I mentioned the close protection team who were fantastic, not just for security but their links with the army. We were particularly lucky with the head of the team who was a tremendous character, a young, enthusiastic captain. They were just so good at thinking outside the box on all kinds of issues.

But one of the drawbacks was that they had brought one of the Overseas Security Advisers in very early on and they had massively overestimated the security risks. So we were only able to travel in these ex-Northern Ireland armoured Land Rovers. The only way you could see out was through a tiny slit in the side. Basically, we weren't really allowed out. It just wasn't necessary as Kabul in those first few months was very safe. I used to drive down the street and see off duty soldiers wandering up down the streets quite happily. And if they could do it, I am certain we could have done it. So that was a great pity.

This was the first of several times in the rest of my career that my military background proved really useful, because our relationship with the military headquarters was very close. One of us went every day to attend their daily briefing. The Commander was an outstanding man called John McColl. A two- star general. It was a well led division. Superbly well organised. Everything worked. John also had great political acumen and read the local political situation very well. Yes, he had his own advisors and things, but his relationship management with the Afghans was really good.

But even more extraordinary was a particular disaster. There's a tunnel that goes under the Hindu Kush, built by the Soviets in an incredible feat of engineering, high up in the mountains. There'd been a bus crash and the military wanted to get some helicopters there to help out. No-one had any maps of the area. No one really knew about it. It was a challenge because you were flying right at the limits of a helicopter's capability. The people who might have known were the Russians, so it fell to me to find some Russians who might be able to help. We knew there was a Russian Embassy, but we had no contacts. We found three chaps, one of whom was working for the Russian equivalent of ODA and had lots of experience in Afghanistan and spoke English. So I drove them to the headquarters. Again, I thought, 'Here I am walking through a NATO military headquarters with three Russians. We went into a room where a huge map was laid out on a table. They couldn't have been more helpful and pointed out on this map where you could land helicopters near to the site of the accident. It made the difference.

I didn't have a huge amount of contact with Afghans except when I was Chargé, but my overwhelming memory is just how unbelievably tough they were. The infant mortality rate was a horrific 25%, but to me the miracle was that 75% lived. Behind the Embassy there was a hill called Legation Hill. It's covered in shanties, very basic housing with no electricity. You can see that a lot of them don't even have doors in the doorways or glass in the windows, so at night you could see the orange glow where they had a fire going. I noticed that most of them clearly didn't have a fire. There was very little firewood. With temperatures of minus ten at midday and minus goodness knows at midnight, how anyone survives that just beggars belief.

The last thing I'd like to say about Afghanistan is that I do remember a couple of times going to meetings at which all the Western embassies would be present, together with the UN and the EU. I particularly remember the EU saying right back then that things were going in the

wrong direction and it was really not going to work, especially the way we were tackling the opium trade. The doubts were there.

### **DHM, British Embassy Kuwait, 2003-06**

**SR:** Did you go straight on from Kabul to Kuwait?

**JB:** No. I've got slightly out of sequence. I was at GCHQ, went back to the Foreign Office for Afghanistan job and then Kabul. After that I went back to GCHQ to do the second job I mentioned setting up the communications system. So I had about another year at Cheltenham after that. And I went from there to Kuwait in May 2003. The invasion of Iraq was March 2003. So it was a very interesting time to be arriving in Kuwait. The Kuwaitis were collectively on quite a high. Although the Iraqis had been comprehensively defeated in 1993, there was a very significant US-UK military presence in Kuwait and so the risk of any sort of attack on Kuwait was basically zero. But it was clear when talking to Kuwaitis that they never completely felt safe as long as Saddam Hussein was in power in Iraq. They never quite knew what he might do next. Not surprisingly, they were scarred by the experiences of 1990 or 91, they hadn't forgotten that. Let's not forget that most Kuwaiti families had had something awful happening to them in that time. So they were obviously delighted that Saddam had gone. They were very well disposed to us. So our diplomatic stock was very high in Kuwait. It must be one of the few countries in the world where John Major is a national hero! Whilst Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister at the time of the Iraq invasion, she'd gone by the time of the liberation. They see John Major on a par with George Bush. He's hugely admired as is Margaret Thatcher.

I had a great Ambassador in Chris Wilton. Our paths had crossed a few times before and we always got along very well so it was really fun to work for him. Chris is slightly iconoclastic. He was a second generation Ambassador to Kuwait as his father, John Wilton, had been. He had a very irreverent sense of humour. The Embassy in Kuwait is a rather lovely building, built in the 1930s.

Our most important role by far was supporting the military in southern Iraq. There was a multinational division in Basra commanded by a British Major General. It was good for me because at any one time there were people I'd known in my army days in the Headquarters in Basra so that was useful in terms of building relationships. But absolutely critical to the survival of the division was the uninterrupted flow of supplies across the Kuwaiti border. It wasn't just food. There was not adequate water inside Iraq for the division. So there were

trucks just carrying water. You can imagine how quickly there would have been a crisis if water supply had been cut.

The extraordinary thing about Kuwait is, although they were absolutely 100% supportive, we had lots of problems at the border and things would go wrong. It's the most dysfunctional country I've ever worked in. So we would get a call from MND (Multinational Division) to say that a convoy had been blocked by the Kuwaitis crossing the border at such and such a place. So Chris or I would ring or go and see someone high up in the Ministry of Interior. They told us that should not have happened and they would be on to it. Two hours later, the convoy was still not being allowed across the border. Our contact would say that he'd speak to the commander. He was being completely honest, we knew that. It was probably nothing more than a British squaddie being rude, but even if his superiors told him to until they were blue in the face, the Kuwaiti commander just wouldn't change his mind. It was the most extraordinary system. It could be very time-consuming, despite the fact the Kuwaitis were so well disposed to us.

There are some really unattractive aspects of Kuwaiti society. Again, like Saudi, the way they treated foreign workers and particularly domestic staff was horrific. It beggars belief. Our Honorary Legal Adviser was a former Minister of Oil. A very effective legal adviser. Kuwait had carried out its first execution for a number of years of a man who had committed murder. I don't think anyone disputed he was guilty. The awful thing was that when they hanged him, the rope broke. So the poor chap fell to the ground very much alive. It caused genuine outrage. There is an essentially free press in Kuwait. This legal adviser had a weekly op-ed in which he wrote 'Isn't it amazing that we are so disorganised we can't even hang a murderer successfully, whereas Fatima So and So, a domestic maid working for a Kuwaiti family hanged herself completely successfully.' And indeed, in the last four months, there had been other reported cases of domestic staff hanging themselves because they'd been treated so appallingly by their family. Absolutely shocking. The article did slightly raise the debate about the way Kuwaitis treated their staff.

I have to say there were some really good things about Kuwaiti society, of which one is that they could laugh at themselves. Certainly the middle classes who used to tell jokes against themselves. And it was a great place to be a diplomat, insofar as it's a very open society. There's not much in the way of entertainment in Kuwait, at least when I was there. Very few museums, not much in the way of nightlife and it's dry. Scenically it's not an interesting

country at all – flat and rather dreary desert. There were very few buildings of any age at all. The British Embassy is actually one of the more interesting old buildings. But on the other side, Kuwait is a very open society. It was one of the relatively few countries, I think, where as a foreigner it was very easy to have a social life completely amongst Kuwaitis because the middle-class Kuwaitis used to really enjoy engaging with foreigners. A lot of the long term Brits had their social life almost entirely amongst the Kuwaitis, which is quite unusual in Gulf expatriate communities.

As a diplomat, there were two things really special about it. One was basically a free press. The only thing that was off limits was actually criticising the Emir. Other senior family members and ministers were absolutely in the firing line. There was a political life there. There was a very independent minded National Assembly with a system where ministers could be summoned for absolutely vicious grillings, covered in detail in the press. You could have really interesting meetings with politicians across the spectrum and civil servants. But, in practical terms, it was an absolute disaster. One of the reasons I think Kuwait is totally dysfunctional is that although the National Assembly has the power to stop just about anything, it doesn't have the power to make anything happen.

The other thing that is unique are the wonderful *diwaniya*. In every other Arab state they are called *majlis*. The way it works in Kuwait is unlike anywhere else – a lot of houses will have a special room for their *diwaniya*. It's not exclusively for the rich as if you drive through a really poor area you'll often see a little tent added on to the house and they will have a *diwaniya* anything from once or twice a year to every night. Most of them are social events run on regular cycles. They're nearly always segregated men-women and, most often, men only. But they could be friends, neighbours. Some have a family or tribal base. Political parties will hold their *diwaniya*, some are artistic or religious. They range in size from a couple of men sitting in there to hundreds of people in a huge setting with gilded chandeliers where they've actually come very often to petition a senior sheikh. For diplomats it's a fantastic networking tool, because you get to know when the interesting ones are so you could go there and have a really useful evening.

The Kuwaitis aren't afraid to speak their minds. You'd go to a *diwaniya* and there'd be half a dozen Kuwaiti men there, talking in Arabic, and they'd be slagging off Sheikh So and So. As soon as you walked in, they'd stop and repeat exactly the same thing in English to make sure you'd understood every single word!

The last thing I'd like to mention is something Peter [Ricketts] may remember, as he was PUS when this happened. We didn't make ourselves very popular with the administration in London, but it's a great story. There was a system in place for Embassy budgets at that time. It was recognised even then that it was badly deficient and was going to be changed. You got your budget at the beginning of the year in local currency, calculated on the exchange rate as it was then. But there was a corrective mechanism and it had no fixed timetable. So as you got towards the end of the year, you could have this dilemma that we had where, if they corrected, we knew that we were going to lose local currency. But if it wasn't corrected before the end of the year, Ambassadors would still get a slap on the wrist for an under-spend. It was ridiculous, but it was about to change. We got to the stage in about January when Chris decided that, without being extravagant, we did need to start spending that money anyway. If we lost it, I didn't quite know how we'd run the budgets. So we took the perfectly reasonable decision that we would spend as if we had that amount at the end of the year. In late February, London told us that we had to repay X amount of money. That would have left us with enough money literally for staff salaries and a bit of utilities, but nothing more than that. No fuel for cars, no postage costs, no entertainment. Chris was retiring in about three months' time and gave me the most wonderful order I've ever had in my career, which was 'Sod it! Send a telegram to the Foreign Office and tell them we're closing the Embassy until the first of April!' So this was on a Wednesday afternoon. We had a Thursday and Friday weekend in Kuwait at that time. So I drafted a letter. My summary: we're broke. Embassy closing until first of April. But I was very careful. I put a note in the title, 'Personal for PUS, Chief Clerk, Director, Middle East.' Chris signed it off. The next morning Chris was sitting in his office in the Residence and got a call from the Diplomatic Correspondent at the *Daily Telegraph* to say he had heard we were closing the Embassy. As well as in the heading 'Personal for ..' I should have put a caveat somewhere up in the distribution list and so there had been a normal distribution. They did do an inquiry to find who leaked it but no-one was found. So we were all over the press for a couple of days, but it didn't bother Chris Wilton too much. We did get some more money from the Foreign Office. Edward Chaplin was the Director Middle East, one of the Office's nicest men. He sent a very good response, knowing that Chris was about to retire: 'Your telegram certainly caught the attention of senior readers ...'

Finally, on a personal note, we were very lucky in Kuwait as we were on joint postings. Sarah was in the US Embassy. She was actually a Sinologist, so she had to willingly take demotion as a registry clerk. But as a linguist she picked up Arabic.

**SR:** Was that the only time you managed a joint posting?

**JB:** We did the same in Bahrain. But it ran out there as she could only do three years so she had to resign from State at the end of her posting in Bahrain. She got another job there which I'll come back to as it is relevant to the Arab Spring.

**SR:** It makes such a difference, doesn't it, if the spouse can get gainful employment?

**JB:** Well, absolutely.

### **Six months' detachment from Kuwait as DHM Baghdad, 2004-05**

**SR:** You were detached from Kuwait to go to Baghdad to help Edward Chaplin. He was already there, was he?

**JB:** Yes. What happened was that I was going back to London for a meeting, so Edward asked if I could pop in and see him. He wondered whether I'd be interested in being his DHM in Baghdad. I said yes straightaway.

**SR:** What, without consulting Sarah?

**JB:** That's a very good point. I probably said yes subject to Sarah's view!

**SR:** Glad to hear it!

**JB:** Just as an aside, Sarah has pointed out that within two months of our daughter being born I was in Kabul. We had three children under 18 months old when we got to Kuwait. A year after our twins were born, I disappeared off to Baghdad. But Sarah was completely supportive.

Apart from the fact that I felt it would be very interesting and quite exciting, I did feel a moral obligation to go because I'd supported the invasion. By 2004, it was very obvious things were going badly wrong. I was very interested to read Edward Chaplin's account of this time. The Americans just wouldn't seriously engage on the day after. I think that was one of the disasters.

The other thing that went very badly wrong was going in with too few troops. There were people in Washington who predicted with uncanny accuracy what would happen in the time

following the invasion with the numbers that actually went in. I agree with Edward's point too: I think Tony Blair was right to support, but he should have used some leverage to say 'We're with you, but conditional on A, B and C.'

Edward flew out of Kuwait when I was Chargé. I remember going out to the airports and meeting the flight in from London. The RAF sent a special aircraft for him to fly out to Baghdad. And then I arrived at the beginning of September 2004. I sort of took over from Dominic Asquith, who had been Jeremy Greenstock's deputy on the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and sort of took over from John Wilks who had been the DHM as we did have an Embassy there as well. I arrived just after the CPA had been wound up, so we were merging the British presence. The Embassy had people who'd both been in the bilateral Embassy and people who'd been doing jobs with the CPA. It was a job that had to be shaped. But it was also one of those places where there was so much going on, happening so quickly, that it was actually the situation that shaped the job.

When I arrived, the Embassy had just moved into a building in the Green Zone. It had been a school for senior Ba'ath party people. Unlike many shoddy buildings in Baghdad, this one was very well built and the layout wasn't too bad for an Embassy. After I had left, it did actually take a direct hit from a missile which landed on the flat roof of the building. I think the person in the room underneath got a bit of a headache and some dust come off the ceiling, but that was it.

It was a very much a DHM job, rather like Kabul. We did a rotation of six weeks on and two weeks off. When Edward was away the focus would become very much political, but the rest of the time it was all the DHM stuff, with a massive focus on two things: staff and security, the latter far more than would normally be the case in a DHM job. It was incredibly exciting and it was very challenging. I make no secret that when I look back now, I'm not satisfied with how I did the job.

The Iraqis I met, I really developed a great respect for. You didn't meet many Iraqis because you were so constrained. Once or twice, I went to some social events, with the political class or civil servants. Some ministers were horrifically corrupt. But quite a lot of them I did admire because they could have been sitting quite safely and comfortably in London or wherever they'd been in exile and had opted to go back, often leading very hazardous lives. It was a dangerous existence.

The local staff were quite remarkable. These were young people in their 20s who, because of sanctions, had had their education completely in Iraq. In particular, there was a woman who was one of our interpreters and translators who was absolutely brilliant. She had never been outside Iraq, studying at Baghdad University. People were desperate for work so we did have a huge recruitment pool from which to get the very best. But they were remarkable. And incredibly resilient, because they weren't living in the Green Zone and going home every night. Sometimes, they would come in shocked in the morning because their neighbour had been carted off by gunmen in the middle of the night and that kind of thing.

The Green Zone was very well fortified both physically with a huge wall around it and militarily, so one felt pretty safe. But, of course, an obvious and frequent target were the gates. Embassy staff had a pass so they could come through quite quickly and get through the gate. We had quite large grounds. We were building a complete set of accommodation for UK-based staff. Everyone was going to have a little pod, really solid, designed to take direct hits, with a sort of sitting room, a bedroom and a shower and a little kitchen. There were earth mounds between the things so that if there was a strike that would break the blast. It meant that we about 60 or 70 workers on the site who had to come in every day and they had to queue at these gates, sometimes for half an hour or 45 minutes. There was a real chance that a car bomb would suddenly pull up. But they were willing to take that risk.

Iraq should be an immensely rich country actually. There are tremendous human resources: there's real dynamism amongst Iraqis. But it's really one of the world's saddest stories.

It was a huge Embassy with about 200 UK-based staff, but of those only maybe 20 were FCO. There were a few from other Whitehall departments. But the vast majority were contractors from all sorts of different organisations, working as advisers in Iraqi ministries. There was also a cadre of about 40 policemen, mostly from the MoD police, working at the police training college.

The FCO staff were very highly motivated and generally very high calibre people. Extraordinarily impressive. But the question was how to keep really good people bidding. That was a real challenge. The incentive couldn't be purely financial, or you could end up with people who were only there because they were in debt. So then we had to try and find other incentives to get the right people. I suggested people being able to claim their full pensions earlier based on the time spent in Baghdad, but that was apparently blocked by the Treasury since it had tax implications. We did get agreement that the Office would pay for

an all expenses stay for an officer's entire family in Dubai during their tour. We were working on how to ensure that there was a scheme for single officers when I left.

I did use to bemoan the fact that we didn't have directed postings anymore. If you'd had directed postings and you knew what they really wanted to do is First Sec job in UKRep, Paris or Washington, you could say, 'That's your dream job coming up in 18 months' time. I will guarantee it's yours if you'll help us out by doing six months in Baghdad.' Of course, no-one had that level of control. But they did come up with the golden ticket idea. If you did a tour in Iraq, then all things being equal, the golden ticket would get you the job that you were bidding for next. I think that did work.

We did realise that the six week in/two weeks out routine was even more important than we thought. There was a case of somebody who was spending much longer than six weeks in and actually had quite a serious personal issue and had to be sent back home for essentially medical reasons. There was absolutely no doubt that was a direct consequence of spending much more than six weeks in that environment. I have to say, they gave absolutely no indication of any problems until the crisis hit. So we made it a rule that the maximum you could stay in country was eight weeks and then you'd be put on the flight, whether you wanted to or not. I have to admire the Americans because they did one year tours. They did have a sort of a breather thing, but it was much less generous than ours. They spent longer than we did and worked every bit as intensively as we did. So I did feel we were quite spoiled, but I do think we were doing things the right way with six month tours. The rule was that you could volunteer for a second six months. Edward [Chaplin] said that, generally, most people did the six months, but my recollection is that most people in the Embassy when I arrived were actually on their second six month stint.

Frankly, at the end of six months in that job, I was pretty whacked. Of all the things I did, probably the biggest single bit of the job was staff and leadership. Keeping an eye on staff morale collectively (and that included the contractors) and everyone who lived and worked in the Embassy was relatively easy, because you were all living together, more like a military camp. We didn't see so much of the contractors because they tended to all be going out to Ministries during the day.

We had a medical room in the compound manned by two ex-military paramedics. Very highly qualified, really outstanding. I made a point at least once a week of going in, shutting the door and sitting down to just talk about things. Most people who came to see them had

no medical problem but wanted to talk. The medics recognised they were a counselling service and were there to listen. It was invaluable. They would tell me things without ever saying anything that could identify people. I think if they had been really worried about someone they probably would have done. But it never got to that stage.

So I had a pretty clear picture of what was bothering people. And perhaps the most surprising thing is it wasn't security. As I recall, we got a quiet week or two and nothing would come into the Green Zone. Then you'd have a busy week and quite a lot of missiles would be fired in, using pretty inaccurate equipment so no-one quite knew where they would land. When I was there, we had two that came into the compound, in both cases not very near the building. One detonated but did no harm. The other one came right in the middle of the building site but didn't detonate. The Australian Army bomb disposal people came and got rid of it.

So it was quite a claustrophobic existence, because you could only go out of the Green Zone with full close protection and Edward, me and the Political Counsellor, Simon Buckle, couldn't even move around in the Green Zone without CP. Every day we'd get an assessment from the intelligence side, which was actually done by private contractors with access to the military. In all the time I was there, only one person asked to be short toured for security reasons. I should say that just before I arrived there had been a person killed. He was a contractor working for BP and his car was hit by a rocket when driving through the town. And while I was there, a protected car in one of the close protection teams was driving outside the Green Zone and was hit by a car which overtook them and blew up. Despite having been next to this fairly hefty bomb, the only injury was one chap who broke his ankle. The car withstood this huge blast.

What really was an issue, and it's not surprising if you think about it, were relationships. We all know when you go to an Embassy, your personal life is much more blended than they are when you're working in London. Here you had no personal life. It was all work. People were sharing rooms with colleagues, working very long hours in a very intense environment. People coming in to the medical centre to vent about a colleague was probably the most common thing. This was an issue, because people were getting very angry or upset and were not able to get away from their colleagues. That was probably the biggest morale factor.

There were a lot of very tight deadlines but you couldn't really plan because security could completely change your plans at any moment. And it was working in an environment where

everyone knew that things were not going as expected or as hoped for. Being realistic, people realised that at best it was going to continue like this for some time and at worst it could get worse. Where it was all going was very uncertain. We were also all aware that the Iraqi people were having a really awful time.

At the beginning of my time, when you arrived at the airport, you just drove down into Baghdad with a close protection team and a backup vehicle, a route of seven or eight miles, most of it down a motorway to get the Green Zone. But that road became worse and worse, so we got to the stage when you could only get to the airport by helicopter. You weren't allowed to go by road at all. Of course, that then became quite a big issue because there are a finite number of helicopters and helicopters are prone to breaking down. So you had a couple of people really wanting (and frankly needing) to get out for their break when the helicopter broke down. You had to use the RAF ones with the air defence suite. So that was a problem. Occasionally, you could scrounge a ride with the Americans.

On accommodation arrangements, Edward and myself (and for some reason the communications man from Hanslope Park) lived in the Residence, which the staff called the Old Folks Home! Edward thought it had been Saddam's sister's house. It was a fairly grand, not particularly attractive house which we could use if we were doing a dinner. Everybody else lived on the lower deck of a double storey car park. If you think about it, a car park is very strong, so if something hit, you had a very high degree of protection. You can imagine it was living in a permanently gloomy environment. When I arrived you had two people to a pod. These pods were not big. But I think quite a lot of people had quite a good time. I have to be a bit careful here, but I'll just say that quite a lot of people got to know each other very well! We had a competition to come up with a name for this subterranean car park accommodation. The winner was Ocean Cliffs! There was quite a life there. That's partly why the Residence was called the Old Folks Home as we had a rather different lifestyle.

On security, I didn't really have much in the way of decision making. We never second-guessed the assessment advice we got. There was a time a plan to get into the Green Zone was picked up. Within the Green Zone, people walked and rather liked it because it was one of the few times they were out in the open. The plan was apparently to try and pick up a Western diplomat and bung them into the boot of a car and leave the Green Zone. Then you'd have a hostage situation. So suddenly, even that little break was taken away from

people. We took the decision that everybody had to use a taxi service run by the close protection teams between Ocean Cliffs and the office.

There was once a concerted attack on the entrance to the Green Zone nearest to the Embassy, only about 200 yards away. We were the first place that a successful attack would have come to. What they'd done essentially was to put a lot of gunmen covertly into the buildings that looked down onto this entrance. Then two huge car bombs came. There was a sort of chicane arrangement, so the idea was that the first one was going to blow that out of the way and the second one was going to drive straight at a tank the Americans always had positioned there, before it could react. The gunmen would then open fire and rush into the Green Zone. Rather alarming. A very alert Iraqi soldier saw that first car bomb coming, realised the hazard and shot and killed the driver. So the car swerved and blew up, but didn't hurt anyone. Then there was a fire fight for a few minutes. This all a couple of hundred yards away from the Embassy. But the extraordinary thing was that people weren't fazed by this at all.

The only place I was able to get to was Basra. Simon Collis was the Consul General, doing a really outstanding job in a really old fashioned diplomatic way, sitting and having tea with tribal and religious leaders. At that time, Basra was much quieter, more stable than the centre. Simon had an office with a lovely view over the Shatt al Arab. He was sitting there working late one night and a missile hit the roof of the Consulate building. By all accounts, Simon tut-tutted, brushed the dust off and continued working!

The other thing that really sent a shock through the Embassy, even though it was nothing to do with the Embassy, was a British C130 aircraft flying between Baghdad airport and the North getting shot down. About 20 people were killed. We all knew people in the military. It felt quite close to home.

One thing on security has just come back to me. We had a bit of a scare at one time – I can't remember whether it was a specific bit of intelligence or just an assessment. But all our fresh food came from outside the Green Zone. It would have been so easy for someone to poison. I can't exactly remember how we got around that and whether we set up some testing system.

**SR:** Yes, the quality of the food is something which makes a great difference to staff, isn't it?

**JB:** You can live on tinned or frozen food, but if you haven't got fruit and veg ... We actually ate quite well. There was no shortage of good food.

Politically, it was a very strange place to be. Frankly, we always felt that our orders came from Number 10 and not the Foreign Office. So although we had Dominic Asquith and Neil Compton back in London, both absolutely superb, the really key thing was that most mornings at about 11 o'clock Nigel Sheinwald would ring up. He would usually speak to Edward, but when I was Chargé it was a bit scary, because he would have all sorts of incredibly difficult questions. He would say what he wanted to happen. Who was going to argue with Number 10 on that? They weren't necessarily things that the Foreign Office would have disagreed with, but I'm not sure they were really involved in some of the decision making at all.

I tried to maintain a close relationship with the military. The military was commanded by a four star American Army General. His deputy was a three star British General. When I arrived it was John McCall, again, who had been in Kabul when I was there. He was as good in Baghdad. It seemed to me a slightly less substantial job because in Kabul he was the senior military person, whereas in Baghdad, he was the number two. He was replaced by John Kiszely. A very different character, but very effective. An ex-Scots guardsman.

We certainly weren't dependent upon the military in the way we had been in Kabul. I think the Office had learned from that experience. For things like helicopters, they could be very helpful so it was good to have an excellent relationship.

On Iraqi politics, I don't know what percentage of the cabinet were British, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was over 50% who'd been exiles living in London in the Saddam years and had come back to Iraq. Certainly the Prime Minister, Ayad Allawi, was a British surgeon. Barham Saleh was the Deputy Prime Minister. I knew him very well already because he had been the representative in Washington of the PUK Kurdish group. He used to network very well in Washington, but he became quite a close friend. There was one minister who lived two doors down from my sister in Clapham! The Foreign Minister was a chap called Hoshiyar Zebari whom I also knew in Washington. But he had been a Foreign Minister for the other Kurdish group, the KDP, but then became a very effective Foreign Minister in Baghdad.

I suppose the only good news story when I was there was the election that took place in January 2005, insofar as it worked, most people voted and it was a clean vote. It delivered a result. We were warned off saying this at the time, but one thing that I thought was really wrong was, before that election, Tony Blair decided that we were going to support Ayad

Allawi. To the extent that he sent out two very senior members of the Labour Party – Margaret McDonagh who was the chair, I think, and had run his last campaign and Lord Ali who was in the media world to advise Ayad Allawi. Actually, there was quite a lot of unhappiness in the Embassy, because this really did feel like the UK putting itself right into the middle of domestic party politics, where it shouldn't have been and where it didn't belong. London picked up this message and I actually got a direct phone call from someone senior saying, 'Just do it.'

The US forces I had a real admiration for. They did a year. Apparently if they were working in some particularly dangerous bit of the countryside, they'd spend a whole year there and didn't rotate to slightly easier places. So probably the easiest option was the ones who were doing central Baghdad in the Green Zone. Not risk free as checkpoints were regularly attacked and people killed, so none of this was easy. What I found amazing was that some of these guys that you spoke to had already done ten months of the same thing, yet they were still so motivated and so focused. Highly impressive.

The final thing about Baghdad was the kidnapping of Ken Bigley and Margaret Hassan. For Ken Bigley I was for nearly all the time the on the ground Crisis Manager. One of the lessons learned from Ken Bigley was you couldn't be a DHM and a Crisis Manager as crisis management was a full time job. So as soon as Margaret Hassan was kidnapped, someone was on a flight from Counter Terrorism Department. There was a designated Baghdad Crisis Manager and they arrived on the ground within about 24 hours, so I had less to do with that.

Ken Bigley was a British engineer who had been living in a house in Baghdad with a couple of American people. We had no idea he was there. We knew that it was quite common for criminals to kidnap Westerners to then sell them on to political terrorist groups. If they weren't kidnapped by Al- Qaeda, they very quickly ended up in their hands. My recollection is that it ran for about a month. We were very quickly reinforced from London. Two officers came out from Scotland Yard from their hostage negotiation unit. They were absolutely superb. The depth of their knowledge and their ability to get inside the heads of people was really a masterclass.

The public messaging was absolutely key, putting stuff out that you knew the kidnappers would read. Some of that was playing on the humanity of the victims, their family connections and suchlike. Some of it was playing on what Iraqis thought. Margaret Hassan in particular was a very well-known and much admired figure in Iraq. She worked for a

charity. There was real anger and upset amongst the wider population when she was kidnapped. Some of the comms was aimed at the wider Iraqi population, to try and shape their thinking on this kind of thing. There was inevitably a great deal going on behind the scenes that wasn't in the public domain. That took up a huge amount of time as well. The staff involved in that work were absolutely extraordinary, sometimes working 20-hour days. People were so motivated. We all knew what Ken Bigley looked like because occasionally these videos would be released of him sending messages. You really felt this was someone you knew. Sadly, in the end, he was murdered.

I should mention that London established a very good relationship with his family in the UK. At the end of COBRA, David Richmond invited the family into the briefing room so that we on the ground in Baghdad and some others could have a chat. It felt to us that was very well handled.

The Margaret Hassan kidnap was a very different one. It appeared that she'd actually been kidnapped by criminals with a view to being sold on. The theory was that they realised straight away they'd made a very bad choice of person to kidnap because she was popular in Baghdad, she was a known person, she was married to an Iraqi. Many people in the Embassy knew and admired her. For that reason, Al-Qaeda didn't want her as a hostage. So she was murdered sadly, quite early on. It just seems such an utterly trivial reason to kill someone. While everyone was focused and working on this case so intensely, we were all driven by that. Suddenly, we heard she had been murdered. That was a really bad two or three days. We all felt it very deeply.

### **HM Ambassador, Bahrain, 2006–11**

**SR:** Having been the Deputy in various difficult places, you then got to run your own show in Bahrain.

**JB:** Yes. The really good thing about being an Ambassador is that you've got a DHM to give all the crap to and you can do all the really fun stuff. My DHMs would probably all say I was ruthless in that principle!

**SR:** It sounds to me as if you have done your fair share, Jamie!

**JB:** My thinking too! My Ambassadorships were all jobs I really did enjoy. Was it David Miliband who used the term 'presumed competence'? It really did feel like that. One felt one had so much flexibility. The Office was happy to let you take the decisions, as long as

you can do what needed to be done. But I felt we got a huge amount of discretion from London, which is part of reason it was such fun.

Just more generally having been an Ambassador in the Gulf, you were dealing very much with 21st century issues – trade, investment and the tech end of that or the perpetual security challenges in the Gulf. But there was something rather 19th century about the way you did diplomacy. They're all countries that we've got a strong relationship with and whilst there'll be conversations between the Prime Minister and Secretary of State and their counterparts, the role of the Ambassador remained more central to the relationship there than it did in many other parts of the world. In the Gulf they have a very personal view of bilateral relations, especially with the UK. That's partly for historical reasons, because to a greater or lesser extent we were involved in the government of those countries.

So it meant that, in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman there was fantastic access to ministers and a very open relationship. You had to really invest time, just in engagement, keeping in touch with people even when you had nothing particular you wanted to talk to them about.

I did a long tour in Bahrain, for four years and eight months.

I was very lucky in both Bahrain and Oman. They are two of the closest relationships the UK has probably in the world. They certainly were the closest in the Middle East, with any countries. And so there's a lot of history there. In Bahrain there was this divide between Sunni and Shia. The majority of the population are Shia. People will argue about what the percentage is.

The ruling family are Sunni. They're the only family in the Gulf that operates on primogeniture which is, I think, a huge strength for them. Uniquely in the Gulf, it means you've got certainty over who the next Crown Prince and the next King is going to be and it does create stability.

The extraordinary thing about the British presence there is we seem to be remembered fondly by both the Sunni and the Shia. Now, one must always aim off for Arab courtesy, even from people you know very well. Bahrainis are very open and they'll often say what they think. But I think it was quite genuine on both sides.

They like the Americans as well. But I always used to say that if they had to deal with one or the other, they would prefer to deal with us, but they have to make the Americans the primary relationship, not least because they see it as an existential issue. The US Fifth Fleet is based

in Bahrain and they see that as their ultimate defence against the Iranians. Our own naval presence out there would in the end count for nothing if the Americans weren't there.

It's a funny place to be an Ambassador, because everything is very personal. A number of Ambassadors at times, including me, found ourselves, sometimes very publicly, out of favour. It happened to my predecessor, Robin Lamb when the Home Office had granted asylum to a Bahraini (without consulting the Foreign Office).

It happened to me twice. The first time was very strange. We knew something was wrong, because we had the QBP [Queen's Birthday Party]. Normally, we would get a senior minister, but no minister turned up. I had a chat with someone quite senior in the family and government who had become a close friend. He told me the decision had been taken at a high level, but he had no idea why. I racked my brains but couldn't think of anything. There were no press attacks on me or anything, but for one month, I couldn't see a minister. At the end of a month, I got an invitation from a minister to go and see him. That was clearly the signal that all was back to normal.

The second time was a rather bigger incident. I'd been in London and I got back to the airport. My driver always had the papers on the back seat of the car so I could read them. The main Bahrain daily newspaper is actually English language and has the widest circulation of any newspaper. All the newspapers had on their front pages 'outrageous' behaviour by a member of Al Wefaq, the Shia party in the National Assembly. It didn't say what they'd done or indeed who the Bahraini was. When I got into the Embassy, my colleagues said it was a bit strange and they weren't quite sure what it was. So I gave it two or three days to let the dust settle before meeting Al Wefaq. Al Wefaq was a broad church. You had everything from the men in suits with postgraduate qualifications from Western universities as economists or doctors, through to men in turbans who were deeply religious. I rang up friend who was a graduate of a British university and asked him round for a cup of tea at the Residence.

He agreed and asked if he could bring a couple of other 'suits'. The Residence is above the office, but I deliberately invited him to the Residence as an informal thing. What had happened was that they'd had a public meeting. The leader of the party had said that the time had come for the National Assembly to vote to elect the Prime Minister. Well the Prime Minister had been serving since 1971 and was appointed by the King. This was really seen as a very direct challenge and insult to the Prime Minister.

I think that was the Thursday afternoon. On Saturday morning, all over the front pages, 'Disgraceful behaviour by the British Ambassador' and 'British Ambassador must be expelled now'. The story was that I'd met the three MPs in a 'secret' meeting and I was interfering horribly in the domestic politics of Bahrain and all the rest of it. Bahrain has host nation police inside the compound. So whether they reported it, I don't know. Anyway, it was there and it was accurate, although there had been nothing secret about the meeting.

We immediately started to get word out that Ambassadors are there to talk to MPs. It hadn't been a secret meeting. It went on and on. One month passed. And it didn't stop. I think David Miliband even called the Foreign Minister, but I can't remember for sure.

There were some really touching moments. I really made a point of getting out and about as much as I could. There were a couple of occasions where a very senior member of the ruling family came up to me, sort of made a point in sweeping through the room, saying very loudly 'Ambassador, I'm so sorry that you're going through this. I think it's absolutely outrageous.' My diplomatic colleagues, especially the Europeans, were fantastic. They really clustered round.

We then had a bit of excitement because, whilst this was all going on, a delegation of hedge fund managers came out from London. Bahrain is a significant international financial centre. I did a dinner in my lovely garden for these people. In the middle of this dinner, a guard came up and said he thought I should just come around to the gate. There were policemen everywhere. Someone had thrown a very crude device that would have made a bit of a bang. One of our guards saw that it hadn't gone off, so he picked it up and threw it back! If it had gone off, someone could have got a nasty burn. They caught the people who threw it over. Interestingly, it wasn't angry Sunnis making a point. In fact, it was two young Shia men. We never really got to the bottom of what the motivation was.

Anyway, it kept going and we were coming up to the Grand Prix. The one thing that Bahrain (and especially the Crown Prince who was the driving force behind the race) did not want was the international media descending on Bahrain for Formula One and the first thing they saw was the big story of the British Ambassador at loggerheads with the Bahraini government. So I think there was some quite elegant footwork by the Crown Prince and the story died a sudden death. There was a very interesting postscript. Not long afterwards at a wedding, I bumped into the Deputy Prime Minister. He asked me to go and have a chat the following week. So I went in. He said, 'You know, I'm sorry. You must understand how

emotional people get about this kind of thing.’ I said that I understood and wanted him to know that I didn’t support their position. What I had said was, ‘Now is not the time for this. Bahrain is a developing democracy. We all recognise that. And there will come a time when it’s right for the Chamber deputies to elect the Prime Minister. But that time is not now.’ He said, ‘Did you really say that?’ and I replied that that was exactly what I had said. Basically the government line. I think there was some horror on his part after all that campaign when I’d actually been rather reinforcing the government view. A very Bahraini story.

In the long term, relationships weren’t damaged at all by any of this. And the funny thing is the Prime Minister, who only died two years ago, and I had a warm relationship. I used to go and have long chats with him, often reminiscing as much about his happy memories of living in London in the 1950s and his various engagements with the British as about political issues. So there’s an ability to separate the anger of something that the British government or an Ambassador had done from genuinely very warm personal relationships.

I had close protection because it was felt we should assume that the risk to a British Ambassador in Bahrain was the same as the risk to a British Ambassador in Riyadh because, for a Gulf citizen, there is more or less free movement across the causeway which links Bahrain to Saudi. At that time, Al Qaeda was very active and the risk was high.

Sarah, as I mentioned, was at the US Embassy, but when she finished she had to retire from the State Department as her posting had run out. She got a job with a firm called Aegis, a British security firm. And specifically she had to write regular bulletins on the security situation for their clients. She enjoyed the work which was quite interesting, all gathered from open source and a few chats. It became really useful at times, particularly the focus on the Arab Spring, as she was able to draw on some of her contacts to actually have quite a lot of useful background on what was happening at the time.

We arrived at a fascinating time. Bahrain for some time had been going through an interesting period, because the previous Amir had died in 1999. His son who became King changed to a kingdom. Rather to people’s surprise, he instituted a huge programme of reform. By this stage, a lot of exiles (mainly Shia but not exclusively) were living abroad, mostly in London. He invited them back to give more heft to the National Assembly. He appointed, deliberately, quite a lot of Shia to ministerial roles. Anyone who could have been described as a political prisoner was released. So it was a real time of change.

He gave the Crown Prince the reform portfolio. The Crown Prince – and I make no apologies for the eulogies – is one of the most impressive people I've met in my career. He was quite a young man then. He was educated at the American School in Bahrain and then went to the American University in Washington. At the time he became Crown Prince, he was doing a postgraduate PhD at Cambridge in economics. He got pulled back and immediately said he wanted to start economic strategy with a completely clean sheet of paper. The model of just being a financial centre wasn't sustainable because of competition from Dubai and elsewhere. Bahrain was a tiny country, with not much oil, so they needed something else. McKinsey's did an overarching report and identified four areas for complete reform, including training and education, fiscal policy and workforce. Then he got really the best in the world into each of those sectors to start planning. The Bahraini Development Board sat on the top of this. There were some British consultants. The whole thing was really impressive. The Crown Prince kept pushing quite hard to make sure that it kept momentum going forward. I think his ambitions were for Bahrain to become a sustainably wealthy country. Critically – and he always emphasised this point – it was no good just having a wealthy bit at the top. For the long term interests of the country, you had to lift up the living standards of everyone, Shia and Sunni. So that was absolutely central to his plan as well. And I think he'd have got there, but for the Arab Spring. That really knocked things off track.

The Crown Prince was highly intelligent, very enlightened and very personable. I saw a lot of him. It was really enjoyable to sit and talk with him. His father, the King, was also hugely likeable.

Despite the big political stories, my main priority for 90% of my tour was the trade and investment side. And financial services, where there was already a significant British footprint. I particularly focussed on developing the relationship in Sharia compliant finance between Bahrain and the UK, as both were international leaders in the field.

The other thing that was a real pleasure working on in Bahrain was the navy. The Royal Navy were there in force, not in terms of the number of people, but the most senior operational command in the navy at that time was Bahrain. A one-star Commodore was responsible for the Iraqi oil platforms, the Straits of Hormuz and Somalia piracy, so all the big issues of the day were covered from Bahrain. So he was the Commander of the Royal Navy there and also the Deputy Commander of the coalition forces.

I always had a very close relationship with them. They were a real credit, very much admired by the other coalition teams. Really good at building relationships with the US Admiral as well. Actually, on at least one occasion, MoD through all sorts of channels were trying to find out some particular aspect of US defence policy and we were just getting stonewalled. The Commodore said, 'Oh, well, why didn't you tell me? I had a word with the Admiral and the answer is this!'

There was also a permanent RAF detachment, because all the VIP flights to both Afghanistan and Iraq flew out of Bahrain, so ministers, senior military and sometimes royalty would fly in from London and then jump on a VIP flight with the defence equipment. So we'd see a lot of people coming through. I spent an awful lot of the small hours of the morning sitting at Bahrain airport.

It was also a country, like some of the other Gulf states, where you had a big human rights issue. There was no question there were some nasty things happening. It was nothing like on the scale, I think, of what certainly the opposition would have said. Usually I've got very high regard for the human rights NGOs. I felt Human Rights Watch, for some reason much more engaged in Bahrain than Amnesty, were probably not always as critical enough of their sources as they might have been. The Bahrainis would have said there was no human rights problem. And that was also rubbish. Quite clearly untrue. So one always had that sort of line to tread.

Almost all the human rights activists were Shia, and some had an agenda that was basically pro-Iran. That didn't necessarily mean that everything they were saying about human rights wasn't true, but there was that agenda there. There were also some human rights activists living in exile in London.

It was very frustrating sometimes because I had a close relationship with the Ministry of the Interior. Two or three times they called me in to say they had details from the internet that so and so in London was clearly inciting violence. I said that I would get straight onto London. But the answer was always that an English court would not consider what had been written a threat. I did share Bahraini frustration on some of this.

The great supporter of the Bahraini opposition was the late Lord Avebury. He used to be in touch with the Foreign Office quite regularly. At one stage, he asked if could bring some of his friends from the Bahraini opposition to meet Foreign Office officials. I happened to be in London at the time and Middle East Department asked me what I thought of the idea. I

thought it was fine but suggested that they make a clear public declaration in advance of the meeting that they did not support the use of violence in Bahrain, under any circumstances. We never heard back from Lord Avebury which was, I think, quite revealing.

A bit about domestic British politics. I was in Bahrain in 2010, when Gordon Brown lost power to David Cameron. The Bahrainis really complained about how little attention they got from the British government when it was Labour and how few ministerial visits they got. Frankly, as every Ambassador will, I rather agreed with them. But it made a difference that quite soon before the 2010 election Peter Mandelson came out to support a Rolls Royce bid to sell engines to Gulf Air, but also did some brilliant diplomatic work with the King, Crown Prince and Ministers. RR also got the deal.

We then had the election. One of the first things the Cameron government produced was a Gulf strategy. Like all these kind of strategies, there were new areas of activity, including trade and investment, security and intelligence, regional diplomacy, culture and education. One was engagement, an explicit recognition by the government (I'm sure driven by William Hague, because he used to come out when he was in Opposition) that there were really important relationships in the Gulf: you had to be willing as a government to spend time just engaging with them, it couldn't be purely transactional. And my goodness me, there were more visits by ministers and members of the cabinet in the first six months after they won the election than in the entire Blair-Brown administration.

What a great time to be an Ambassador! Just as you'll get blamed for things the government's done, you'll get a lot of personal credit for things that government does, even if it's nothing to do with you personally. I think colleagues in other Gulf posts would have said the same.

During my last four months or so, the only story was the Arab Spring. It was huge in Bahrain. It was already happening in Tunisia and Egypt. William Hague was on a regional tour. He came out around the 10th of February. I remember we were sitting in his suite in the hotel watching key developments in Egypt. It kicked off in Bahrain on Valentine's Day, the 14<sup>th</sup> of February. It had been announced way in advance by various groups that there were going to be marches on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February. We had this rather surreal afternoon, on the 14th of February. On advice from his British advisers, the King had just instituted an honours system. The first session of this was in the afternoon with a big military parade and a Royal Box with the King sitting in it. Everyone who was anyone in Bahrain was invited.

There was a section where all the diplomats sat. We were all watching this parade but we all knew that the marches were happening that afternoon. We couldn't check our phones because of the parade. The parade finished and all these people were given their medals. As we were leaving, you could see a plume of black smoke. There was a lot of rioting in Bahrain. Every Friday evening, you had rioting in some of the Shia areas. In itself that wasn't a big deal. But we knew these big marches were happening. I had to drive along the motorway to get back to the Residence, quite close to the Shia areas. Clearly, there was quite a bit going on.

The smoke may just have been young Shia setting fire to the barricades, but it became very apparent that these first big protests were peaceful marches. There was some striking footage: the average marcher was middle aged and middle class, not young Shia radicals. A lot of women. Not the kind of people who would throw stones and Molotov cocktails. But I think the police were so used to dealing with violent rioting that maybe they used the same sort of tactics with these protesters. People did get hurt and there was one fatality. There was a huge march for the funeral and there was quite a lot of trouble there. And also Pearl Roundabout, the focal point of the Arab Spring in Bahrain was occupied by Shia at that stage and they were there for only about two or three days. In the small hours of the morning, the police came to clear them. There were some British advisers around so we felt we had quite a good idea of exactly what was going on. I think four people were killed in that clearing. Experts who looked at the footage afterwards said that it was an easy operation that could have been done with no violence, no casualties at all.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, a large crowd reoccupied Pearl Roundabout. The forces, including the army, were in position to go and clear the roundabout. It was lining up to be something really nasty. At that point, the Crown Prince gave the order to the army to return to barracks and the police to pull back. The Crown Prince said they were going to solve this by dialogue and not by force.

The next morning I was in the car when William Hague called. He told me that my job was to support the Crown Prince by every means available to get this dialogue going. We both felt that this was the way to underpin the long term stability of a close ally which we had an interest in.

When something like this happened in Bahrain, you couldn't be a diplomat, you had to get engaged. It just wouldn't have worked any other way. My American colleague who was the

Chargé and I spent the next month, up to the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, shuttling between the Crown Prince, the Shia (in particular, I was dealing with one individual, a very senior member of the party) and the Sunni parties. I was very careful to spend time with the two Sunni parties in the National Assembly. Both had a religious base: one was basically the local franchise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the other was Salafist. The Salafist I was dealing with was especially forward looking and open-minded about possible ways to resolve the crisis. I kept in very close touch with the American and was scrupulous at least twice a week in clocking in with the Crown Prince, either ringing him or actually getting to see him, so there could be no suggestion that I was freelancing.

It became immediately apparent that the people who got it, who understood what needed doing were the Sunnis – both parties. They were completely objective. They essentially agreed with the Crown Prince that dialogue was necessary. They were mindful of their constituencies, but they had bought into the idea that the Crown Prince's approach was the right one.

With Al Wefaq it was a very different story. My interlocutor took persuading to make the tiniest gestures that might help the Crown Prince. On one occasion, he agreed with me that they would shift their position from insisting that there could only be two parties at the talks, the Crown Prince and them, on the basis that he represented the Sunnis, to having them, the Crown Prince and the Sunnis. But when I saw him the next day, he told me they weren't going to do that after all. I have absolutely no doubt that, because it was a Shia political party, the final decision was taken by the senior Shia cleric in Bahrain, who was incredibly naive politically. I don't know what he had in mind. Anyway, that idea died.

Sometime in the middle of all this, Peter [Ricketts] and David Richards came out on a tour of some Arab Spring related countries. I went to see the Crown Prince with Peter and the Defence Attaché took David to see the head of the armed forces who was a real hard-line friend of the Prime Minister, old school. Peter and I had a very good meeting with the Crown Prince who, although under great pressure, was still very focused, very clear what his objectives were. It was really valuable that Peter was there as a gesture of support for the Crown Prince direct from London. It really made an impact.

David Richards, on the other hand, was confronted with the question, 'What is that Ambassador of yours doing? Get him out of here! He's an absolute disgrace. He's interfering and undermining our security.' David couldn't get a word in edgeways. So you

had these two. Peter very kindly said, 'Don't worry, what you're doing is what you should be doing. Keep going, keep doing it!' So it was very reassuring to get that direct from Peter.

So we kept plodding away. As time went on, the Shia were not moving much. The problem was that the Crown Prince was making incremental concessions to the Shia to bring them to the table. Every concession made was a price to pay in terms of the Sunni reaction.

So I thought the situation was getting a bit precarious. And then on about the 12th of March, I had what turned out to be my last meeting with Al Wefaq. And I said to him, 'Look, surely you see where this is heading for now. The offer you've got from the Crown Prince is the best the Shia community have ever had and will have for a long, long time to come if you take it. If you don't, we're going to have tanks running across our causeway. It's going to be horrible and your community is going to suffer.' He replied, 'Yes, I know.' But they didn't make any concessions the next day. So on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, there was a large Shia march. I keep saying Shia, but actually there were one or two Sunni human rights people and some communists as well. I should have said that Pearl Roundabout was still occupied. By this time it had become a very large encampment. There was a big march in a place called Riffa which is where the King and the Crown Prince were. Potentially very provocative. Actually, I think it was handled very well. There was no violence and it went off without any problems. I remember going to bed that night, thinking that maybe I was being too pessimistic and it would all end peacefully.

Then the tanks came across the causeway. And that was the end of it. I have no hesitation blaming the Shia in large part. It was entirely avoidable. The other sadness I have is for the Crown Prince whose agenda for improving life in Bahrain for the entire population was at best very seriously put back by some years.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, the Saudi tanks came across, with some Emirati ones. I think they were the only two countries involved in this. The Qataris had a pretty bad relationship with the Bahrainis so they were unlikely to get involved. The Kuwaitis were actually quietly trying to do some mediation and play a helpful role. The Omanis were certainly not involved at all. And in fact, despite what you read, what they were used for was to guard the military bases in Bahrain to free up all the Bahraini forces to go out and reimpose order on the streets. There were a couple of stories of Saudis being seen on checkpoints but we were never able to verify them.

One could understand why the hardliners in the family said enough is enough. They felt they were about to lose control. And it really looked like that. In the Shia areas, you had young men sitting on roadblocks. There were plenty of true stories of Sunnis getting beaten up. The same was happening in Sunni areas with young Shia the victims.

We in the Embassy weren't seen as a target. But where the Shia put the roadblocks, in the middle of the city, meant that no-one could get to us. The regional security officer was actually staying nearby, tried to come down and was turned away and had stones chucked at him. So we were stuck there. Sarah, myself and our three children who thought this was the most exciting thing that had ever happened. Sarah, fortunately, is robust! We had our four Bahraini policemen, our cook in the house and the maid. We had enough in the deep freeze to feed everyone for about 48 hours. Then we sensed that things were about to get a bit easier. We were really critical on food. We backed onto Ras Roman, quite a poor district. So Sarah went out with our wonderful Nepalese cook to go and buy some bread and see what else she could find. Our dog was an English bull terrier, who was a bit naughty with cats and camels and completely sappy with people. English bull terriers frighten people, they look scary. So Sarah took George with her. They were able to fill up a couple of shopping bags, so we were back in provisions again.

I should say that, frankly, it would have been diplomatically risky for me to go out. There was also no close protection team at the time. So we'd been under siege for a couple of days. We all knew what was coming next – a crackdown. We also had a sort of paradoxical situation in that we'd been advising British citizens to leave from very early in the crisis. A large number of them had left. So it was probably a reasonable bet that those who were left had decided to stay anyway. Then, of course, we didn't know for sure whether we were about to move into a period of extreme stability insofar as you'd have essentially martial law or something else was going to happen. It was quite a slow burn crisis. All our evacuation plans were completely ready to go. We decided with London that we would still play safe and get people out. Which, with the benefit of hindsight, was actually the wrong call. This charter aircraft turned up. And I think my family of four constituted half of all the passengers on the aircraft. The press picked up on that. It was a close call and, of course, it did settle down and people could have quite safely stayed.

Then we had a rather moving thing. An entirely peaceful crowd of Shia men and women turned up at the gate of the Embassy, begging me to intervene to head off the crackdown they

knew was coming. I went into the gatehouse and was at a window physically probably less than a foot from them. Very distressed people and very distressing to see. I didn't open the gate, mainly we had these four Bahraini policemen who hadn't slept basically for 48 hours. You could see they were utterly exhausted. There was no way I was going to let them anywhere near a crowd of people. So I passed the message out that I was very sorry, but we couldn't intervene in this and couldn't open the gate.

Then the crackdown started. The village behind the embassy was a Shia village. So we did see the police coming in and starting to fire riot gas at a small, peaceful demonstration. So we saw all of that playing out. And we had a very nasty few days when they really did crack down: there were wholesale arrests, and I think lots of nasty things going on, some of which came quite close to home. I know these are fairly minor but two British Council staff were arrested in the office. Plain clothes police just walked in and took these people away. As it turned out, they were released 48 hours later and they hadn't been mistreated. They'd been taken into the Formula One circuit because that had been used as a sort of interrogation centre. They were perfectly well treated, certainly not beaten or anything. But there was absolutely no due process to this. They were never formally arrested. They were just taken away and there was no record. No-one could contact them while they were there and no-one knew where they were at the time.

The other very distressing case was when one of the drivers came in, in a real state of shock. He asked if I had a shirt I could lend him. He'd been going through a police checkpoint and when he showed his ID card, it showed where he lived. It's very easy in Bahrain to tell whether someone is Shia or Sunni because they're almost completely segregated, other than the middle classes. So the policeman saw where he lived and just threw his ID card across to the other side of the road. He pulled the driver by his shirt and almost ripped it off his back. The police then shouted and jeered at him. Frankly, compared to some of what we were hearing was going on, that was pretty minor, but the poor chap was, understandably, in quite a state when he got into the office. The ironic thing is that you get to know your drivers pretty well. This guy was basically supporting the status quo. He was not in any way a radical or anti-government.

So it was it was very, very nasty at that stage. I did go in a lot of lobbying saying that the human rights abuses had got to stop.

One thing where I think history has been rewritten is that you quite often read that the Iranians were involved in the unrest from the beginning and such like. I'm absolutely sure they weren't. Frankly, I would rather expect them to be. But we had a very close intelligence relationship with the Bahrainis: I knew the slightest sniff the Bahrainis had of the Iranians doing anything. At no point during the Arab Spring did the Bahraini intelligence agency ever suggest that there was any Iranian involvement. So I think that's something that's been written after the event. I think probably the Iranians did start to interfere later on.

There were some people who said that it really touch and go for the Bahraini for the Al Khalifa, whether they would survive this as the security forces could potentially get overwhelmed, in particular, in the run up to when the Crown Prince pulled the police force off the streets where there had been a lot of deployments. I never thought that was true. I think that the army and the police between them were actually probably getting pretty tired. But they have a National Guard in Bahrain, quite a large force, and as far as I know they were never deployed. So even before the GCC forces arrived, there was quite a lot to spare.

I remember when I got back to London there was a Heads of Mission meeting. I was asked to give a talk on the use of social media in a crisis. It was the first crisis where we systematically used social media as part of our communication plan and particularly using the Embassy Facebook site. That was brilliant, because not only could we post messages and get a very wide readership in British community, but you'd be getting input from all over the country. Brits would write in and recommend avoiding such and such a street where there was trouble or something happening. So it was a really important tool for us to know what was going on and useful for the community because of the real time information. Invaluable.

#### **Ambassador, Muscat, 2011–14**

I got out to Muscat in September.

I'd like to call out my predecessor, Noel Guckian. They had had a very sad time as his wife got cancer. But if the measure of a good colleague is the quality of the handover you get, Noel and his wife were absolutely fantastic. It was a real pleasure working with him. Sadly he died last year.

There can be few postings like Muscat. It's the most stunningly beautiful country. Omanis are very likeable, friendly people. It's easy to get around inside the country. It's a relatively large country, a bit bigger than the UK. There's a very good motorway network. I love off

road driving, so even if you only had a day, you could drive for an hour on the motorway and then go off into the mountains, right up into the villages. It was just the most wonderful, existence. I sometimes wondered what I had done to earn this!

**SR:** As British Ambassador, you had a very special position I think?

**JB:** Absolutely. It was one of the very few places – maybe the only one – where you are emphatically the number one Ambassador. And not only that, but the Sultan liked people to know you were the number one Ambassador.

The other thing that was quite fun there is that there was a very large British loan service team, commanded by a serving two star British general. The general and I had been in the same battalion both in Cyprus and Germany some 30 years earlier. We were neighbours as we lived quite close to each other. This network of about 100 loan service officers was a very useful asset as part of the relationship.

Oman is very different from the other Gulf states. I remember writing a diptel to all Whitehall to remind people that we tend to talk of the GCC collectively, or the Gulf states, but really we should say the Gulf states and Oman, because Oman is so different from all of the other Gulf states in a number of ways. Its history is very different. It was a minor imperial power at the beginning of the 19th century. It controlled a fair part of the coast of East Africa. It had trading posts way down into the East Indies. And it was a very significant maritime power. They had some warships, things that looked like HMS Victory. So they faced the Indian Ocean and, at times, they did have possessions up the Gulf as well, because of such a powerful navy.

The way it was governed was very different as well. The other Gulf countries are all monarchies. But the ruler, the King, the Amir or whatever, was there by the consent of their family. It was a bit more than first among equals, but they had very much to rule with consent of their family even in Bahrain, where you had a fixed system of primogeniture. Oman was completely different. I always say that if the other Gulf states are corporations, Oman was absolutely a one- man show, an autocracy, a very benign autocracy. But Sultan Qaboos was in charge and that was made very clear. If any member of the family looked like getting a little bit too significant, he would find some way to remove them off the scene for a while. It wouldn't be imprisoning people or anything like that, but getting them out of the way for a while. Although he had fantastic wealth himself, he didn't give a great deal of it to his family. If they wanted or needed money, they basically had to go and make it.

In 1975, when he took power, I think there was one school and one mission hospital in the whole country. There were ten miles of asphalt roads. If you were Omani you needed a visa to leave the country and the old Sultan had to personally approve that. I was there nearly 40 years later, but the change had been fantastic. For all the huge wealth he had, it was very clear that most of the wealth had gone straight back into the country into infrastructure, schools and health care and everything else. So I think he'd done very, very well for Oman. But also I felt quite soon after I arrived that I was catching the end of a golden age. They had a bit of trouble in the Arab Spring. Not a great deal. But there had been some protests, which was unheard of in Oman before the Arab Spring. That wasn't because it was particularly repressive. People knew that there would be a degree of tolerance. Qaboos was also genuinely hugely popular. There was no question about that. But there were some protests. And there was one in particular, on a roundabout on the road between Muscat and Dubai. About two hours out of Muscat, this roundabout was occupied and the road blocked. And that was cleared with force. I think one or two people were killed. Although, again, it sounds like it was a well-handled operation.

When I arrived, people had got the realisation that they could protest. Not only that, but the Sultan was willing to give them a lot of what they wanted. So he sacked some of his ministers who were alleged to be corrupt. He created more jobs in the public sector. But there were a lot of strikes at the time I arrived. The default of employers came to be just to concede to everything the strikers asked for. If they didn't, the Ministry of Labour would tend to step in and tell them to do it anyway. So even before the Arab Spring, it wasn't a sustainable economy, insofar as the public sector was massively over-large. And there wasn't enough opportunity, particularly for young people. The private sector was not growing fast enough. And then when you added to that the strikes and the difficulty of running a business or even people wanting to work in the government sector, it was very difficult to do anything. Real economic reform was needed. The only person who basically took decisions was the Sultan. He was also Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister, so he had all these key issues. He never went to cabinet. That tells you how the decision making was done. He was a highly intelligent, well-informed man but no one man can really take on all those decisions. I remember on one occasion a very senior Omani came for a drink one evening at the house. He told me that the Sultan had to start on serious economic reform. The trouble was that the only person in the country who he listened to was me! He wouldn't listen to anyone else. So he urged me to go and tell him. I replied that that was a bit above

my pay grade. But the Sultan and I did talk about the economy. But the trouble was that he'd agree with every word you said, but didn't actually do anything about it. And, of course, the more time went on, the worse the situation became. When the IMF Article 5 team came up did their annual report, I always found they were very willing to chat. So I always tried to track them down and have a drink with the head of the team before they left. He said that in a well-managed economy, even if you're very rich, you should have some debt because that's just an efficient use of your money. He said that at the moment, the Omanis basically had no debt, but they were going to need to start borrowing soon. If they went to the market straightaway, they would get the most incredible rates because that was such a good bet for any lender. So they were actually recommending that Oman should start to grow its debt. They didn't do it and, of course, when they had to start borrowing after my time, they were getting much less favourable rates.

The other great worry for all of us and the Omanis was the succession. You had basically a constitutional thing called the Basic Law which laid out succession arrangements. The family council, about 180 male relatives of the Sultan, got together on his death and they had 48 hours to agree who the new ruler should be. If they failed to do that, there were two sealed letters, in two safes, one in Muscat and one in Salalah in the south. That would have the name of the Sultan's successor, who would become the ruler. Well, the Law didn't specify whether decisions had to be by consensus or majority. It didn't specify whether there was to be a quorum. It was full of holes. I remember doing an analysis with colleagues. We thought it probably was going to be all right, with an easy, peaceful handover. But there were real vulnerabilities. But there doesn't seem to have been any difficulty in selecting the current Sultan. We'd periodically and gently been suggesting to Qaboos that it might be a really good idea to appoint a Crown Prince to give more certainty and start training him up. To be fair, there's a history in Oman of Crown Princes bumping off their fathers so you don't start from very good place! I'll never forget that the Prince of Wales came out to visit and the Sultan gave him a dinner. The Prince was briefed to raise the possibility of a Crown Prince. The Prince is a consummate diplomat, he's so good at raising really difficult subjects in a way that could never cause offence. So he did it at the right moment. The Sultan looked the Prince straight in the eye and said, 'Crown Princes are a very bad idea!'

In some ways, frankly, it was an easy job, because it was such an easy relationship, requiring so little management. Diplomatically, it wasn't an especially challenging job. We had some really quite meaty interests there. Oman is a very reliable partner in that strategically very

difficult bit of the world: that was invaluable. I mentioned the loan service team ... we had a very close defence relationship, which included the Omanis buying a significant amount of British defence equipment. The biggest single deal that I was very much involved with was the British Aerospace Typhoon. It was a very important deal for them, because I think it was only the second sale and they were hoping it would be a door opener to many other sales in the Middle East. David Cameron actually came out to witness the signature of the contract.

When I was there, 70% of all foreign investment in Oman was British. And that was almost all BP and Shell.

Diplomatically, the Omanis were very candid about their position. They were friends to all. There was no point in going into them and expecting them to beat up the Iranians about something. But if you go and say it would be really helpful if you could pass this message to the Iranians, you could know that they were reliable and would do it without the Iranians going up like a rocket. They were invaluable in that role. They didn't always agree with our policy in Yemen. But they played generally a very constructive role, trying to be peacemakers.

The thing we were also worried about at that time, I remember, was that so much of the relationship was the Sultan. Every decision was taken by the Sultan and much of the older generation had close links with the UK as they'd probably been to university here or Sandhurst, or whatever. In the early days, there were quite a lot of Brits around the country. So they'd worked with Brits and clearly got on with them. But the younger generation ... we were trying to put together a strategy of how we can raise awareness of the UK's relationship amongst the younger generation.

Another indication of the extraordinary relationship is the number of senior visitors we had. The Prince of Wales visited and Princess Alexandra came to the opening of the opera house. We got a lot of ministerial visits. The Defence Secretary was quite a regular. Probably not surprisingly, the Foreign Secretary came a couple of times as well. There was also this thing which we all called the Privy Council, though that wasn't its official name. This was happened every year when I was there, on the first weekend in January. The Sultan would fly out a group of Brits, including one serving minister (when I was there it was either Alan Duncan or Lord Astor from MoD), CDS and a couple of very senior Foreign Office officials. You also tended to have the CEO of Shell, because of their connection. Then a couple of former CDSs, Christopher Geidt when he was The Queen's Principal Private Secretary. All

in all, a pretty stellar cast. They'd sit down at about 11 p.m. with the Sultan in the Palace and would talk through the night. It was all sorts of foreign strategic issues. Each person would present on a particular subject and the Sultan would give them a quite a candid briefing on the internal situation in Oman. The other day I saw someone saying on a human rights website that the Brits basically still governed Oman and gave the Sultan some instructions on how to govern. Absolute rubbish. It was very much a forum for strategic stuff and didn't deal with the internal stuff.

There was an economic council, which was pretty much moribund. It was an entirely private sector group. And then you had your parallel diplomacy. I always recognised that the Embassy was but one of the numerous channels ... links between the government of Oman, particularly the Sultan, and the United Kingdom and not always the most important one.

There was a legendary character who only died a year ago, called Sir Eric Bennett. He was an ex-RAF fast jet pilot who set up the Sultan's Air Force and remained there for the rest of his life. He was extremely close to the Sultan. For the last years of the Sultan's life, he and an Omani called Omar Zawawi saw more of the Sultan than practically anyone else in the country. Eric dealt directly with the PS at Number 10. The really important high level contacts were done through Eric, they weren't done through the Embassy. I would probably be aware of them because I had a good relationship with Eric. We used to have lunch regularly and he would brief me on what was going on. If I wanted to know something or if I wanted to see the Sultan, I would always do it through Eric. I would speak to Eric first, then make a formal request to the Foreign Ministry so you didn't upset them. But Eric was the guy who actually made it happen.

There were all sorts of other people. There were a couple of, by now, very elderly businessmen who had been working with the Sultan's father. They were older than the Sultan, well into their 80s and had an avuncular relationship with the Sultan and could have conversations with him that no-one else could. They tended not to see much of the Embassy and I used to try and seek them out because I knew they were hearing things that I never would. They were always discreet, but there were still things they could share that would be hugely valuable. So I was always a great fan of parallel diplomacy. It was beneficial to the wider bilateral relationship.

The last thing I'd like to say on Oman ... as I've already said, the only two non-Arab Ambassadors to have a relationship with the Sultan were myself and the American. I would

get summoned, with a couple of days' notice. It would always be in the early evening. You would arrive at the Palace, a few miles outside Muscat. If the meeting was at seven o'clock of course you'd get there at half past six, knowing full well that if the meeting was at seven, it probably wouldn't start until eight. The Sultan always kept people waiting. It was part of his style. (Apparently when the Queen came for a State Visit just before I arrived, one of his protocol people asked, 'How late does The Queen like to arrive?' And of course, the answer was, 'The Queen is never late!' So, for the first time ever, the programme ran exactly on schedule.) So you'd sit in this exquisite Palace and wait. And then you'd go in for your meeting. One to one, which is quite unusual. In all the other Gulf states I've been in you'd have a minister or another senior member of the family. But the Sultan was one to one. Each meeting I had with him got longer and longer. My first one was about 45 minutes. The last one was a good two hours. They were the most enjoyable meetings. It wasn't just business. The Sultan talked about the history of Oman, the history of the region, absorbing details on recent history and what had been happening in other Gulf states. The Sultan did a lot of reminiscing about his time in the UK because, as a young man, he had gone to Sandhurst. He'd then done a year with the British army with a regiment called the Cameronians which, frankly, was one of the hardest regiments in the British Army – a Glasgow regiment. They'd been very involved in reuniting Oman in the 1950s and fought very well. Having done that, he then spent three months with Suffolk County Council to get some understanding of civil administration. So he lived in rural Suffolk as well. He lived with a vicar and his family. He is very musical. He told me he would go for bike rides and sometimes he would hear the organist practising in a church, so he would go and sit at the back of the church just listening to the music. So clearly he had very happy memories of the UK. That's where his attachment to the UK began. That was reinforced in 1970 when we had a role in the coup that removed his father. And then Dhofar, of course.

One of the key events of the year was the Sultan's New Year's party. The format was fixed: you would be invited to the Palace. There'd be 50 or 60 guests. The entire Omani cabinet would be there with one or two other very senior Omanis. The Omanis were there without their wives. A British minister was always invited, too. Then you'd have the British and US Ambassadors with their wives, the senior manager of Shell, the Sultan's advisers. You'd have about an hour and a half in this ante-room. What a fantastic networking opportunity with fabulous wine and snacks! After a while, you'd be called through to a pavilion in the garden and the Sultan would be at the entrance to greet you as you went in. By now it was

probably about 9.30. You'd sit down and there would be two or three of the military bands playing on the lawn. And there was a buffet, so you would have this huge feast. That would finish around midnight. At which point you went to the auditorium next to the Palace, where the Oman Symphony Orchestra gave a concert. It lasted about two hours. Finally, at about half past three, you went back home. A legendary event.

It was the most wonderful existence, it really was. But all the way through there was this slight worry that there were challenging times ahead.

### **Deputy Private Secretary to HRH The Prince of Wales, 2014–17**

**SR:** So now we come to your time working for the Prince of Wales. Did this involve the usual recruitment procedures? How did it come about?

**JB:** Well, I was asked to bid for the job. I wasn't the only one to bid. I'd been in both Bahrain and Muscat when the Prince and the Duchess visited, so I knew them from then. Fortunately, the visits had gone well, so I think it's probably for that reason that I was asked to bid. The selection process was fairly standard, entirely done by the household. I had an initial chat with the Private Secretary. Then there was a panel with him and a couple of the others. The Duchess's Private Secretary and Justin Mundy who headed the International Sustainability Unit. After that interview there was a shortlist. The shortlisted candidates had an interview with the Prince and the Duchess at Highgrove. It was the most extraordinary job because there can be very few jobs like it anywhere, I think. It's inspiring to work for the Prince of Wales. He is so passionate about the things that we all know he cares about very much. But the other thing that we talk about is his sense of duty. When you actually see it, it is absolutely extraordinary. He just never stopped working. For that reason, it was without a doubt the hardest work of any job I've done in my career. I think all the Private Secretaries found the same. Incredible. We had to keep up with him, even though there were many of us to cover the workload.

For me, it was a great job because my career had been very heavily focused on one region, more than I think is normal. I'd not done much outside that. Suddenly I was dealing with just about anything, a huge range of issues. In about my second week, someone who'd done things with the Prince before came to speak to me about what they were planning to do in the Arctic: we were sitting in my office with maps of the Arctic laid out on the desk. Two weeks earlier, I'd been in Muscat and had spent the previous 11 years in the Gulf! That's the pattern right through: geographically and thematically, it was such a wonderfully varied job.

One of the lovely things about the Foreign Office is that you do meet more than your fair share of really interesting people, often very inspiring people. Even more so in Clarence House. You met the most extraordinary people who'd done the most extraordinary things. I should add that you also find yourself meeting or dealing with quite the opposite – people who either had an agenda and were trying to bring the Prince in some way to exploit that or, frankly, just wanted the kudos of doing something with the Prince.

It was an inspiring place to work, because it is a relatively small household and the staff is so dedicated. It was unusual for me because the Foreign Office Private Secretary is just passing through. One of the Private Secretaries had been there for about 10 or 12 years. A lot of the other staff, the secretaries and the PAs and some of the administrative people have been there for decades. They certainly don't do it for the pay! They worked very hard and they were utterly loyal.

We also had an important relation with Buckingham Palace and Kensington Palace. I had a very good relationship with Buckingham Palace. And also certainly with Prince Harry's Private Secretary. I saw a bit less of the Cambridges' Private Secretary. By that stage, the Queen was still doing a few visits, I think only to Europe. She did one to Germany when I was there, but very few. So when we did the Royal Visits Committee, the Prince was really the first one that you dealt with as the most senior member of The Royal Family.

It was a very big Private Secretaries office: there was the Principal Private Secretary who was William Nye. Then Clive Alderton took over from him. There were two Deputy Private Secretaries. I was one and the other one deputised on all the non-foreign issues and also did Scotland. Then you had four Assistant Private Secretaries. The Duchess of Cornwall had an office of three as well. The foreign affairs team, so to speak, was me, one of the Assistant Private Secretaries, a researcher and a PA. My Assistant Private Secretary was not British – they came mainly from the realms. There was also the International Sustainability Unit, headed by Justin Mundy, slightly separate from us, but working very closely with the Private Secretaries. They used the Prince's convening power to advance the whole climate change sustainability agenda. It was a small, very highly-gearred team of really impressive people. Any time we went overseas or were planning a visit, they would always be involved.

So my portfolio was foreign, Commonwealth and, critically, realms. It's quite surprising how many people in the Foreign Office tend not to understand the relationship between The Royal Family and the realms. We were going to do a tour to Australia and New Zealand and

a Director rang me up from the Foreign Office to say that it would be really helpful if the Prince could do such and such a thing. He couldn't, because he has absolutely nothing to do with HMG when he's in a realm. He's there as the Crown Prince of Australia effectively. And so we don't, when we know what we're doing the reces for these visits, we don't go anywhere near the High Commissions. It was purely us and the Australia or New Zealand government.

I also did the non-Christian UK faith communities. I did quite a lot with the Jewish and Muslim communities.

So the job really revolved around visits. My first full year, 2015, was the busiest year the Prince ever had for travel. It was roughly a trip a month. We worked very long days on the reces. Ambassadors are familiar with the routine, but the Royal Visits Committee, a government committee, would decide on the programme working two or three years out into the future, although it wasn't immutable. For each visit, the Foreign Office would set the objectives and we would work very closely with the relevant geographical department on this. I found it was not difficult to reach agreement. There was a sweet spot where you got objectives that supported HMG's interests and overlapped with the Prince's interests, especially in climate change sustainability.

There was one engagement in my time when I really got it wrong. It frankly wasn't the right engagement for the Prince to do. And I should have seen that. On the recce, I should have just said, 'No way. We're not doing this'. So I hold up my hand to say that I got that one wrong.

I think I worked with 22 Embassies. You typically spend a few days with an Embassy team and you tend to see a lot of the Ambassador.

**SR:** This gives you a real insight into how well Embassies are functioning, doesn't it?

**JB:** Yes it does. The quality was really impressive. What varied was how much engagement you got with Ambassadors. And it was interesting that when you went to a small Embassy and this was going to be by far the biggest single thing in an Ambassador's tour, they tend to devote time to it completely. But actually, we came to see you in Paris and Peter Westmacott in Washington. Both Peters spent a lot of time with us on the recce. When we went to Dublin, Dominick [Chilcott] actually spent the entire recce with us. Ireland's a special case which I'll come back to because it was very political. But there was a direct

correlation between the amount of time an Ambassador personally devoted to it and the success of the visit. Mostly, it was fantastic. There was just one case where an Ambassador simply wouldn't engage. I actually got to the stage where I told him he had to get more involved because, frankly, his team was not delivering and that I was worried the way the visit was shaping up. Even after that they really didn't deliver.

**SR:** So how did the visit go in the end?

**JB:** All right, but not as well as it could have gone. The pity is I don't think HMG therefore got as much out of it as it could. I was wondering whether that particular Ambassador was not exactly pro-monarchy. Even so, he should have recognised that doesn't matter. This is the bilateral relationship. Strange. But, by and large, they were really impressive.

On the visits themselves, I would be in the Prince's pocket for pretty much most of the visit. We'd always start the day with me chairing a meeting of the team, not just our team, but the Embassy team and sometimes other people. So there could be around 30 people in the room. And then at some stage, I would get called up to go and brief the principal on anything that had come up. He was very good about reading his briefs.

The other thing that was unusual was that as Private Secretary I went to two countries where I'd been Ambassador before that. It was quite interesting to see things from both sides of the fence.

The value to the UK – one was acutely aware of this in the Gulf because they had dealings monarchy to monarchy. I remember Andrew Green in Saudi telling me that monarchies around the world regarded the House of Windsor as the gold standard. They do have extraordinary cachet, even amongst other monarchies. As an Ambassador I found the benefit in terms of creating a huge wave of goodwill, so you could then do quite a lot of business. If there were some difficult issues around, I might try and just hold them back until after a royal visit and then ride in and see ministers straight after that. It generated that sort of benefit which I think people don't realise. When you're an Ambassador in post, you don't realise the extent to which the Private Secretary goes back with a list of follow up actions from the visit, a huge amount, most of which are generated by the Prince. Almost all on the climate change and sustainability side of things. Some of these were quite major projects, consistent with HMG policy and very valuable for that reason.

We went to the UAE. The relationship there is a bit up and down. At the time of our visit, the relationship had been quite cool and wasn't going very well and there was one particular issue that was quite difficult. The Prince basically solved that issue at a dinner. I won't go into the details of what it was but it was quite extraordinary. So sometimes you got that clear, immediate identifiable benefit to the taxpayer. Mostly it was more the goodwill that was generated and there was a lot an Ambassador could do to exploit that goodwill in the relationship overall.

The one thing the Prince did very little of (and this was deliberate) was trade. If there was a particular trade issue, he would always very happy to raise it and did it very well. But when I was in the Gulf, there was a new Ambassador arriving who said he was frustrated we didn't do more to promote trade. I went straight back to say that I couldn't disagree more. The whole benefit of the Prince of Wales is that his relationships with these people are not transactional. It's engagement. Engagement in these relationships is time really well spent. In our relationship with the UAE, the constant in that is the relationship with the Royal Family, a solid foundation relationship, however much things may be wobbling above. I think that would be jeopardised. It was a bit different for the Duke of York when he was a trade envoy. But for the Prince of Wales, I think keeping him out of the day to day transactional stuff is really important.

Ireland. The high spot of my career lasted all of 10 seconds! The Prince of Wales shook hands with Gerry Adams in Galway University. The Prince had never done an official visit to Ireland, although he'd been there privately. The Queen had done her State Visit a couple of years earlier. So 2015 was his first visit. And it was the most extraordinary thing. I get quite emotional. My first job in the Office was Republic of Ireland Department and if you could have told me then that, 30 years later, I'd be going to the Republic with the Prince of Wales on an official visit, I'd have thought this was never going to happen. It was really extraordinary to see that change.

The handshake was suggested at the very last moment to Dominick [Chilcott], who I might say was absolutely brilliant. The Prince wanted to go to Mullaghmore, where Lord Mountbatten was murdered. Very emotional for the Prince. So we went across, not quite knowing what the reaction would be. We started in Galway where the Prince had a private meeting with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. The next day, we started in Sligo where the Prince was to give a speech. Dominick and I worked up the first draft together and, like

all his best speeches, the Prince made quite a few changes. He personalised it. It was perhaps the best speech he'd ever given on peace and reconciliation. He used his own loss, Lord Mountbatten's murder, as part of that. To see a Sinn Fein town council standing up and giving a standing ovation to the Prince of Wales was incredible. Then we went to a memorial service at the nearest church (incidentally where W B Yeats is buried). Who knows what was going through the Prince's mind afterwards as we saw the spot where the boat was blown up and he met some people who'd helped in the aftermath. An extraordinary and very moving visit. The public were incredible. Every village we went to had people standing waving Union flags. The plan was for Ireland to become an annual visit and I think that's been kept.

In the visits I made, there was never a negative reaction. The country where perhaps we were most concerned was Serbia where memories were still quite fresh about the NATO bombing. We went to Kosovo on the same trip. Even then, the Prince had a relationship with the then Prime Minister who is now President of Serbia. It was fine.

I have to say I've never worked so hard! I did two and a half years there and I was happy to step back. But it was a fascinating time.

### **Full time Spanish language training, 2017**

**SR:** Then you had a complete change and went on to full time Spanish language training. Had you done any Spanish before?

**JB:** I did do a Spanish O-Level and hitchhiked from Los Angeles to the South of Lima, so I must I have had enough Spanish to sustain conversation with lorry drivers over long distances! But I make no secret of the fact that learning Spanish at the age of 58 was far more difficult than Arabic at the age of 28!

I felt that in terms of the quality of life and everything else, I'd done the two best jobs the Middle East could offer. So Sarah and I decided we'd bid for Panama. It had been upgraded as an embassy and it was an up and coming place. I waited and waited and then got a message saying no, not Panama as it was still very small. But what about Santiago? We said no to Santiago initially as it was so far away. We had three children in boarding school. But BA just announced a direct flight – actually their longest direct flight. So that made things much easier. So I said I'd be delighted to go for that.

## **Ambassador, Santiago, 2018–20**

It was only later that I discovered my grandfather was born in Chile. My great grandfather was a classic sort of successful, self-made Scottish banker and had been out there for about 20 years at the end of the 19th century. So I made much of this connection with Chileans, my grandfather, who spent the first 10 years of his life there.

The other extraordinary coincidence was that, before I went, I got to know a chap through a mutual friend. He became as political appointee the Chilean Ambassador in London.

I hadn't realised before I went to Chile that there are masses of Brits who've got a connection with Chile. There are very strong personal links. The number of people I met when I was getting ready to go who told me that a family member lived in Chile or that they had business links. So I went there thinking that maybe it was the most exciting time to be a British diplomat since 1945. Because post Brexit, we would create a completely new position for ourselves in the world. To be doing it in Chile, in particular, was fascinating because you had at that time a centre right government who were ideologically absolutely aligned. Socially liberal, but very similar economic policy. I remember Liz Truss went out before I arrived when she was Chief Secretary to the Treasury. She spoke at an event, saying she thought Chile was brilliant in the way their economy was absolutely spot on. The three pillars of their foreign policy were: tackling climate change, the international rule of law and free trade. The President was very keen to build a relationship.

So I thought this was just going to be absolutely fascinating. Talk about being in the right place at the right time. Chile was the richest and the most stable country in Latin America.

The other thing is Chile was the Chair of COP 25 so, for that reason, we had a close relationship with them. They had an excellent Minister of Environment.

The President was very keen that Chile should be the first country to sign a free trade agreement with the UK post Brexit. So we were going for a continuity agreement on a pre-existing EU trade agreement, free trade agreement. So it was relatively straightforward. The Chileans have more free trade agreements than any other country in the world. Not surprisingly, their negotiators are brilliant. Experienced and sharp. I think we probably got a slightly easy ride as the President may have agreed some concessions they wouldn't normally have made in order to get it over the line. By the time I arrived, it was pretty much done, with only one or two issues still outstanding. It was signed in January 2019. So I think I was

the first British person to sign a free trade agreement since 1973 probably! A moment in history which got lots of coverage in the Chilean press. Not a word about it in the British press. Number 10 came out very firmly and said they were not going to give this profile. So it passed unnoticed in the UK.

It was the first time since Washington I worked in a democracy. It's a completely different thing! In the Gulf states, they all have national assemblies of some sort. In Bahrain it was not insignificant. But it really mattered in Chile. In particular the foreign affairs committee which mattered to us because they could shape government policy. So it's very important to work with them.

I thought I was going to do this wonderful post Brexit thing in such a wonderful place as Chile. Never has a job turned out more different! Other circumstances intervened.

I'd only been there a year and a bit. In October 2019, Santiago literally went up in flames. Chile is inherently a very stable country. There are plenty of problems, social problems but it was absolutely shocking to them. And completely unforeseen. I don't think anyone in Chile saw this coming.

**SR:** So what was the spark?

**JB:** There'd been an increase in the tube fare. It was a very low price, must have been subsidised. I used to use it for my meetings with ministers as it was quick and easy, much cheaper. They put the tube fares up in real terms, the equivalent of 1p or 2p. Even in percentage terms, it was only a 5% increase, if that. Students started a campaign on a Monday morning: they jumped the barriers. At about going home time, there were simultaneous arson attacks at about seven or eight stations, including the busiest interchange stations in the centre of the city. Clearly very carefully planned. They'd built these pyrotechnic devices that erupted into a sheet of flame. They'd given some warnings and I don't think anyone was hurt. They set some trains on fire and almost immediately there were masses of young men on the streets. Radical left wingers are a very strong tradition in Chile. By 11 o'clock that first evening, a curfew had been declared and troops were on the street. That was the beginning. Some of the time it was lockdown. It went on for about six weeks, into December.

There were some huge peaceful demonstrations. The students who started protests had, knowingly or not, tapped into a pool of discontent that was much stronger than anybody

realised. So a huge amount of both poor Chileans (the number of Chileans in absolute poverty is quite low at about 5%) and what we might call the lower middle class (the Spanish phrases is very appropriate, vulnerable middle class people) or the 'just about managing' people who immediately sympathised with what was going on. I remember going home from work and passing a huge march of students. You could tell that these were all middle class students protesting in support. One march had a million people on it: the population of Santiago is 6 million, so a sixth of the city was out on the street.

So you had this huge mass, non-violent movement, combined with an extremely violent protest going on. It was pretty well organised. They even had a sort of relief system. So you'd have the people at the front of the engagement and after half an hour, they'd be pulled back to feed another wave up to the front. They had medics working behind them. There were photographers – it was very well organised. There was plenty of violence on both sides. The police were certainly committing serious human rights abuses, both with excessive use of force, indiscriminate use of force on the streets and the treatment of prisoners when they were taken in. I have to say the BBC coverage was pretty appalling, because they were where it was happening. They had a BBC correspondent, but they were down with the protesters so all their coverage was from that perspective. They did say plenty about police brutality and that was not wrong. But you had absolutely no idea that the police were facing extremely violent protests: a huge number of police were injured, some were killed.

We had quite good information also because we had staff living in flats above the main epicentre called Plaza Italia, where most of the meetings were happening. So they were looking from their balcony as it was going on and giving reliable accounts because they were filming on their phones.

We had about six weeks living more or less in lockdown. Our role was mainly monitoring the situation and making sure our travel advice was bang up to date. But we didn't actually get to the stage of advising people to leave. I don't think we even explicitly said don't come to Chile, but it was very heavily caveated.

What the government did handle very well was police brutality. They made absolutely no attempt to deny it and they were quite frank, publicly and to us, that this had gone wrong and had to be changed. They gave Human Rights Watch and the Americas human rights organisation a completely free hand to do a report. Those reports were pretty critical.

(Amnesty weren't invited but came anyway. Their report, it has to be said, was pretty misleading, in places biased. Very surprising from Amnesty.)

We still got quite a lot of trouble and tension after that in December. Because it's a southern hemisphere country, late January to early March is their August so it all gets very quiet. But by March we were getting ready for an uptick in the violence again. We had contingency plans. We knew we might have another lockdown or more curfews. But of course it didn't happen because COVID arrived. That got people off the streets very quickly. But of course it also meant we had another lockdown. So I think we were the best prepared Embassy in the world to work remotely because we'd already been doing it for six weeks, just before Christmas.

During COVID we were really busy initially on the consular side. We had 12 cruise ships in Chilean waters with a lot of British passengers. It sounds a bit callous but, luckily for us, the Chilean government came out right at the beginning to say they were not allowing anyone off the ships. Within 24 hours, they'd left Chilean waters.

There was one ship some of whose passengers were already ashore. So that took us quite a long time to get them home. Some of them got COVID as well. It was a real challenge because when the rest of them came ashore, somehow word got out and there was actually quite a large protest by the locals. We also had various Brits around the country so getting them out was a very big effort. It took about three weeks. Once that was done, it actually got pretty quiet for us. If you think about it, those who were going had gone. But of course, we couldn't go out and about and do traditional diplomacy. We did a certain amount online. And yet somehow I got to the end of every day absolutely exhausted. It's Zoom and Teams, not meeting people face to face meeting but only through screens. I found it incredibly tiring. I spent four or five hours a day on these meetings and there was enough work to fill the rest of the day.

The other thing I have to say about Chile is that I've never had a head of mission job where I had spent so much time on HR and leadership. It was difficult. Most of the staff were great, but there were some, frankly, who weren't. Chilean labour laws were very weighted in favour of the employees, so moving people on was challenging. The other thing I'm sure you've encountered and was a particular problem in Chile was a terrible relationship between the Embassy and the Residence. And that proved really difficult to deal with. So one way or

another, I spent much more time on that side, trying to sort things out. It was still a work in progress when I left.

On the flip side of Brexit, my relationships with my EU colleagues were actually very warm. I wasn't going to moan against Brexit. They didn't expect that and I didn't need to do anything to defend or justify Brexit. It was purely making it work as best as we could for everybody. Fortunately, too, the EU rep there was a Greek woman who was intensely Anglophile. So I always had a very good relationship with her, even when things back in capitals were probably more tense. And I was pleased after my first year to make it onto a national paper's list of the five most influential Ambassadors in Santiago.

British interests. Our big commercial work was the mining companies: Rio Tinto, Anglo American and Glencore all had huge investments in the country as it is the biggest copper producer in the world. Very different from dealing with the oil majors: Shell and BP were always keen to have a very close relationship with the Embassy. Other than AA the mining companies really didn't seem to want a relationship at all, even when the crisis started.

The other reason it's great to be British in Chile is that the Chileans are intensely class conscious. Isabel Allende wrote a wonderful book, which I recommend to anyone going to Chile called *My Invented Country*. It's quite short, a very cynical insider's view of Chilean society. Very, very funny. She maintained that Brits are socially smart people. That did help with access actually.

The really important relationship was the navy, because the Chilean navy was partly founded by a Brit, Thomas Cochrane, during the Spanish war of independence. Cochrane had been a brilliant young naval officer in the Mediterranean during the Napoleonic wars, so brilliant that Napoleon called him the Wolf of the Seas because he was such an effective and aggressive captain. The full story is utterly fascinating. The Chileans with great foresight approached him to come to Chile to set up a navy. He scored a series of the most extraordinary victories, every engagement against all the odds and to this day there are streets and towns named after him, whereas in this country we hardly know of him. One British Admiral I knew said Cochrane was really up there with Nelson in the roll call of great British naval commanders. The famous thing he said ... the training academies have their own naval dictionary and it doesn't have the word *impossible*. This is because on one occasion when Cochrane was involved in some madcap venture which succeeded, he remarked that the Chilean navy did not recognise the word *impossible*. So that was really important. When

you drive down to Valparaiso, you can see all these Royal Navy warships parked up which the Chilean Navy bought.

The most senior visit when I was there was the Princess Royal. It wasn't on the Royal Visits Committee programme. The Chileans were having the bicentenary of their foundation and were desperate to get a member of the British Royal Family. I knew the Princess's Private Secretary very well so when I bumped into him in St James's Park, I asked him what his boss would think of coming out to Chile. He replied that it was actually the sort of thing she'd love to do. She did say yes so we had to find the funding. We got a very good return in terms of goodwill.

**SR:** So you only spent two years there?

**JB:** Yes, I had to leave early, unfortunately, because of a very difficult family issue, which was really difficult to manage from the other side of the world. I'd actually turned 60 so I was in a comfortable position of having the option of retiring. To be honest, London was not my preferred place to work. The Office were very helpful and agreed I could short tour and take retirement.

**SR:** Do you have any sort of valedictory thoughts?

**JB:** Yes, I had a think about that. It sounds awful, but I wouldn't join the Office again, as it is now. We're all old farts by the time we retire. 'It wasn't like this when I was a boy' and this kind of thing. It really has changed in a way that it had to change. It was absolutely right to change. It was caused by the ease with which you pass information around the world. So, you know, those wonderful jobs I did early in my career, getting in Land Rovers and travelling around the country ... whereas when I was DHM and head of mission, obviously political jobs, I maybe spent as much as 40% doing project planning, budgeting and so on. It had to be done. Before the age of the internet, there's no way that anybody could accumulate data from every Embassy, analyse it and have it ready to present to the Foreign Affairs Committee. Now, you can do that. And the Foreign Affairs Committee now demand a level of detail in a way they didn't used to. So I think the Office is absolutely right to put this tremendous focus on professional project management, much closer attention to budgets. Now you need to get permission from London on budget issues which were completely local decisions in the past. That means people have got to spend much more time on those kinds of issues. But I've never particularly enjoyed the process. I think now people do get out and

about less than they used to and spend more time in the office, put it that way. It's just not as fun as it would have been.

**SR:** If you look at your key words, Jamie, the words that recur are *lucky* and *happy* and *great colleagues*. Overall, you've had a pretty good time, haven't you?

**JB:** I think I've been incredibly lucky with my colleagues. The London jobs I didn't particularly enjoy, so I've been lucky to be mostly overseas. The jobs I've really enjoyed, I suppose, were particularly the heads of mission jobs in Oman and Bahrain. I couldn't say I enjoyed Baghdad. It was a very hard grind and very intense.

**SR:** But professionally very challenging, but rewarding perhaps?

**JB:** Rewarding, but overall still not enjoyable! So it's been a mixed bag. I've had some really good ones and some I haven't enjoyed it all.

**SR:** That's a good note on which to stop. Thank you very much.