

## **BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index**

**UNWIN, Peter William (born 20 May 1932)**

Career Details (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Entry to FO (Levant Department), 1956	pp 2-4
Legation, Budapest, 1958	pp 4-10
Tokyo, 1961	pp 10-12
FCO (PUSD liaison; guidance telegrams; North and East African Department), 1963	pp 12-16
British Information Services, New York, 1967	pp 16-18
FCO (Western European Department), 1970	pp 18-23
Seconded to Bank of England, 1973	p 23
Bonn, 1973	pp 23-26
FCO (Head of Personnel Policy Department), 1976	pp 26-30
Fellow, Center for International Affairs, Harvard, 1979	pp 30-31
Minister (Economic), Bonn, 1980	pp 31-32
Ambassador to Budapest, 1983	pp 32-39
Ambassador to Copenhagen, 1986	pp 39-41
Deputy Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, 1989-93	pp 41-46
Retirement	pp 47-50

(There are general reflection on the diplomatic career on pp. 46-47)

## **PETER WILLIAM UNWIN CMG**

interviewed by Charles Cullimore on 24 March 2005 in the Oxford and Cambridge Club in London  
for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.

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### **Education and entrance to the Foreign Service**

CC: Could I start by asking you to say something about what drew you in the first place into the Foreign Office and the Foreign Service as it was then.

PU: Well, at that time, nearly fifty years ago now, the Foreign Service was considered a plum, at least among the sort of people that I was mixing with at Oxford, and so I thought I'd do the exam and see. It cost £4, which was quite a lot of money then but wasn't prohibitive. I did the exam and got a telegram - one got telegrams in those days - saying, "You have passed. Please telegraph final choice of service." I'd just come back to my College, having walked my girlfriend, now my wife, home. So I rang her up and got her out of bed at about midnight and said, "I've had this message; what do you think?" "Oh!" she said. "It would be rather fun to go abroad." So I sent back a telegram saying, "Foreign Service please," and that was how I got into this game.

### **National Service in the Intelligence Corps**

That was in 1954 but I then had to do National Service, and I did it in a most peculiar job which is perhaps worth mentioning. I was commissioned into the Intelligence Corps and I got into working for a mad but rather brilliant Major who was running a research section in a photographic interpretation establishment, around the proposition that what Britain's defence needed was instantaneous graphic intelligence. We took ground photographs of Soviet bloc equipment, snatched either by Attachés in the Soviet bloc or by licensed snoopers in East Germany working for a thing called BRIXMIS. We also experimented with other ways of securing graphic intelligence, such as leaving television cameras beside the road as we retreated to film the Soviet hordes as they advanced. . Other people did the photographic interpretation and I was the dogsbody who helped the mad Major produce these brilliant insights. I also used to take the stuff to London and broker it round the various intelligence departments of the War Office.

Just one final thought about the madness of the man. He decided that senior officers had difficulty reading books. Turning the pages broke the flow, he decided. So our book about instantaneous graphic intelligence would not have ordinary pages. We would assemble the pages by sellotaping them together in the form of a Roman book; i.e. a scroll. So there he and I sat, taping together these brilliant thoughts on instantaneous graphic intelligence until we had a scroll about five hundred pages in length. What the rather more down-to-earth people in Military Intelligence of the War Office made of this, history doesn't recall.

That's the way I spent my two years before joining the Foreign Service.

### **First employment in the Foreign Office in 1956**

CC: I should think after that your first start in the Foreign Service must have seemed perhaps a little dull.

PU: Not really, though I started badly. We were living in Woodstock at the time, but Personnel Department invited me to come and see them to discuss arrangements for starting work. I drove up to London – no newspaper read, no radio heard – and arrived in Carlton House Terrace at about ten. I left the car by the pavement - one could in those days - and went in. Two very grand First Secretaries welcomed me and did all the necessary things to induct me into the Service. One of them said, looking knowing, "We're putting you into Levant Department. That should keep you busy!" I pretended that I knew what he was talking about. Off I went and grabbed the first newspaper I saw. The previous day Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal.

I started work in Levant Department a month later, and found it fizzing with activity because, although Suez was dealt with by the Department across the corridor, the African Department, we were pretty deeply involved. I was so wet behind the ears, I had no idea what was going on. The others all rushed around, up to the eyes in work. I tried to be helpful and just got in the way. One of them said, "Read the telephone directory! Find out how the Office works."

There I sat, bemused, right through the Suez Crisis, and it only gradually dawned on me that most of the people round me had no idea of what was going on either. They were much busier and more active than I was, but they had no idea of what was being plotted across the road in No 10 Downing Street.

So that was my start in the Foreign Service. I did almost two years in Levant Department and gradually was given slightly more responsible things to do. Eventually I was put in charge – or, more precisely, did basic dogsbody work - on Lebanon and Syria. In 1958 the Americans landed Marines in Lebanon and we dropped some parachutists into Jordan to show solidarity, a solidarity that had not been very visible two years earlier when we went into Suez and the Americans kiboshed it.

One story is half true and is I think is worth telling: I used to go, because everybody else was too busy, to the Heads of Section meeting, which prepared the first draft of the weekly JIC intelligence report. It was a pretty low-level organisation, and it was thought that I wouldn't make too much of a mess if I represented Levant Department on it. There was some discussion of the gathering crisis: were the Americans going to invade Lebanon or not? Would we be involved? The man from Admiralty, a Lieutenant Commander I think, said, "We have a problem about the Mediterranean Fleet. It's sailing eastwards towards the crisis area but it'll soon have to turn back to refuel in Malta. What shall we do?" I said out of the depths of my ignorance but with the mantle of the Foreign Office on my shoulders, "If I were you, I wouldn't turn it back." The ships continued eastwards and in the next twenty-four hours up went the balloon. So I always claim, with only partial veracity I, that I had a hand in sending the Mediterranean Fleet into action. Something much grander and more important than anything I achieved for nearly thirty years thereafter!

### **Posting to Hungary in 1958**

In the early summer of 1958 the powers said, "We're going to send you to Budapest". I was very excited. It was only two years since the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, and at the time I had found myself much more emotionally involved with the Hungarian tragedy than the Suez fiasco. The chance of going to live among Hungarian heroes two years afterwards was extremely intriguing. But, while we were preparing to go, the Hungarian authorities executed Imre Nagy, who was the central figure in the Revolution, was kidnapped afterwards by the Russians, sent into imprisonment in Rumania, brought back to Budapest and executed on 16 June 1958. A friend, I remember, wrote and said, "You sound admirably calm for somebody preparing to go and live in a graveyard," and it did feel a bit like that, but off we went to Hungary. We had to wait for a few days in Vienna while our visas came through, and then we set off - we now had two small children - down the road from Vienna to Budapest. We got to the border where the Austrian frontier guard, I noticed, had got his pistol wrapped

up in greaseproof paper so it couldn't have been drawn very quickly. He said, "Auf Wiedersehen!" and we were both so nervous, we replied, really rather over-emphatically, "Bald!" (soon). Off we went down this road, barbed wire on the left, barbed wire on the right, no doubt a ploughed strip with mines in it, and we finally got to the checkpoint under a rather sinister-looking watch tower. And there we were stuck for quite a long time while they checked what this strange family was doing entering Hungary in this way, in a car jam-packed full of babies' impedimenta, clearly intending to stay.

CC: Did you at that stage have CD plates on the car?

PU: No. No we didn't. I suppose we had British number plates, and we'd got Diplomatic visas. Eventually they let us through and we drove off down the road into Hungary, which looked pretty bleak - actually it still does look pretty bleak, the Hungarian countryside - and we got to a place which had become famous two years earlier, called Mosonmagyaróvár. Journalists charging down this road from the West to Budapest had encountered there the immediate aftermath of a massacre. Crowds had demonstrated, the security police had panicked and shot at the crowd and the crowd had then lynched the security police. So Mosonmagyaróvár, two years earlier, had been something really big in western newspaper headlines. When we drove through it seemed to be sleeping the sleep of the graveyard.

By this time, the baby was getting desperate for something to drink. We incompetently hadn't brought water, and we tried unsuccessfully to buy it in various scruffy looking places but got nowhere. Then we were stopped at a traffic light in a fairly major town called Győr, and there the child was still howling and we were still hoping for some water. And suddenly a very modulated English voice spoke in my ear. "Can I be of assistance?" There had pulled up beside us at the traffic light, the Military Attaché in Budapest who was coming back from Vienna. We used to say later that the Military and Air Attachés spent half their time shopping in Vienna, but he produced water and then led us into Budapest.

The only other thing about that journey that I actually remember is that near Budapest we got held up at a level crossing. Two small boys came along and were trying to beg from us - not a thing we saw much afterwards in our time in Hungary, but there they were - and along came a man, absolutely incandescent with anger, and told them (I suppose) that no true Hungarian should go begging from a foreigner. It struck us forcibly at the time.

We drove into Budapest and were led to the Legation and then to our house, a rather basic flat - all right, but smallish - with a glorious view from the hills of Buda across to Pest, and I settled down to becoming a junior diplomat.

CC: Can I stop you there for a moment. You said 'Legation'. When did that become an Embassy and what was the significance of the different words?

PU: Budapest was one of the four Legations left by then. Bucharest, Sofia and Budapest remained Legations because the Western Powers argued that these Soviet satellite countries were not truly sovereign and that therefore it would be wrong to enhance their status by turning them into Embassies. The fourth Legation was the Holy See, which I suspect was held back for many years because of strong Northern Irish emotions on the Papacy. I think the first three got elevated into Embassies probably in the '60s. But that was why Budapest was a Legation and our Chief of Mission was a Minister.

So there we were, settling down to learn the ropes in Budapest. I was very much the junior character, the Third Secretary in Chancery, but I remember the first diplomatic task I was ever called upon to perform. The Hungarian Foreign Ministry, to whom I'd just been introduced, rang up and asked me to call. So off I went - I think I told the Head of Chancery I was going - and they said, "We want you to know that, as you know ..." (I didn't know) "we've taken into custody two local members of the Legation staff and several other characters, and we are telling you now that we're going to release one of them and put the other one on trial." I said something profoundly diplomatic to the effect of, "I take note. Please spell their names," and went off back and told the Minister who said, "Oh! You're in no position to negotiate on such matters. I'm going off to deal with this." Anyhow, the outcome was that, of these two members of the local staff, one was released but was forbidden to return to work for us, and the other was imprisoned on a charge of espionage. I think what in fact he'd done was to get to the Legation the manuscript of a number of Imre Nagy's essays, which were then sent to the West and published in 1957 under the title 'Imre Nagy on Communism'. He spent several years in prison, often in the same cell as the man who became President of Hungary after 1989, Arpad Göncz. Eventually he became Göncz's *homme de confiance*, an unofficial private secretary, and I met him then when I went back to Budapest when Göncz gave me a medal.

So that was that. Somebody took me to buy petrol at the “Diplomatic petrol pump” – presumably the only one to stock high octane fuel. It was just round the corner from the Foreign Ministry and, as we were filling up, the colleague who had taken me said, “That building over there ...” pointing at a rather grim building, “was where we think Nagy’s secret trial was held”. Like my first business with the Foreign Ministry it was a grim reminder of the continuing consequences of the Hungarian Revolution.

I settled down to life in Budapest and work in the Legation. I drafted a weekly political report to London, and frankly most of it at the beginning was about rumours of repression, arrests, trials and executions. Even in the worst of times no-one could stop the Hungarians gossiping, and one way and another the rumours reached us. There was one slightly dramatic moment when a young Hungarian somehow got into the Legation past the policeman on the door. We feared that this might be a provocation. He was very distraught, and as far as I could piece together what he was saying it was that he came from an industrial area called Ujpest which had been active in the Revolution. His father had been arrested after the Revolution, and now he and a number of others were going to be hanged. What could I do about it? I said, “Give me the details.” I took them down and they went to London and a story appeared in an article in the Guardian. But whether Western publicity stopped the hanging, I very much doubt.

CC: Was there a very visible Soviet presence?

PU: There were 40/50,000 Soviet troops in the country; fairly visible yes. You didn’t see the troops in Budapest much but, if you went out into the country, you saw their trucks. Generally the soldiers were kept on a pretty tight rein. You didn’t see much of them, but they dominated everything.

What else about that period? In my second year in Budapest, the regime started a drive to get the peasants back into the co-operative farms which they’d all deserted at the Revolution. This was represented in the newspapers as common sense, with the peasants all very glad to get back into co-operative farming, but in fact there was a lot of brutality involved in getting them there.

There came a moment when we caught a Hungarian spy in their Legation and expelled him from London. We knew somebody on our side would be expelled tit-for-tat, and we were all waiting to see who it would be. In the end they latched onto the Commercial Secretary who was a grand man of forty

years of age who really knew his way around in a way I didn't. He appeared in my office suddenly, with a pile of papers this high.....

CC: About two feet, for the record!

PU: About two feet, thank you! He said, with agonising slowness: "Peter, I have been declared persona non grata, which means I'm being kicked out. The Budapest Industrial Fair, on which we will have a stand, opens in a week's time. These are the relevant papers, and with them I leave you!" He walked out and I was left with the rather interesting experience of trying to put together the last bits of our participation in the Fair. I think we had persuaded British companies to take part largely, in our minds, for political and social reasons rather than commercial ones: a capitalist presence in a communist showcase.

CC: I was going to say, were we actually doing any business?

PU: Very little. But the Legation was urging, and the Foreign Office was agreeing, that we should cautiously pursue a policy not of just boycotting Hungary but of making contacts with Hungarians outside the Communist Party monopoly. A presence at the Trade Fair was a way to begin and I was put in charge of it because there was nobody else to do it. It was the beginning of a programme of commercial, social and cultural contacts. There was no British Council representative because he'd been kicked out back in the '40s and so, when we started the cultural programme, for want of anybody better, I did it. I found the work absolutely fascinating because you found that Hungarians, although they were afraid to be in contact with us, were so intrigued to know about the West that they took some risks to respond to us. For example when my wife and I, the most junior people in the Legation, gave a dinner party for all the most eminent doctors in Hungary, they all turned up. And when the Legation started a lecture programme, lectures by visiting Britons and by Hungarian eminences, people would risk coming into the Legation to hear these lectures.

CC: That's interesting. They were free to come?

PU: Well, they were free to come but there might be consequences afterwards. Without exception they thought they were taking a risk. Across the street from the Legation was a dry cleaner's. Cleaners and laundries were known as Patyolats. It was widely thought that the middle 'O' on the shop sign

concealed a camera that photographed all visitors to the Legation. And sure enough, years later the photographs were found in the Interior Ministry files.

Anyhow, I remember once a man - I won't bother with the name but he was the most eminent Hungarian composer after Bartok - and he came and gave a lecture about Hungarian music. He lectured to this really quite large audience of a hundred Hungarians, and ended up by saying that, "And so we see that Hungarian music is timeless, borderless and classless." The last word, of course, was dynamite because Hungary was meant to be a state run on class lines by a Party dedicated to advancing the interests of the working classes. There was a hush, a very little nervous applause, and everyone took care not to catch each other's eyes.

CC: He didn't disappear instantly!

PU: No, he didn't. He was probably too old and too eminent to get into trouble, whereas younger people would have. And of course, the very fact that he was making friends with a Western Legation may have give him a certain amount of protection; there would have been damaging publicity in the Western press if anything had happened to him.

I'll tell you another story about that period which I think is interesting. There was a woman who worked in the Legation as a translator. She was the widow of a landowner, a class enemy, and a very committed Roman Catholic. I used to go and chat with the translators every day and pick up what they had to say. She told the Head of Chancery very confidentially that she was being given a rough time by the Secret Police. (She became a family friend of ours for many years afterwards, so I know all this ex post facto.) They were bullying her into becoming an agent of theirs and she was doing her best to resist. In the end they said to her, "If you don't do what we want, we're going to drive you mad. You'll end up in a lunatic asylum." She still didn't give in - or told us she didn't: even with someone like her one was never quite sure. In the end, they said, "All right. We're going to kick you out of Hungary. You'll never come back." She was quite a sick woman, a cripple, so in the end my wife and I drove her to Vienna on her way into exile. She went with one clapped out suitcase to her name, and that was about all. When we got to the frontier, she had to go into the customs shed with the clapped out suitcase. They gave her a pretty rough time, saying: "What are you doing, leaving the country in the company of these imperialist spies?" Anyhow, she finally got out ...

CC: It's a bit surprising that she got out.

PU: I think it was probably because she had a nice little flat and one of the officers involved in her case wanted it. As he couldn't break her and as diplomatic constraints prevented their putting her in a lunatic asylum, he said, "All right. Let's let her go." Anyhow, she went and settled down to live in the West and lived to the ripe old age of 92. I wrote her obituary in the end.

CC: Very interesting, all of this is because of the insight it gives into what life was like behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War.

PU: That's right. When I was doing the Legation's cultural contacts work I talked once to a musicologist - he may have been somebody we were going to invite to visit Britain. He said to me in very elegant French "Monsieur, vous batissez un pont d'or." ("You are building a bridge of gold' between them and us.). All these Hungarians, some of whom I talked to afterwards when they were much freer and I was Ambassador, were absolutely fascinated at the chance to be in touch with the West on a trip to London and so on, and at the same time they were frightened. It was the beginnings of our policy that went on for twenty years, of trying to treat the East European countries as normal countries which were trapped in a situation they didn't want to be in, as unwilling satellites of the Soviet bloc. We all know how that ended, but it took a long time.

CC: Did you have any contact with the Soviet Authorities?

PU: I met them socially, but nothing else. I'll tell you a story later about my first meeting with the Soviet Ambassador when I went back as Ambassador.

CC: It will be interesting to get the contrast between then and later when you went back in the '80s.

### **Posting to Tokyo in 1961**

CC: And then you went on ...

PU: We went directly to Tokyo. As you know, most of the people in the Embassy in Tokyo were trained Japanese speakers, and I wasn't.

CC: That was going to be my question.

PU: They span me a story to cheer me up to the effect that it would be good to have a different perspective on Japan, but in fact what they really meant was that they hadn't got a Japanese speaker lined up so I had to fill a gap. I did two years there, and my superiors did their best to set me up with work that didn't require a knowledge of Japanese, but I always felt rather a spare wheel on the coach and didn't, frankly, achieve a huge amount. For myself, as somebody who only ever lived outside Europe and North America once, it was a fascinating experience to see that incredible country, but I don't think I contributed very much or have very much to record about the period.

CC: What was the job?

PU: I was the Second Secretary in Chancery and I dealt with Japan's external relations. I remember two things, one which directly involved me and the other not. The Japanese were keen to get back some not very useful islands which had been seized by the Russians at the end of the War. The Japanese, to my mind, used up an inordinate amount of credit and goodwill banging away at this and getting their allies to bang away about it too, when it was clear that they hadn't any bargaining cards and weren't going to get them back. But I wrote report after report on this. Similarly we and most other countries were trying to get the Japanese to behave more responsibly about whaling. I would send round note after note and they would say, "Yes, all very difficult," suck their teeth and do nothing.

Secondly, I was sent off to do a report on the situation in Okinawa, which was the chain of Japanese islands in the China Sea, by then a major American base, seized at the end of the War and Americanised. I flew down there, a long way from Tokyo, and spent four or five days there talking to the Americans, who said everything was fine, and talking to Japanese officials and journalists who said, very circumspectly, that everything was not fine. The visit was interesting in itself, but I remember it mostly because it showed me, in retrospect, how very bad I was at that stage at reading between lines. I thought I'd learnt it in Hungary but I don't think I had, because I came back and wrote a report that more or less endorsed what the Americans had told me – that things in Okinawa were all right really. Then somebody from the Embassy in Washington went there two years later, a more senior and wiler man. He got the Americans to talk more frankly, and came back and wrote a

quite different report, saying the situation was really pretty bad. I felt rather chastened by that because, frankly, I'd bought a bill of goods. Having learnt scepticism in Hungary I should have known better. I suppose in fact I was subconsciously influenced by the assumption that Americans were good guys and the Russians were bad guys.

CC: You probably thought that this was a part of the world where you could take things on trust.

PU: That's right, but I should have known better.

CC: What was the status of Okinawa?

PU: There was an American Governor and it was run very much as an American fiefdom. There was local government in the hands of the local Japanese. But I suspect that an objective observer would have seen that the American presence in Okinawa was much heavier, much more direct than the Soviet presence had been in Hungary. There was an American governor, big American presence; it was a major American base. As I say, I didn't see this but, in retrospect, it was obviously a pretty heavy-handed presence. And even then - it went on for years - there were incidents when Japanese girls were raped by American soldiers, and the Japanese protested and the Americans tended to brush it aside. It was a bad bit of post-colonialism; a post-colonial colony.

To me I learned an enormous amount about places outside Europe just by going to Japan. We went there and came back on a ship, six weeks going out, six weeks coming back; a glorious experience. I discovered Asia from that ship including, on the way out, Saigon, which was just beginning to slip away; there was a big French presence there in 1961.

CC: So then from there you had a posting back to London for several years.

### **Foreign Office from 1963-67**

PU: I had four years doing a variety of jobs; I'll go through them quickly. I had a liaison job in PUSD which taught me something about a very different organisation from the Foreign Office. I was pretty depressed at the time, for reasons that had nothing to do with the job, and it drove me slightly batty dealing with a number of people whose work had made them strangely devious. Maybe they had

to be, and I remember Kelvin White, who was doing the same job as I was, explaining ‘White’s Law’ . It said: “The more often the word ‘luncheon’ appears in a friend's minute, the less useful that friend is.” And it was a good proposition. The friends’ job was to get down into the gutter and not try to do things that were semi-diplomatic. I think the only useful thing that I did there was to prepare the case for doing the swap that got back Greville Wynne, the British spy who was arrested by the Russians in connection with the Penkovsky case.

Incidentally, I ought to go back a little and record that I met Greville Wynne during the time I was in Hungary. I was in Vienna for a day’s shopping and went to have a quick meal in a lovely steak restaurant. Anyway, there I was when somebody else joined me. He was very talkative, an English businessman, and told me first of all how he got no help at all from the Missions in Eastern Europe where he was doing a lot of business. Then he started to get more and more loquacious and talked rather unwisely about the things he got up to “over there”. It all sounded pretty silly, and I wouldn’t have wanted to be overheard if I’d been him. He gave me his card as he left and it said in effect, Greville Wynne, Import and Export.

Now, X years later, here I was with the friends and they wanted to swap a Russian spy for Wynne and I wrote the case - well, I drafted it and someone fiddled with it thereafter - for getting him out of prison in the Soviet Union. It was not in any way sinister. I think the main argument was that, if we were to persuade people to work for us as agents, we’d got to show we cared about them when they were in trouble. That was the argument.

CC: Did you ever find out why he came and sat beside you?

PU: Pure chance, I think

CC: Not much wonder he got into trouble.

PU: No! In retrospect, he was a boastful, talkative fool.

CC: Yes, it sounds like it! Right! That was the first job.

PU: That was the first job. Then I moved from that to doing guidance telegrams. Do you remember guidance telegrams? This is the line to take on such and such. This got me around the Office in a way because one day the subject on which posts needed guidance was to do with Russia, the next day with South America. So it was a slightly ancillary kind of job, but it had to be done; I didn't much enjoy it but I did it. The only story, I think, worth telling from that time concerned one quiet day, settling down to weed old guidance telegrams, and I picked out the file on Kenya. As an old Africa hand, this will amuse you. I went through a series of guidance telegrams about the Mau Mau period and thereafter, and they started off, the first one said, "There's a spot of trouble in Kenya; nothing to worry about." Next, "There's rather a lot of trouble in Kenya, still under control." Third, "These people are a very sinister bunch; they're called the Mau Mau and they do things and they take oaths that frankly, if a woman's going to decipher this, can't be written down, you know, it's so vile!" And then, "There's a very dangerous man called Kenyatta who's exploiting and running this, and Kenyatta is really a menace; he's probably paid by the Communists." Then, "Kenyatta is such a menace, he's been arrested and deported to the Seychelles." And a bit later, "Trouble continues in Kenya, but we're getting on top of the Mau Mau Rebellion." Next one, "It's necessary to take a firm hand with the white settlers as being the cause of part of this problem. We're getting Kenyatta back from exile. He's served his time." "We're talking to Kenyatta now about the future." "Kenyatta is a very wise and shrewd fellow and he's got a great deal of support in Kenya." And it ended up, you know, with, "Kenyatta our friend and the pillar of British interests in East Africa." All within a period of ten years. It was a glorious example of when the wind changes, policy changes.

CC: And also, "He's done his necessary stint as a guest of Her Majesty", which seemed to be a necessary part in graduating to power as a former British colony got its independence.

PU: And one now reads, a thing I didn't know at the time, just how freely we butchered the Africans in putting down the Mau Mau Rebellion. Have you read these two new books about British war crimes in the campaign against the Mau Mau Rebellion?

CC: We'll talk about that later. Coming back to your own ...

PU: Coming back to my own patch: from that I moved to an interesting job. I went to North and East African Department and did a year on the Maghreb Desk - Maghreb meaning Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. By now I was a junior first secretary, and I found the job very educational because I was

dealing with three embassies in a part of the world that was entirely new to me, and dealing also with the three countries' embassies in London. And I think it taught me something that Japan had started to teach me, that there was a good deal of civilisation to be discovered outside Europe and North America, which was not an assumption I think I'd started life with.

One story which I remember. The embassy in Tunisia said, "The daughter of a major important figure in Tunis has got cancer. Can you get a cancer expert out here to deal with and assess her?" And, in the course of trying to set up two eminent cancer experts to go to Tunisia, I fear I used the fateful words, "Oh, with a family that rich, money will be no object". Anyhow, when the doctors came back, I rang them up and said, "What happened?" "Oh," they said, "There was no hope but we made the girl comfortable and then girl died."

For a time I heard no more, but then the doctors told me there was some trouble about their being paid. I asked the embassy to chase matters up and got back a letter from the ambassador saying that the family were proving elusive. "It reminds me", he said, "of the great truth that no good deed ever goes unpunished." I had never heard the phrase then; I have used it constantly since. A couple of years later, I met one of these doctors and said, "Did you ever get paid?" "No," he said, "But they set us up with a holiday in Tunisia instead." A diplomatic lesson: always be careful what you say about the certainty that good things will happen, because they don't always. It was a lesson which I forgot when, decades later at the Commonwealth Secretariat, I was trying to assemble an emergency package of aid for Papua New Guinea. "They'll certainly pay up", I told the Australians; they certainly didn't

I moved from that job, which was low-key but educational and pleasant, to dealing with Egypt in 1966/67. It was the usual tension-ridden, crisis-ridden relationship with what was then the United Arab Republic, and things were blowing up into the 1967 war and the stoppage of the Canal – shades of 1956. Things were pretty hectic in my last couple of months there with the Canal closed, people ringing up and saying, "We've got a ship approaching the Canal. Will it get through or won't it?" I honestly forget most of the details of that time, it was so confusing. But it was the fourth major crisis, if you take Suez '56 as the first one, the Americans in '58 and us in Jordan in '58, then there was one in '63, then there was this one in '67. It was one crisis after another.

CC: It was fairly unusual, I would have thought, in the space of only four years or so, to have four jobs.

PU: I think what happened was this: as I said, I was pretty depressed at the time and I think I was kept in London for four years because of that. Being with the friends did not cheer me up very much. Guidances were a bit of a non-job. Then, as I perked up, I asked for a move and got these two jobs in NEAD. The move within North and East African Department from the Maghreb to the Egyptian desk was really a promotion, and on the Egyptian desk I was dealing for the first time with major issues with relatively little supervision. So whether they knew it or not Personnel Department did a pretty good job of getting me back into high gear. All the same, staying in London for four years at that time was a long time, it's true.

### **Posting to British Information Services, New York, 1967**

CC: And then you went to New York.

PU: I then to went to another rum job. I forget what it was called, but I was the economic propagandist in British Information Services in New York. There was a Minister who was the head of the office, there was a senior First Secretary as his assistant, and then there were four or five of us, the others locally employed, British people living in America, running little departments. In a way I was the resident intellectual. I ran a fortnightly magazine called British Record, which went to four or five thousand American movers and shakers - at least we hoped they were movers and shakers; I suspect they weren't but we hoped they were. I did a lot of public speaking, both in New York and around. I think I am now quite a good public speaker, and became one through that experience.

I got to New York in 1967 at the time of a big British dock strike, and so our household stuff got stuck in Liverpool, and for three months we were entertaining off cardboard plates and imitation knives and forks. In the course of that first three months, the pound was devalued. I remember I was rung up by the New York Times on the day of devaluation and asked for a backgrounder. The move had been kept deadly secret and we had no guidance on how to present it, so I made up what I could and babbled away to the Times. They said to me at the end, "You've been very good to us. Can we name you?" And I said, "No, not on your life! Don't name me!" Anyhow, a big piece appeared the next day in the New York Times, a jolly good piece as it turned out, and it was all me and I wished I'd had my name on it! I remember one of my lines was that, "Well of course this will make holidays in Britain a lot

cheaper for you Americans; you should come over and see us some time.” And that was in quotes – immortality in the fish-and-chip paper.

Anyhow, over the next three years I went around the United States, getting to most places except California, talking about the strength of the British economy and that kind of thing. It was all a bit farcical. But, as I say, I think I learned public speaking the hard way and above all how to cope with difficult questions.

One story which may amuse you and may amuse whoever reads this thing: Pat Dean, the Ambassador in Washington, was going to go and talk in Hartford, Connecticut to a group of businessmen. Hartford is the insurance capital of the United States. He wanted me to go up and support him. So I went, greatly honoured, and we sat down with these top insurance men of the United States, and he trotted off whatever he'd been given to say and did it very well, and then said he'd take questions. He handled four or five political questions very easily, and then he got an incredibly convoluted question about investment in Britain, and he said, “I think I'll ask the expert to answer that one” I thought, “Sod you!”, floundered around and came through it with honour roughly intact. It was the old problem of being number two in any situation; you are suddenly caught. Again, a good experience. And the funny thing is, if I'd been the speaker, I could have handled things so much better than being the number two. Pepys says somewhere that he goes to a meeting and he notices with interest something to the rough effect that ‘he who is the greatest man in the room behaves with so much more finesse and confidence than anybody else’. Interesting!

CC: British Information Services sounds rather grand and like a separate organisation but it was actually part of the FCO.

PU: Yes, it was under the Embassy in Washington. It was a big thing then, and it was frankly too big; it's shrunk enormously since. The history really is that, during the War, before the Americans came in, we were building in a major propaganda organisation and, in order for it to be allowed to make propaganda in the United States, it had to be registered under some American regulation, and it was therefore set up as a separate entity, though under the authority of the Embassy, and purveying a line given it by London. It made a big reputation for itself during the War and that reputation lingered on in the time I was there in '67, but frankly it was shrinking and declining in importance in those years. I was lucky to be there at a time when it was still a fairly big organisation. When I was there, it

had the magazine I was telling you about, all my public speaking and others' speaking activities. There was a television programme - not a very good television programme - once a fortnight which was made for us and with our input, and then given to any American station that wanted to use it. British Ministers who came to New York would normally speak to an audience gathered together by BIS lunch.

CC: Who was the head of the BIS?

PU: It was Paul Wright - do you remember Paul Wright? Still, at the age of ninety-something, still going strong. [He has since died]

### **Return to the FCO to Western European Department, 1970**

CC: OK, so then you came back to London again.

PU: Then in 1970 I came to London to be the assistant in Western European Department.

CC: A pretty key job!

PU: It was in some ways the most interesting job I ever did. The essential thing at the time was the German Ostpolitik. We covered the whole of Western Europe but the bilateral stuff with most of the countries took care of itself and we spent nearly all our time on the Ostpolitik and the Berlin negotiations. In 1969 the Germans had embarked on a new approach to the East, a new Ostpolitik. The proposition was that West Germany wanted to normalize as far as possible its relations with the East, with the Soviet Union, the Eastern European countries and East Germany, but it was not prepared to recognise East Germany formally pending a peace treaty. The four occupying powers, the Soviet Union, United States, France and Britain, said, "Yes, pursue these negotiations but don't forget that we, the four powers, have rights in Germany as a whole, rights of conquest which will be terminated only if and when a peace treaty is signed." I once summarised that by saying it was like saying: "We congratulate you on your marriage but remind you that the bride is not a virgin". So there was an interlocking set of negotiations going on. First, German negotiations with the Soviet Union; secondly, German negotiations with Poland and the other satellites; thirdly, West German negotiations with East Germany; fourthly, the four powers' negotiations over a settlement over Berlin. It was an enormously

complex set of negotiations, done mostly, in our case, by the Embassy in Bonn, though the four-power meetings were held Berlin, and I never cease to admire the way Christopher Audland in particular handled those negotiations.

We in London had to keep abreast of this and keep Ministers engaged. They tended to think that a lot of the issues were ‘how many angels on the point of a needle’ and get impatient. Yet the issues, however technical, were important in themselves and as precedents. It was an intriguing, difficult, educational job, in my case made no easier by the fact that I had two particularly ornery people working for me (this will probably be cut!). Both David Gladstone and Maureen MacGlashan were extraordinarily ornery and they had a technique of producing a draft submission to ministers that introduced a new line of policy just the day before the submission was due. I would say, “Hey! But this isn’t the policy.” “Well, we think it should be!” They’d done it so late, I had to sit down and re-do it in a hurry..

CC: Without any previous discussion.

PU: Exactly! So they were irritating to put it mildly, but we kept the show on the road. I was delighted when dear old Tom Brimelow once said to me, “You have saved us from making many mistakes,” which was a nice compliment coming from a man like that. He was then the DUS.

CC: Deputy Under Secretary. He was covering, what? Europe and ...

PU: Europe and East/West relations. Today I suppose you’d call him Political Director. As for the particular incidents: there was an occasion in 1970 when we got a message saying that the Russians had just told us in the control centre in Berlin that they were closing the air corridors to Berlin for several hours that night. We said they couldn’t do this, and they said they were doing it for safety reasons. The Western powers were thrown into a great tizzy about this, because our absolute right to fly through the corridors to Berlin was a central tenet of our position in Germany. We said that the correct thing for us to do was to fly planes through the corridors and show the Russians that they had no authority over our use of the corridors. The communications were all very difficult - Washington, Paris, London, Bonn, Berlin - getting Ministers on board, it was all very difficult. It was made more difficult by the fact that Nixon and Kissinger were on an American aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. Anyhow, we finally got to a situation where Alec Douglas-Home rang up the Prime

Minister, Ted Heath - and I heard him do it. He said, "Ted, we've got a spot of trouble in the corridors. I'm advised to send an aircraft through the corridors as a probe." And one heard a voice at the other end say, "Humph!" And so we did! We said to the allies, "Right! We'll be sending an aircraft through." It was agreed that we should do it, and the French said they would fly if we flew, so that was all right; we were all set to do it. And then the Americans said they would not fly; something had gone wrong with their communications and the President and Kissinger were out of touch with the State Department. But anyhow, they said no; it was an American cock-up frankly. So we were faced with this question, "Do we go ahead without the Americans?" In the end we did and we sat up all night, pretty well, waiting to hear if the flight had gone through safely and, at about 2.30 in the morning, we heard it had gone through. BRIXMIS been out there patrolling underneath the route just to see what was happening.

CC: That was the British Military Mission in Berlin.

PU: That's right. The British Military Mission to the Soviet Forces in East Germany. They'd been out patrolling and they'd seen a missile fired, but far from the aircraft. The general deduction was that it had been fired just to justify closing the corridors. So it all went well, but ...

CC: Can I just ask, when you say 'a probe', there was a military ...

PU: It was a military flight. It was a military transport, so it was a Royal Air Force aircraft but not a fighting aircraft. But it flew through and we'd established our rights.

CC: The French did the same?

PU: No. By this time, the French, who'd said they were ready, had either got fed up with waiting to hear and gone home or they had gone out to a party, so in the end we did it on our own. It was a good example of the difficulty of co-ordinating things among allies and, frankly, in a sense the unreliability of allies. The French one expected to be unreliable, but the unpredictability and unreliability of the Americans.... I think what happened was that the State Department said yes to us but it's got to go to Kissinger or the President and, once Kissinger and the President had spoken, they couldn't claw it back and they said no.

CC: But it also illustrates how inherently dangerous the whole situation was, especially before the four power agreement on Berlin, which at least recognised certain norms. This was presumably before that agreement was included.

PU: Yes indeed. And the West and the East had played a game of chicken for a very long time. Long before my time, long before your time, we got quite close to going to war, or risking war, when the Russians wanted us to lower the tail gates of trucks to show how many troops we had in them going through to Berlin, and we said, “No, we’re not going to change our practice.” It was a thoroughly dangerous and basically rather mad situation.

So that was that. What else did I do in that time? One other thing that was quite interesting was dealing with an organisation called KFA Ltd, which was a company registered in London and with its offices in London, which acted as an informal East German Trade Representation, because of course at that time we didn’t recognise East Germany. During the run up to the completion of all these Ostpolitik agreements, which would include a recognition of East Germany and then diplomatic relations, KFA Ltd started to get rather pushy in trying to establish its position, as anybody in their position would have done. So there was quite a lot of interesting ‘how many angels on the point of a needle’ stuff to be done about that, and one incident in particular, I think, is worth recording.

There was a man who made Cornish pasties somewhere in Cornwall, who flew around Europe selling them in his own aeroplane. He was in Hamburg and wanted to fly to Stockholm, and he set off in his small aircraft, got off course and was forced down just in the top north-west corner of East Germany by Soviet fighters. He was released the following day and, in normal circumstances, the aircraft would have been released with him, but it fairly soon became apparent that the East Germans, with Soviet connivance, thought, “We’ve got the British over a barrel here. They can only have the aircraft back if they will do business with us.” We weren’t prepared to do business with them because we were holding out until the Ostpolitik package was completed. It got more and more difficult because the West Germans seemed to have no difficulty in doing practical business with the East Germans, even though they didn’t recognise them, but they didn’t want us to do the same and we like good allies weren’t doing it. It was jolly difficult to explain all this to a man who hadn’t got his aircraft back. His local MP said this was the Foreign Office being absurd. So we dragged on, and I tried to explain it to Ministers. Tony Royle said, “I can’t defend this. It’s just too silly!” He was right in a way. Anyhow,

in the end we decided we'd cut our losses and Alex Mineef was sent up to Hamburg to go to the frontier near Lubeck ...

CC: From the staff of the Embassy in Bonn.

PU: That's right. He had a letter which was, for some reason, signed by the Consul in West Berlin and a brown envelope packed full of 2,000DM for expenses, for shipping the aircraft, and he went to the frontier, handed over the money and got the aeroplane back, no doubt with his fingers crossed behind his back saying, "None of this constitutes recognition!" In fact, after a long period, the East Germans had succeeded in screwing us on a point that had seemed theoretically important and frankly it wasn't very.

CC: But you got the aircraft back and had not conceded.

PU: Well, we'd met and we'd talked, you know, but we'd done nothing more than the West Germans were doing every day with the East Germans while saying they weren't. So that was that.

What did one learn in those years? The enormous importance of working with allies, the enormous difficulties of doing so and the fact that, with real professional care and real thoroughness, you can negotiate your way out of a lot more than a paper bag, and do it harmoniously and in agreement. During that period, certainly the Germans broke ranks at times, certainly the Americans did, with Kissinger's famous back channel cutting out the State Department as well as the allies, certainly the French did a bit. We thought we were simon pure but we did once. There was one bad mistake, which is a bit too complicated to talk about; it wasn't in the end very important. I think that was the lesson I learned from those years.

CC: And this was presumably before the days of the Bonn Group which only came into existence, I guess, because of the quadripartite agreement. Or was that already happening?

PU: The Bonn Group was in existence throughout the time I'm talking about, and was probably set up to handle the inter-Western negotiations before we went to talk to the other side. And I think that,

without that Bonn Group day-by-day interaction, with Christopher Audland playing a huge part in it, we would never have pulled it off, it was so complex. It couldn't have been done, really, by capital to capital; it had to be done somewhere.

CC: That was what I was trying to get at. Where was it actually going on? So it wasn't in fact detailed negotiations going on in Bonn.

PU: The centre of the thing was Bonn/Berlin, that access - Bonn for the Western side and then Berlin for West to meet East.

### **Secondment to the Bank of England, 1973**

CC: And then after that you.....

PU: After that I had a few months at the Bank of England.

CC: Fairly unusual.

PU: Well, it taught me to count! Two of us went together: Timothy Daunt and I. I don't know what Timothy was about to do, but I was on my way to an economics job in Germany and I had three or four months ... It wasn't very satisfactorily done. The Bank of England then was an enormously gentlemanly organisation and one was treated like an honoured guest, but I didn't get a huge amount out of the experience. I think three months wrapping my head round economics at the LSE or somewhere would have been a lot better. But anyhow ...

CC: It sounds as though it wasn't long enough to be able to do an actual job.

PU: I wasn't doing a job, no. It really wasn't very satisfactory. But in that time I was desperately trying to learn German because my German was extremely weak when I got to Bonn, and also trying to get on top of the basic elements of economic policy.

### **Posting to Bonn, 1973-76**

CC: Then you went to Bonn, for once in the Foreign Office, a fairly logical progression from the job you had been doing.

PU: Yes, though to an entirely different job, as Economic Counsellor, which I found very heavy going at first. It was hard work but immensely worthwhile and very educational. I think in a way I really grew up doing that job. For one thing, it was on promotion to Counsellor, so I was running a proper team for the first time, and I had to get my head round German at the age of forty, which was not easy. Doing economic propaganda work in New York had been very much a question of purveying a party line, but dealing with the Germans on European Community issues and analysing the German economy, which at that time was the model for the rest of us, talking to bankers in Frankfurt, going to see the Bundesbank, all this was a serious proper job and I enjoyed it very much. Well, to be truthful at first I found it daunting but, as I got on top of it, I enjoyed it very much. It enabled me to get to know Germany in a way I hadn't known it before – my wife had been born there but I'd scarcely been to Germany. I think the experience of being in a big Embassy - a huge and, at that time, really rather ratty Embassy - was a good one. So, all things considered, I consider it a good period.

I suppose the big theme was the decision of the new Labour Government that they were going to renegotiate the terms of membership of the European Community and put the results to a referendum, which meant one spent a lot of time, I in Germany and others in the other capitals of the European Community, trying to persuade our host governments to agree to our doing some fairly absurd things, and to the European Community doing some fairly absurd things, so as to get into a situation where Harold Wilson could go to the country and say, "I've improved the terms of British membership of the European Community."

CC: Shades of what's just happened in Brussels yesterday!

PU: Exactly. It's all a bit lost in the mists of time. I think it is a fact that joining the European Community as we did in '73 meant that we joined very much on the other people's terms (as one does if one is a demandeur) on the Common Fisheries policy for example - that really was a stitch-up to our disadvantage. But we joined and, almost immediately, everything went wrong. The first oil shock pushed up the price of oil globally, hitting everybody's economies. All the European Community economies were suffering from all these things, and we were suffering particularly because we'd just

joined, we had a difficult transitional process to undertake in any case, and our economy was being hit for six by the oil shock.

We were saying, “Look, without special treatment, we are going to be in a terrible situation. It’s going to be very hard on us in budgetary terms.” In the end the European Community played ball. We got agreement on a formula which might turn out to mean little or nothing really. It said that if an unacceptable situation for us were to arise, the spirit of the European Community would mean that it would have to (I remember this one in French) *aura au coeur* – take the British problem seriously. It was very weasely language. I think the others were saying, “Look, you signed up and within months you want the thing changed.” And we were saying, “We’ve got a different Government.” Anyhow, the details which I’ve entirely forgotten made for a fascinating negotiation, and one saw the Germans leaning over backwards to help us. At least, in presentational terms they were doing so - whether on substance I’m not so sure.

I remember one story from that time which is perhaps worth telling. When the whole thing had gone through and the British people in the referendum had said Yes to membership of the Community, I had a big party in the garden for all the people around Bonn who had been involved in our dealings on the subject: I suppose there were about fifty or sixty of us there, mostly Germans. I made a speech as one used to on those occasions, and said, “One thing is clear: this has now settled once and for all, the question of British membership of the European Community!”

CC: Brave words!

PU: Brave words! Yes, never say never.

What else? What is I think worth commenting on now, about thirty years later, is just how monumentally successful the German economy seemed and was at that time. One felt sitting there why don’t we follow the German example, and this is how to do it. I remember when I was leaving I wrote a dispatch for the then Ambassador to send, because I was so convinced of the merits of German Federalism. This was a dispatch about how the German system worked. And I put in a final paragraph as a joke, I knew he’d have to take it out - saying roughly, “What does this mean for Britain? It means that we really have to adopt the federal system, turn Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex and Suburbia into states in a Federal Kingdom, and run Britain on the sensible lines

adopted by the Federal Republic of Germany.” It was a joke but I felt we had so much to learn from the German model: we were getting nothing right and they were getting everything right. Thirty years afterwards, things look rather different.

CC: Yes. I remember at the same time that it was the main theme. We were all obsessed with this thing about how successful the German economy was. I remember Shirley Williams coming out on a visit, it must have been 1975 - probably you were there - and I thought she partly put her finger on it when she said, in a joking way, that the real problem is the difference between the British and the German education systems at that time. British kids go to school and have a marvellous time, and enjoy it greatly, and then they have to get out into the real world and discover what an awful place it is and they actually have to do some work and don't like it. Whereas their German counterparts had had a miserable time at school, strict discipline and it had been absolutely awful, and they had to get through it somehow and, when they get out from school, they're so liberated and delighted that going to work is a great joy. Anyway, there was a grain of truth in that, I think, at the time.

PU: I'm going to say something that's wildly off the point. On that same occasion, Carla Powell looked at Shirley Williams across the room and said, gesturing appropriately: “She may have got the brains but I have got the tits!”

CC: We must leave that in!

PU: So, to sum up on my years in Bonn, after a shaky start, I came to enjoy my time there. The job was manifestly worth doing and, whenever people ask me about Bonn, I always say, “Well, it may not be much of a city but, if you're interested in power - which you ought to be if you're going to be in diplomacy - it was the place to be. The heart of Europe and all that.

### **Head of Personnel Policy Department in the FCO, 1976-79**

Then, in 1976, I got a posting back to London which suited us down to the ground because our son had just had a road accident that nearly killed him and we desperately wanted to be back in London for his recovery, though that had nothing to do with the appointment.

### **CPRS and the Review of Overseas Representation**

They'd appointed me to be the Head of Personnel Policy Department at a time that was really very interesting indeed. PPD, as it was always called, was I think in normal times rather a dull job. It dealt with personnel but rarely with people as individuals. Instead it dealt with things like the structure of the Diplomatic Service, its establishment, numbers of people in an individual mission, opening and closing missions, and so on. The interesting human work, of who went where and so on, individual careers, was done by another department across the corridor. So in normal times, I think PPD would have been rather a dull job. But this was an abnormal time and I found it fascinating and, curiously enough, one of the most political jobs I ever did.

Autumn 1976 was a time when the whole question of Britain's overseas representation and the status of the Diplomatic Service was a matter of intense controversy. Britain was in bad economic trouble and it was being argued that part of the trouble was that we were putting too much of our limited resources into overseas representation; that that representation was wasteful; that we were a Service that was living in the past. It was said that we were wasting money, we were wasting resources, we needed to be shaken up. I don't think, myself, even though I take a more modulated view now than I did then, that there was a great deal of truth in these criticisms but it was there and it was a political fact. And so, just before I returned, it was decided to set the Think Tank, the Central Policy Review Staff, to work on a study of Britain's overseas representation, with five or six bright youngish people on a panel under the Chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Berrill, to do this work. My Department, PPD, was told to set up a little unit to liaise with that review, to facilitate its work in interviewing the Foreign Office and so on, providing information to it, and at the same time to shadow its activities. So there I was, presiding over this Department, on the one hand doing things like establishments - rather dull work like that - and on the other this intensely political work of arguing the corner of the Diplomatic Service at a time when it was under fire.

Things were made more interesting by the fact that the new Foreign Secretary was one of the youngest ever. David Owen came to the Foreign Office at the age of thirty-eight, straight from a junior ministerial job at the Ministry of Defence where he'd made himself 'very badly liked', as my mother used to say in Yorkshire, and set about making himself pretty badly liked in the Foreign Office. I think, in retrospect, that he was arrogant partly because he was an instinctively arrogant man and partly because he felt very unsure of himself coming into this senior Department of State at the age of thirty-eight. It must have been quite frightening. But he on the one hand and perhaps over-inflexible senior

members of the Diplomatic Service on the other fairly soon produced a tense inter-relationship that wasn't very good for either side. So there was a lot riding on all this. I've always felt that the Diplomatic Service is an asset to Britain - perhaps not as good an asset as it used to be – but at that time there was a real danger that, out of all this emotional and politically driven in-fighting, a lot of damage could be done and an opportunity for reform would be lost.

My own position was a bit ambivalent, as was the position of my bosses, Curtis Keeble, who was the Chief Clerk, and Andrew Stark, who was brought back from Copenhagen to supervise the relationship with the CPRS. On the one hand we were doing an objective job of providing information and facts to the Think Tank. On the other, we were trying to ensure that our own views got a proper hearing. I suppose we were also getting - indeed I was getting - into a good deal of propaganda work about the value of the Service, because I didn't want that value to go by default. So, in retrospect, it was a muddled situation and one where, if one were reconstructing what happened for an academic purpose, say, one would have to ask oneself some rigorous questions about whether the whole thing was entirely proper.

A lot of other members of the Diplomatic Service were getting into the act. When the Think Tankers went to various embassies, they ruffled a lot of feathers; a lot of people then started briefing against them. It was frankly a bit of a mess. There was I sitting in the middle of this and trying to hold all the threads together, which is why I started by saying that this was perhaps the most political job I ever did.

Then things were made more emotive by developments such as the appointment of Peter Jay, the son-in-law of the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, to be Ambassador in Washington. In particular the way in which the appointment was defended by David Owen caused real anger. He said more or less in terms that there was a network of senior British Ambassadors and British diplomats which was closed to him, the Foreign Secretary. Through Peter Jay he could break into it; otherwise it would remain closed to him. It was frankly a pretty ludicrous and quite unfactual thing to say.

CC: He said that publicly, did he?

PU: Yes. I mean, he didn't say it in quite the terms I'm using and I'm probably sharpening it up a bit, but that was the general sense of what he was saying. My wife, who is usually a gentle soul,

produced a devastating remark about all this when we were having dinner with some people, one of whom was a man of about forty from the Treasury. He said, “But you know, let’s face it, Peter Jay *is* the brightest man of my generation,” to which Monica, God bless her, said, “Yes, but what’s so special about your generation?” It was a palpable hit; addressing just the sort of thing you see happening to-day with the Blair world.

As you can see from the way I’ve been talking, it was an engaging, interesting, very lively time and I think in a way I still feel a bit emotional about it. Trying to look back objectively, I suppose I would say two things about this whole business of trying to reform Britain’s overseas representation and the British Diplomatic Service in the process. First of all I think that it was necessary to review the situation of the Diplomatic Service and of our overseas representation, but that the exercise was flawed by being driven by really rather irrelevant considerations, many of them politically motivated. And the Diplomatic Service’s reaction to it, for which I must take some responsibility, was also flawed. As a result we missed an opportunity to do a better job of reform than was done.

Secondly, it is fascinating to look back at the way the assumptions of that time have been called into question by later events. A report a few years earlier, the Duncan Report, had said we should just concentrate our efforts on the OECD countries and more or less forget the rest of the world. That report was seen out of court. Then came the Think Tank Report, and one of its underlying assumptions was that the job of the modern Diplomatic Service was to manage Britain’s overseas decline - I think we all half-agreed with that. Our future lay very much in Europe, but the United States was our key ally. I thought that the only way we could have an Atlantic relationship of equals would be if we immersed ourselves in the European Union, and we might have to pull out of other areas, concentrate our efforts on this. Yet when you look back from where we are now, you see that our most pressing problems are global ones. I think we are wrong to have involved ourselves in Iraq, but I have to recognise that world-wide problems demand our engagement – in alliance with others, of course. And now we’ve got an economic strength that we assumed than we would never recover. There are few prolonged straight lines in history.

CC: You did say that an opportunity for more fundamental reform was missed. Is it possible to say something briefly about that?

PU: I wish I'd got a clearer idea, a clearer memory, of what came out of it all. But running forward a bit, I remember talking with Patrick Wright in the late 1980s and saying that our overseas role was no longer confined to managing decline as we'd been doing for many years. And since 1989 or so we've been managing success – or were until we got sucked into Iraq and association with this dangerous American Messianism

CC: Managing success!

PU: Managing relative domestic success and using it abroad, but we've thrown away yet again our chances of getting properly involved in Europe, but we'll come to that later.

### **Sabbatical year at Harvard, 1979-80**

From PPD I went to Harvard. As I used to say, the Foreign Office sent me there to try and recover my sense of proportion after three years dealing with CPRS. Harvard was a glorious treat. I think it was one of the best sabbaticals the Foreign Office had to offer. I went to Harvard to the Center for International Affairs, which is now called the Weatherhead Center, and spent a year as a grass widower, as a bachelor, because Monica didn't come with me, listening to the great men lecturing, going to seminars, meeting and doing things with twenty people rather like myself from similar backgrounds, who were similarly having a year off there, and writing a paper which I will go into because it led me to do other things later.

We were all free as air but we were expected to write a paper – a mini dissertation. I decided I would write mine essentially about Britain's place in the world. It became the subject of a seminar and it led to my writing an article based on it for International Affairs, published by Chatham House, which attracted a certain amount of attention. I suppose it came out in International Affairs in the early '80s. Many years later, I came back to the subject and, in retirement, wrote a book called 'Hearts, Minds & Interests', which perhaps we ought to discuss later.

That was the way I spent my year at Harvard. It was a return to the United States after several years away and a return to a very special corner of the United States, the intellectual power house of Boston and Harvard and so on. I think it fortified me in a view I'd had before which was that the whole idea of a special relationship with the United States was self-delusion on our part, not because the

Americans I was meeting had any ill will towards Britain but because they were pre-occupied with much bigger issues; they were living in an infinitely larger society and even those at Harvard, whom I knew because they took international affairs seriously, were so pre-occupied with the United States' interests that they weren't ever going to be able to see us as really serious people, let alone equal partners. They couldn't see us as people whose interests were to us as important as theirs and often really different. And so I came back from Harvard convinced that we couldn't go on kidding ourselves much longer about a role in the world as a sort of semi-equal partner to the United States. And with rather sceptical views of the United States. I'd lived in New York a few years earlier and enjoyed it and I enjoyed living at Harvard, and if you are open-minded you can't fail to be impressed by the United States. But I saw also an understandable, but nevertheless rather unattractive, solipsism - a pre-occupation with what was going on in America - which just made the Americans people that we couldn't safely go to bed with. It became one of my deepest convictions and of course now, with Bush Junior, I believe it even more strongly.

Half way through Harvard, the Foreign Office said to me, "We've got a job for you. It's your first embassy. We want you to go and be Ambassador in Vietnam." I said, "Yes. I've had very good postings and I'll go willingly to this hard one; but I don't think it is fair to ask a wife who's found a lot of things to do in Bonn and then in London, to go to a place like that." In particular the post report said that all three other embassy wives were required to work in the Embassy - required - while the Ambassador's wife was not allowed to. So I said I would go, but go on my own. And a week later, they decided I'd be running off with Vietnamese blondes, and cancelled the proposal. So that was the end of that.

### **Minister Economic in Bonn 1980-83**

So instead, I went back to Bonn, which I'd left four years earlier, to be the Economic Minister. There was John Boyd who'd succeeded me as Economic Counsellor, and he gave a dinner party, at which he said, very nicely, "Your house is my house; my house is your house!" but it was a bit incestuous. It was a slightly awkward situation which I think we both handled very well. But I'd been doing the job and just four years later came back to supervise it. And he, frankly, was doing it better than I'd ever done because he was, I thought, a brilliant guy. We got on extremely well, but my real problem was to find a role that wouldn't just be duplicating that of the Economic Counsellor. I set myself to get out and about all over Germany, not just in Bonn, because I thought otherwise I'd be just an extra wheel

on the cart. So I went off and did a lot of public speaking around the country, having got enough German by then to be able to do it. I suppose I must have irritated the Consuls-General by interfering with what they were doing - I tried not to. And I tried to take a broader view of Germany than I'd been taking a few years earlier, following on from the dispatch on German Federalism that I'd written just before I left Bonn the first time round. But I think really there wasn't room for both an Economic Minister and an Economic Counsellor, or put differently, for two Ministers. So it was three years, not of marking time, but not as fulfilling as the previous time in Bonn.

### **Ambassador to Hungary 1983-86**

At the end of which, they gave me my heart's desire to go back to Budapest. They sent me went first to the Adult Education College in Accrington to spend a week relearning Hungarian – God knows why the system chose Accrington - and I was met by a young woman who was as they say great with child and who said she was going to re-teach me Hungarian. But in her condition she couldn't be with me from 8.00 in the morning until 11.00 at night, so she brought along her equally pregnant friend and they took turns to teach me. I settled down with these two women of Hungarian origin to try to relearn Hungarian in a week. It was typical of the hand-to-mouth arrangements the Foreign Office used to have for teaching lesser languages. Now they have gone to the opposite extreme and seem to waste whole man- or woman-years in teaching people languages they may use only once in their careers.

CC: Where had you learned your Hungarian originally?

PU: Oh, I'd picked it up in Hungary as a young man.

CC: You didn't actually have any ...

PU: I had lessons, one to one lessons, in the Legation and I used to go and talk to the old man and his sister who lived in the flat below us, but I went back to Budapest with nothing more than basic Hungarian, roughly what I'd left it with; enough to make my speech when I presented my credentials in Hungarian, and that was about it.

Anyhow, we went back to Hungary, a very different Hungary from the one we'd left twenty-something years before. We crossed the same frontier and drove down the same road, but this time flying the flag

and all that; you know the great treat of being a Head of Mission for the first time! And we went to a Hungary which was on the move, very much the West's darling among the communist regimes of Eastern Europe because it was reforming its economy and toying with a little more political openness, but which, when I looked at it, I thought had made rather less progress in the twenty-five years I'd been away than Western commentary seemed to suggest. It was still very much an authoritarian, totalitarian state; people were still pretty afraid to speak their mind. The economy, which was supposed to have been so marvellously reformed, was still pretty ropy. The food in the restaurants was still pretty bad. If this was the best communism could do, it wasn't terribly good.

I went back in the summer of 1983 when the last of the great East/West crises was brewing up over the stationing of intermediate nuclear weapons in Europe, SS20s on their side, Cruise and Pershing on ours. Having presented my credentials I started going the rounds to meet everybody, as you do, and I decided not to be pleasant about things; I had to say, "Look, we're heading for a pretty chilly winter." Which I did, and they all said, "Yes, yes, Mr. Ambassador, but I'm sure it'll be all right in the end." And then I had to call on the Soviet Ambassador, and I thought, "Really, I've got to sock it to him. We're not particularly friendly. They are threatening us and no doubt think we are threatening them." But when I got out of my car there on the pavement was this great bear of a man with wonderfully shiny blue eyes and a benevolent smile. He flung his arm round me and said, "My dear colleague, come in! It's such a delight to meet you!" and so on. I was going to tell him what we thought about things, but he said, "I've got some very special caviar for you! Have some. Have a vodka! Have another vodka!" And at the end of it, we'd had a lot of caviar and a lot of vodka, and we'd not told each other any angry truths! I tottered off half plastered.

So that was the atmosphere and, within a couple of months, Geoffrey Howe came on his first visit to Eastern Europe as Foreign Secretary, arriving on the day after the Russians had shot down the Korean airliner that had strayed over Siberia. It was a nasty business and western feelings were running high. I remember Geoffrey Howe in his quiet way made quite a point of it. But in a sense all this was froth on the top of the beer because underneath we were moving towards a really serious exploration of the possibilities in Eastern Europe.

CC: When did Gorbachev ...?

PU: Gorbachev came on the scene in 1986, at the end of my time in Hungary. Andropov, who had been Soviet ambassador in Budapest at the Revolution in 1956, was the Soviet leader when I arrived.

### **Visit of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to Hungary in 1984**

PU: When I went to Budapest in 1983 the FCO were developing a policy of exploring the possibilities of doing business with individual East European countries and seeing just how free they felt to act as sovereign countries rather than Soviet satellites. Just before Christmas, 1983, Julian Bullard (Political Director) told the Hungarian Ambassador in London that Margaret Thatcher would like to pay a visit in the New Year. The Ambassador's response was, "Oh yes, yes, yes, yes!" Julian said to him, "Had you better not ask Budapest before you say yes?" He was sure it would be all right. But in the run-up to Christmas I detected signs that the Hungarian Government was getting cold feet. They had invited Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl and whoever was the Italian Prime Minister at the time to visit Hungary. Now all three were proposing to come in the first six months of 1984, and these were precisely the three Nato countries that were allowing the stationing of intermediate nuclear missiles on their territories. I thought this could all go very nastily pear-shaped, so I rushed off a telegram to London saying that I thought the Hungarians might be under pressure from Moscow on the point. In the end, being Hungarians, they were fairly good at getting out of tight corners. They patched up an argument that they must go through with Margaret Thatcher because we'd cleared the dates with them, and the other two hadn't yet reached agreement, so they were put off a bit.

Margaret Thatcher came in January 1984. It was her first visit to an East European country, and it was obviously quite a moment. The weather was terrible; she never saw the sun or even real daylight throughout the twenty-four hours she was there. We took her into the ultra-secret room to brief her. We answered all her political questions pretty well and then, God knows why, she asked what time it got light in Budapest. Of course I should have just said, "7.35, Prime Minister!" but my mind went a complete blank. All my staff sat around looking equally stupid, and she must have thought we never got up till 11am.

CC: Never saw the dawn!

PU: Never saw the dawn! Anyhow, we had a little diplomatic crisis because, although she was there as the guest of the Hungarian Prime Minister, who was a nonentity, she suddenly announced that

she wanted to meet Kádár, who was the man who controlled everything, without anybody else present except interpreters and Private Secretaries. The Hungarians didn't like that a bit but, in the end, they had to swallow it; otherwise it would have just wrecked the visit. She had what I was told afterwards by John Coles (her private secretary and later FCO Permanent Under-Secretary) was a really amazing conversation with the Kádár. When I had talks with him two or three times, he just held forth endlessly, saying nothing. But he'd obviously impressed Mrs T. I never discovered what it actually was that he said. I suppose one could now try and look in the records and see, it must be recorded somewhere, but I don't know what it was.

CC: So John Coles was there.

PU: John Coles took the record, but it was never vouchsafed to us.

We'd laid on quite a complicated programme for her, a 'meet the people' sort of programme, and one thing was to go to the big market in Budapest, which was an incredible spectacle at any time because you saw just what Hungarian agriculture could do if it was given its head. The big market was particularly crowded that morning and with television cameras and so on following us around it was a scrum. We were struggling through this mob, and it all got so threatening that at one stage I just grabbed the wife of the Hungarian Ambassador in London and my wife, put my arms round them and sort of bulldozed my way through. It was really quite alarming. But Margaret Thatcher made television by saying "I must buy those paprikas," or whatever, and when they handed them over: "I must pay for them!" The Embassy had equipped her with Hungarian forints in an ordinary brown envelope. She opened the brown envelope, and out spilled hundreds of forints with the cameras blazing at her. Anyhow, Hungarian friends told me afterwards that, for months thereafter, Hungarians, particularly young, smart Hungarians, thought the smartest thing to do was to carry your money around in brown paper envelopes!

But, on a more serious note, although the visit was a mad scramble - talking to a lunch I gave, press people and so on, going around being photographed, going to a beauty spot to be seen again, televised - it really was quite important in that I think it opened up to Hungarian eyes generally the idea that you could have contacts with Western politicians. There was significance not just in what was happening in the meetings, but in the barnstorming she was doing, you know, getting out and about and being seen. I think it opened her eyes to something we'd been saying for a long time, which was that Hungarians

might look like black conformists, but in fact there was a huge amount boiling up there that, given freedom, could make them very different. Hungary and some of its neighbours were genuine countries, not just satellites, and they were beginning to feel their oats.

About the same time, something happened that I found very intriguing. There was a man who later came to temporary prominence as Hungary was moving towards true independence in 1988, and he wrote an article in a Hungarian academic journal about the development of Eastern Europe. In it he referred to something which only I spotted as significant because I'd been in Hungary before. He said that the Soviet Government had put out a declaration in 1956 about a 'free and equal Commonwealth in Eastern Europe'. Now in fact they'd done that about two days before they decided to crush the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. I remembered it because I'd written a book about Imre Nagy, but nobody else saw the significance. What I thought was fascinating was that here the Communist apparatchik was, picking up something that the Russians had said in '56 just before they crushed the Revolution, and talking as if it still had validity. And of course it soon did have validity because, by 1989, Moscow was letting Eastern Europe go. It was a fascinating glimpse into what the Hungarian Communists were thinking. It was a careful hint, and he didn't go to the Gulag for saying it.

What else happened in that time? Well, we were pursuing a policy of opening up contacts with Hungary. The Royal Ballet came and, almost more to the point, as far as I as Ambassador was concerned, Princess Margaret came as their patron. She stayed with us for the best part of a week. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, but it was a rather difficult week.

And then - I don't know the dates - came the time for Kádár to pay his return visit to Britain, which gave us some interesting events. Kádár was the man who at first supported Imre Nagy in the Hungarian Revolution and then betrayed him, and eventually hanged him. So back in the 1960s he'd been a leper. But time heals and, over the years, he had turned into most Hungarians' favourite Communist uncle. By the time I was dealing with him as Ambassador, he was an avuncular figure, well on in years, who spoke in riddles. I think that he'd learned to speak in riddles because in the past it had been the safest way to speak. But there he was, having received this visit from Margaret Thatcher, going back to London. I wrote to the Department and said that they needed to remember that might just be a last feather in an old man's hat. We laid on one heck of a programme for him, and he got around and saw a lot of people, and made quite an impression, and I travelled around with him a lot. I kept wondering,

how far this man was one of us if only he dared to be. Although I'd written about the man he'd murdered in 1958 I didn't dare mention Nagy's name to him – it would have been too near the bone.

CC: Had the book been published?

PU: No. I wrote it originally back in the 1960s, then after 1989 I rewrote it and it finally came out in 1991. Anyhow, Kádár and I flew up to Edinburgh and, as we were getting into the car off the 'plane, I saw standing on the pavement my son and his girlfriend - the son had been born in Budapest. So I said to Kádár, "See that boy over there? He's my son. I'll let you into a secret. When he was born in Budapest, he was baptised by Cardinal Mindszenty" (who was at that time in refuge in the American Legation, and I thought this might embarrass Kádár into saying something interesting). He just, "He looks like you! Are you an Anglican or a Catholic?" I said, "I'm a Catholic." "Oh!" he said. "We won't tell them that in Whitehall!" It was cunning, you know putting me on the wrong foot. It was typical of the man; he was a very wily old bird.

In my period as ambassador in Hungary I used to try and talk to people indirectly about Nagy because I was getting material together hoping I would someday be able to write a publishable book about him. But it was interesting that, even at that time when Hungary was so much freer, I thought it really won't do for a British Ambassador to be too obviously asking questions about this man; his story and eventual murder was too much of a neuralgic point in Hungary's memory.

CC: Did Margaret Thatcher go anywhere else in Eastern ...?

PU: Not on that trip but, within about two or three weeks, she went to Moscow to Andropov's funeral. Quite soon our policy of trying to open up normal contacts with Eastern Europe was really motoring and played a subsidiary role in bringing about the 1989 year of miracles. It was all part of the CSCE process. Back in the 1970s, when I was dealing with the Ostpolitik, I'd always been really rather sceptical about the beginning of the CSCE process - it had all seemed to me a bit farcical, going around talking about human rights and press freedom and legal processes to a bunch of hard-faced Communist apparatchiks. But when I got to Budapest I saw things differently (and frankly more wisely). In the end, as you know, we came out smelling of roses from that, and our efforts helped open up Eastern Europe in a way that prepared the way for 1989.

CC: Yes, you're probably right.

PU: So my three years in Budapest, which I enjoyed enormously, were spent mostly on things that were designed to normalise relations with Hungary, normalise relations between East and West, get people talking and doing business together, try to get away from demonising each other and move towards more normal times.

CC: But I think implicitly what you're saying is that it was also more feasible to do that by then than when you were there in the '50s.

PU: Oh much more!

CC: That things had changed.

PU: Things had changed enormously. Hungary was getting really quite normal in a way. Just two stories, two little incidents:

There was a young Englishman, obviously a bit dotty, who kept getting himself into trouble in various parts of Eastern Europe, sometimes in Hungary. Consuls kept intervening and getting him released from prison. Anyhow, on one occasion he tried to cross the frontier between Bulgaria and Greece without a visa and got himself arrested again, and for some reason he was sent to Hungary where he was put in prison. He then became our problem. To try to resolve the problem I went along to see the Head of the Hungarian Consular Department, who told me at once that they were going to release him. I said, "Well, that's very good of you. He's given you an awful lot of trouble." The Hungarian official didn't simper and talk about good will to HMG or anything like that. He just said that they had no grounds to hold him. "As far as I know, there is nothing in the Hungarian criminal code that criminalises crossing the frontier between Bulgaria and Greece." He was talking about the rule of law whereas, thirty years earlier, he would have been blustering about the man being an imperialist spy, put up to things as a provocation against the socialist bloc. Now he was really playing things straight. In this kind of situation, Hungary was becoming what we saw as normal.

There was another story of the same kind. At the time the Americans bombed Libya, there was real fear that British Embassies even behind the Iron Curtain would be at risk. There was particular concern

about Budapest because MI5 knew that some Libyans had been through training courses in Hungary. So we asked for police protection, rather reluctantly, because it tended to frighten off Hungarians who wanted to be in touch with us for whatever reason but would be unhappy about passing the policeman on guard. Then the policeman outside my house just vanished one day, and I protested and he soon turned up again. He was unarmed, quite useless, but nevertheless there he was. I was talking to him one day and he said we really shouldn't worry, in Hungary we were as safe as houses. I said, "Have you read the newspapers to-day?" They were full of a story about how criminals coming from the West had pinched six pictures from the Hungarian National Gallery, pictures of enormous value, and got away with it. Don't tell me that Hungary was any longer a complete police state when things like that happened, so I told the policeman that just for the moment, until passions over Libya had cooled, I wanted him outside my door.

When I left, I wrote a dispatch in which I took a leaf out of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. I took fifteen Hungarians I knew and described them; five who'd done well under communism, five who'd done badly and five who had found a way to get by. It was rather contrived but it was a way of bringing to life the way Communist Hungary was developing. I started by saying, "I've spent the last three years in this country studying Hungarian communism. It's the best kind of communism to be found outside the cloister, but it isn't very good." Then at the end I wanted to sum up, and I said, "I leave with the best of memories. I have a faint hope that, in my lifetime, I'll see these people achieve something similar to the freedom we have in the West." I sent it off, and I thought, "Oh my God! The Office will think I've gone completely soft on communism." In fact, I was forecasting that change within the next 30 years – I was 48 when I wrote that despatch. In fact the change came three years later, in 1989.

CC: It took everybody by surprise, the speed with which it all happened.

PU: Yes.

I went from there to Copenhagen.

### **Ambassador to Denmark, 1986**

CC: It was still 1986.

PU: I went to Copenhagen in '86, yes. I always say of Copenhagen that nobody in his right mind can complain about being British Ambassador in Copenhagen, but it was a shade dull after Budapest. The Danes pride themselves on being very like the British, sense of humour, the lot, but they were a lot less lively than the Hungarians. And then, in terms of work, all the serious work on the European Union and on Nato was being done in Brussels. Bonn had been different because Bonn was such a powerhouse, but I'm afraid it must be true of a lot of smaller EU members that the interesting work is hived off and the bilateral work is really rather dull.

CC: And I suppose there were no real issues that ...

PU: There were no real issues. The only issue really was that we felt strongly that Danes were trying to have their cake and eat it on defence; they wanted to be defended but they didn't want to put any money into it. In the words of a very old lady who came to stay with us in Copenhagen, they wanted the penny and the bun. I got rather steamed up about this and wanted to do various things to bring home to them the evil of their ways. In fact, I rather overdid things, because in retrospect it is manifest that while I was in Copenhagen, between 1986 and 1988, things were getting dramatically better in Europe and the threat from the east was vanishing before our eyes. So if ever there had been a need for a bigger Danish defence contribution it was becoming past history as I wrote.

I couldn't help but enjoy life in Copenhagen, the position of honour in a nice little capital like that, travelling around doing vaguely interesting things, going to the Faroes which was fascinating, but .....

CC: Did you get to Greenland?

PU: No, I didn't get round to it in the short time – less than three years – I was in Copenhagen.

I don't want, for the record, to sound as if I was totally disgruntled with Denmark but it was difficult to find anything terribly fulfilling there and, if I'd had more sense, I would have just lain back and enjoyed it. But I rather fretted and said to various people that I really wanted to do one really serious job to end my career on. There had been talk, I think never very authoritative talk, of my going back to Bonn as Ambassador, but there were lots of stronger candidates. When that job went out of the window, and the job of Chief Clerk in London, it was difficult to see where I could go next. I think the ideal thing would have been to go back to Eastern Europe, let's say to Poland, but that didn't seem to

be on the cards, and the FCO said they would try to find me another job, but it might be a matter of staying for six years in Denmark, which I frankly didn't want to do.

### **Deputy Secretary General at the Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989-93**

So, when the chance of a top job at the Commonwealth Secretariat came up, I convinced myself that this was something that would be seriously challenging and I'd have a go at it. I took over from Peter Marshall in 1989 and plunged into a lot of travelling which, in terms of my own education, had the great advantage that I discovered the world outside Europe, North America and Japan. Typically I would fly to Malaysia, work quite hard at a conference there for five days, fly back, have a few hours in London and fly on to Jamaica. It was that kind of life. I didn't see much of the countries; I went into one smoked-filled room after another. But I learned a lot of development economics on the job and I learned the skill of keeping committees representing all the Commonwealth countries together on any kind of subject. I used to think, Australia's on my right, Zimbabwe's on my left, and I must make sure I look left and right as well as forward so I'm not leaving them out of the discussion. That was the easy part. The difficult part was the total disparity of interests represented around the table.

CC: Who were you dealing with? At what level?

PU: Senior officials, occasionally ministers. The big meetings came round regularly. There was the meeting of senior officials prior to the annual Finance Ministers' meeting. Then every two years there was the meeting of the senior economic officials prior to CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting). There were a lot of ad hoc environmental and scientific meetings and then, separate from that, I ran a lot of seminars and conferences around the Commonwealth. The trick there was getting the experts to use language the rest of the world could understand. I was new to development economics and absolutely new to the Commonwealth, so I found it really very intriguing, and the conferences and the meetings and so on were fascinating because they were such a challenge.

Typically, before the Finance Ministers' meetings, we would be writing the draft for the communiqué to be put out after their meeting. Earlier communiqués I inherited had been a hundred paragraphs long; completely un-newsworthy. So I started a campaign: let's try and produce drafts that focus on the main issues in a way the press can understand. But you know, the Greek Cypriots insisted that every meeting, however technical, should include some political condemnation of the Turks. Other members

had similar obsessions. I suppose I was naive to think one could overcome this but I tried, in the interest of making the Commonwealth more newsworthy and better-respected.

The Secretary General was Sonny Ramphal to start with, followed by Emeka Anyaoku. Sonny Ramphal was a brilliant man and a most brilliant speaker, but he was pretty slippery. He didn't take me into his confidence and, to be fair, he didn't have mine either. Maybe he thought that, if he was seen to be too close to the Brits, it would be bad for his credit everywhere else, but he didn't take me into his confidence and that was difficult. His successor, Emeka Anyaoku, did and launched me into being the main mover and shaker in an elaborate process of reform he launched. The idea was first to agree new goals for the Commonwealth and then to reform the Commonwealth Secretariat to achieve them.

So my four years with the Commonwealth Secretariat fell into two uneven halves. In the first year and a half I was doing an awful lot of conference-going and so on that I've been describing. Then in the next two and a half years I stayed mostly in London, only going to conferences when I had to, the rest of the time trying to push through these reforms.

I was banging my head against a brick wall because there was something very circular about the whole process. In trying to produce a more effective Secretariat we stressed that we would only undertake work which Commonwealth governments wanted us to do – no job creation for jobsworthies. But of course it was the easiest thing in the world for Mr So-and-So in the Secretariat to ring up his home government and say, I think we ought to be doing such-and-such. Why don't you ask us to do it? Emeka had worked in the Commonwealth Secretariat pretty well all his life and he knew what was wrong, but he couldn't stand up to governments on a consistent basis. So when I said we were trying to do a bit of everything and therefore doing it mostly badly he agreed. But when I said we simply had to eliminate some things and concentrate our resources he saw the political difficulties. He really was up against a lot of political pressure, and the only real countervailing pressure for change would come when Britain, Canada and Australia, the main contributors to the budget and to the CFTC (Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation) started to say We're not paying! In my time they were grumbling but not insisting. At the same time I kept telling Emeka that Whitehall and other developed world governments were undergoing a real cultural change. They wouldn't put up indefinitely with a Secretariat which wasn't changing similarly. He half-agreed, but as I was talking he would say - or more likely just think - Well yes, but I've had the Indian or the Nigerian Minister of Finance on the telephone, wanting something quite different.

As Secretariat General he was in an awkward position. The result was that, in the end, we got agreement on a package of changes, first of all in the Commonwealth goals and then in the machinery for achieving them, which looked all right but frankly changed very little. So at the end of four years, in which I really worked quite hard at this, I concluded that I'd been banging my head against a brick wall. I'd largely failed and, if I'd been wiser, I would have cut my losses earlier and gone back to running the economic side of the Commonwealth Secretariat rather than trying to reform the whole Commonwealth.

So it was a disappointing note on which to end. I could have gone on for longer. I had a five year contract and I'd done four and a half years, and they would certainly have given me another contract if I'd wanted to go on, but I thought the time had come to cut my losses. I would go away and write books instead.

CC: It raises some very interesting questions. You say you felt you were banging your head against a brick wall. What at the end of it is your view? Do you think that the problems were largely semi-sort of technical because of the way the Secretariat was set up and funded, or are you really saying that you felt that the Commonwealth had outlived its time?

PU: I said in my book about Britain's place in the world that, after trying to see a role for the Commonwealth, I could see only two serious strategic roles: one was as a benchmark of behaviour, and the other was as a sort of regional organisation which happened to embrace Commonwealth countries rather than a particular region, taking specific action on things which for whatever reason it could do better than the United Nations. A quite small Secretariat could have serviced those roles. Instead we meddled ineffectively in a lot of things. I've noticed that, since I was there, the size of the CFTC has almost halved, and that is really because the developed Commonwealth finally decided that it wasn't getting value for money.

CC: Right. What sort of size is it, or was it?

PU: Well, in my time the CFTC had about £25m per annum and I think it's now down to about £15m or £16m. Both those numbers are a bit vague, but it's roughly of that magnitude, and I'm afraid

that illustrates that I was right, that you had to change the Secretariat if it was to go on doing useful things.

CC: Did you have the view at the time that the Secretariat should really be reorganised so that it was focussing just on those two strategic things?

PU: Not really, no. I thought that its non-strategic CFTC work was worth doing. Just to take an example, it has and had a really rather good debt management system, helping countries to manage their debts. It wins golden opinions for helping to advise developing Commonwealth countries when they're negotiating mineral rights and things, so I think there are specific things like that that are well done by the CFTC. But in the global scheme of things they are pretty small beer.

CC: I can't help wondering whether it couldn't have developed a role in helping to advise them on negotiations in WTO, for instance, or on planning the trading regimes.

PU: Well, in my time, it had an advisor in Geneva helping on that sort of thing. There were individual things like that that seemed to me to be worth doing, but they weren't really big enough to justify the high-flown rhetoric of the Commonwealth. The fact is that an awful lot of the things that the Commonwealth said it wanted to do in common, it couldn't because the interests were so diverse. I'll give you an example. I sat banging heads together through one meeting of senior finance officials preparing a communiqué, and I got it down, let us say, from a hundred paragraphs to about fifty paragraphs. The remaining fifty paragraphs showed just how diverse Commonwealth interests were. And then somebody got up at the end, from a developing Commonwealth country, and said, "We've spent the last two days wasting our time on this. What I want to suggest now is that we ask the British to go and speak for the whole Commonwealth at the IMF World Bank meeting which will be starting in two days' time." He really meant it, but it was utterly naïve because we'd spent the previous two days failing to agree on what we would say. He thought, let's cut through all this cackle, but the fact is that the Commonwealth is just too diverse to make that sort of sense, and it deludes itself by its high-flown rhetoric. I used to spend ages going through draft after draft, crossing out the letters 'IN' in front of 'valuable' because they would say everything was 'invaluable'.

So I'm glad to have done it but I left the secretariat a rather disappointed man, but disappointed because I had been unrealistic about what could be achieved. Of course, in going to the Secretariat, I'd

cut myself off for the last three years from real involvement in British foreign policy. I used to take great pleasure in saying, “The British are quite wrong about this,” a thing one could never say before, but I missed that feeling of intimacy and trust which is, or used to be, one of the great joys of working in the Diplomatic Service.

CC: Any reflections ... Presumably you went to the Heads of Government meetings. One or two?

PU: I went to two. I was in Malaysia and in Zimbabwe.

CC: Any reflections on any of that? The behaviour of the principals, or anything of that sort?

PU: It's not fashionable to admire John Major, but I was very impressed by the way he handled things in Zimbabwe, in Harare.

CC: Because Harare produced that Declaration of Principles.

PU: Yes, it did. Which was really ...

CC: Which is the sort of thing you've just said that the Commonwealth could perhaps do.

PU: Yes, and it's so ironical that it happened in Zimbabwe! The Harare Commonwealth Declaration was really a re-run of the Singapore statement, which had been largely ignored. And you know it would have been fashionable until a few years ago to say, “What more can you expect of these people!” But now it's the Anglo-Saxons who have got people in jail without trial, who run Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and, for that matter, Belmarsh. Nations in the end go their own way. I'm not saying we're as bad as Zimbabwe but, when you're under pressure, you do things.

CC: Yes, you do.

PU: So I wish I could have come away from the Commonwealth Secretariat with, for example, a chapter on the Commonwealth for my book that was more upbeat, but it couldn't be because I just couldn't see a way through.

CC: So, at the end of all that, nearly forty years I should think, a very long time, any reflections at all on the changes in the Service during that time, or things that have got better, things that have got worse?

PU: Well as someone who has long been retired and isn't in close touch, I have two ignorant views: a) I can't understand what's going on within the Service now, but b) I have the strong impression that it is losing its way.

CC: There was a thing called an *esprit de corps*, which probably is a phrase you wouldn't even use to-day, but I don't think there's a lot of that around.

PU: When I look back, I think that the Service I joined in 1956 was a very stuffy thing, and it had really an awful lot to learn - oh, about simple things like togetherness and man-management and so on. But, within the upper ranks - from top to bottom of the upper ranks - it did have a very strong *esprit de corps*. I suspect that was achieved at the cost of a lot of other people feeling like second-class citizens. I remember an Ambassador's wife once. I was one of her gang because I was in the senior branch of the Service, but her language was so careless, "Hello Peter! Oh, good evening, Mr So-and-So," you know, who was a Chancery Guard or a communicator. It was what happened at the time but it wasn't very clever language. And one saw so much of it.

I remember when I was doing guidances and the Labour Government came in, I don't know whether I would have voted for them but I had a strong feeling that this was a chance to start Britain on a new note, a new tone. I drafted a guidance telegram saying, in effect, "Here is change, new government, new faces, new approaches. Here is a chance to put across the idea of a new start." Almost as I was writing it, the new Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon-Walker, got up at his first press conference and said, "We are not the Government of Suez." I suppose I wasn't saying that, but that was in the back of my mind. Anyhow, I wrote this guidance and I've never seen any piece of work of mine go through so many hands. It went to official after official, all the way up to the Permanent Under-Secretary. One of them wrote that this could look as if we were asking people to root for the Labour Government. In the end, Gordon-Walker wrote on it, "No, don't send this. The Government will be known by deeds, not words."

I felt very strongly for a lot of my time in the Service that it and, more important, British foreign policy, had to get away from defending old positions and try and switch into something positive. That, plus my doubts about the relationship with the United States, fed my faith in the European Union as a central element in our foreign policy. I'd been rather sceptical about it early on but I became really rather a fanatic about it. When I left Copenhagen, I wrote a farewell dispatch called something like 'Three views on Europe - ambivalence is not enough', saying that, in Germany, I'd seen the Germans happily inside a European Union that we were still agonising over; in Hungary I'd seen people whose dearest wish would be to get into the European Union; in Denmark I'd seen people who were as ambivalent as we were, all this as a preamble to a reassertion of my belief that the only future for them and us was the EU.

So I felt that the Service and British foreign policy was stuck in a rut. I felt we had to change a lot in our attitudes, and I thought the central change was embracing Europe. I'm now beginning to think that, particularly after Iraq and enlargement, it's too late for that and that the European Union may not be the solution to all our problems that I thought it was. When Turkey comes in, and eventually places like Ukraine, I fear the EU will be so disparate that it will lose its present limited operational effectiveness.

CC: If not Europe, it prompts the question, "Then what?"

PU: I've always wanted a Europe that would be operationally effective and capable of answering the United States back; not inimical to it but capable of talking back to it. And I feel we're on course for never being able to do that, for we'll never be able to reach agreement within the EU – rather the way the Commonwealth in my experience was stymied by the diversity of its members' interests.

### **Writing books in retirement**

All I really want to do now is to round out my story by talking about the books I've written since I retired. To me, in a way, they are a sort of fulfilment of a career spent in foreign affairs, a career in which, as I've said, I had some disappointments. When I joined the Foreign Service back in 1956 I probably thought I'd go further than I did and so, to the extent of this disappointment, I suppose I was driven to make up for it when I retired.

I've mentioned at various times my book about Imre Nagy, 'Voice in the Wilderness', and you saw from what I've said earlier that I'd got a great interest about Hungary and a great hang-up about the Hungarian Revolution. The book was quite a neat way of bringing that to fulfilment. It came out in 1991, two years after Nagy's honoured reburial and rehabilitation as a great Hungarian patriot. Unfortunately it was published by one of Robert Maxwell's companies and, within a month, he fell off his boat and the company went into administration so you don't see many copies of it around!

I went on from that thinking that I would try and write something about a place, and I finally decided to write about the Baltic States, or rather about the Baltic. I'd got hooked on the Baltic in a very limited way when I tried to explain to myself how Denmark, such a small country between Scandinavia and Germany, had survived as an independent state for so long. Answer: controlling the mouth of the Baltic. So I wrote 'Baltic Approaches', which describes a journey all the way round the Baltic from Lubeck back to Lubeck, and I still think that though it's not a great book it is rather a good mixture of travel, politics, history and observation. What's been fun for me is that, having published it in 1996, the Baltic States in particular have now come into fashion and focus. So a lot of the stuff that I'd picked up when I was writing that book I use yearly when I lead a tour round the Baltic States or lecture on a cruise round the Baltic. That is another example of the fulfilment I'm talking about.

Having done that, I thought, well, I'll go back to Britain's place in the world which I'd thought about at Harvard, and produced in 1998 a book called 'Hearts, Minds & Interests - Britain's place in the world', in which I tried to bring into written focus all the things we've been talking about today. So most of my themes are there: doubts about America, commitment on Europe, feeling there isn't very much future in the Commonwealth except in very limited ways, feeling that Britain - tempting though it is - can't go it alone and has got to be involved with other people, and that, contrary to the mood that's dominated many of us for many years that Britain was inexorably slipping down the ladder, feeling that it was now on the rise again. Since I wrote that, I've been very saddened by what I think is a critically central mistake of going into Iraq in the way that has committed us to the American coat tails and isolated us in part in Europe, so ensuring that in our lifetime we won't be able to stand at the heart of Europe as successive prime ministers have said they wanted to do.

I then took some time off and wrote a book you might find amusing because it's about the Iron Curtain. It follows the same technique as the Baltic book: politics, travel, history, observation. It's called 'Where East met West', and describes a journey starting in Lubeck and ending in Trieste. I do that

journey annually with tours, examining the areas immediately on both sides of the line of the old Iron Curtain, seeing what it did, how much of it remains and what look like the prospects for the countries involved now. I think it's the best of my books; though it's the one that sold worst I go on liking it.

That was number four. And the last one is a book about the English Channel called 'The Narrow Sea', which is basically a history of England seen through the filter of things happening on the Channel or beside it, and trying to answer the question, how far did the existence of the Channel shape British history, and how far did it shape British attitudes to-day; a barrier and obstacle in one sense but also a bridge to the continent and an opening to the world. You know, ships going backwards and forwards across it since the Stone Age, and what now?

In a way - I'm going to sound very pompous - those five books and one that I'm working on now round out my experiences and my conclusions and give a sense of fulfilment to my career.

One book got away. In the middle of 2000 I was about to start a book that was going to try and answer the question, "If the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has done more good than harm, is there a danger that, in the 21<sup>st</sup>, it will do more harm than good?" I got a study group together to help with this, with Michael Palliser to chair it, and I was all set to write it up in the same way as I'd done with 'Hearts, Minds & Interests'. Then my back let got me down and I had to have an operation, so I cancelled the whole thing. But if one had been able to go ahead with it, how timely it would have been as the sequels to 9.11.2001 started to unroll.

So that's the end of my story.

CC: Well, is it? I was going to say OK, it would have been timely but would it not still be timely?

PU: It's been overtaken. There are so many hundreds of books on the subject now, you know.

CC: Looking at it through the context of a whole century, not just a few years.

PU: Yes, but frankly the market is saturated. Whereas it would have been ahead of the run, I think now the market is saturated.

One thing I'm fiddling with now is a book which will be a series of written snapshots of the events of 1956: Hungary and Suez, but much else too: it was a tumultuous year, and a book about it might attract readers next year on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I hope I'll finish it. One thing that's interesting is that there is a massive number of parallels between Suez in 1956 and Iraq now. A government going mad again. Peter Hennessy on television yesterday was saying that he thought the Iraq business was the biggest disgrace in British administrative and political history since Suez, and I think he's probably right.

CC: Well, there's a book in that, isn't there?

PU: I hope so. Let's see.

[21,500 words]