

DOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details

David Clive Wilson (Lord Wilson of Tillyorn)

(Born 14 February 1935)

KT 2000; GCMG 1991 (KCMG 1987; CMG 1985)

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The Master's Lodge, Peterhouse, Cambridge, Friday 19 September 2003.

MM:

Could we start, Lord Wilson, by me simply asking you about your early life before you joined the Foreign Office; you did National Service from 1953 to 1955 and then went into the Black Watch – a good regiment.

Lord W:

Yes a very good regiment. My early life – I am a Scot; I was at school in Scotland at a school called Glenalmond which is about 10 miles north of Perth. So when it came to the time of National Service, the Black Watch was in a sense the local regiment but it was also a regiment which some members of my family had been connected with as regular soldiers. My father, who was in the church, had been a regimental padre in the First World War attached to the Cameronians. But I preferred to go into the Black Watch and found it fascinating. I was first of all, after initial recruit training and officer training, one of the teaching officers at the regimental depot in Perth and was then sent to join one of the battalions - they had two – in what was then called British Guiana, so that was a fascinating experience. We were sent to take part in one of those late colonial episodes when there was a fear of a communist inspired insurrection against the government, masterminded by a man called Cheddi Jagan and his wife. The policy of the colonial government in those days was that you could have one of them out of jail at any one time but not both of them out of jail at the same time. British Guiana which had never had a British battalion in the whole time it was a British colony had a battalion sent out a year before we went – which was the Argylls – the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The Black Watch was then sent out to replace them. We were a great disappointment to the local population because since we were called the Black Watch they assumed that we were a black regiment. And we turned out to be yet another regiment wearing the kilt and not to be particularly black. We had a drill for dealing with insurrections which was that, as many people would be familiar with in those days, you put up barbed wire, you put up a banner and you said if you cross this line we'll open fire. We practised that, but in our minds what we would have done if there had been a riot, which there never was, was that we would have turned out the pipes and drums and everybody would have stopped to listen. Anyhow, it was a fascinating experience for a young man. I was able to travel, I organised a little mountaineering expedition to a mountain called Mount Roraima on the borders of British Guiana, Venezuela and Brazil which is oddly enough the origin – or this

mountain is rumoured to be the origin of a book by Conan-Doyle called "The Lost World". It is a great big plateau with a 3,000 foot cliff all the way around it on that trijunction and I organised a tiny little expedition of three of us using dug out canoes and marched across the savannah. Anyhow, it was a great experience for a young man.

MM:

Indeed, a 2nd Lieutenant of 18.

Lord W:

Yes, yes. I had probably more responsibility looking after 30 people than I ever had again until I became Governor of Hong Kong.

MM:

Yes, but after that you went to...

Lord W:

I went to Keble College, Oxford. I had a scholarship at Keble and did the normal statutory three years there and then was looking for something to do. I had been very interested in working in government service and working abroad both from what I had seen in British Guiana and what I saw while I was at Oxford. During a long vacation I went on what was called an Oxford University Expedition to Somaliland – a tiny expedition, there were two of us – but it was an official University expedition. So I saw another British colony, marching very fast and very unprepared towards independence. My original plan had been to go into the Colonial Service, and I was offered a place in the Colonial Service but it so happened that in my final interview when I asked the very distinguished interviewing panel what sort of career it would be for a young man like me, the answer was: "don't worry, in your lifetime there will be plenty of British Colonies". From my limited experience at that time I knew that was nonsense. So I said: no thank you very much. It so happened I was offered a job in the Foreign Office. That may sound slightly strange, I know, but the reason that I had failed to take the exam was because I was meant to be in charge of an Oxford University Mountaineering Club party at Glencoe when the exam was on and I thought that climbing was more interesting than the exam, so I never took the exam. And the Office, very kindly, having heard for some reason about me, said would I like to join for a year on a temporary basis and say goodbye at the end of the year if nothing happened, but if I took the exam and

passed, I could stay on. And that is what I did. I took the exam after I joined the Office and I did pass so I stayed on in the Office.

MM:

Very good. And almost immediately you were sent out to Vientiane.

Lord W:

Yes, without going into it at huge length, the story is as follows. Because I had been taken on on a temporary basis, I was posted to South East Asia Department to look after the Foreign Office bit of the Colombo Plan while I was waiting to take the exam. I wasn't sent off on language training or any other training for that matter. As a young man the reason I joined the Foreign Office was to travel, to see the world, do an interesting job, so I thought I would volunteer for the only language that was taught outside the UK and in those days it was Arabic at Shemlan above Beirut, so I volunteered for Arabic and that was agreed. I set out for Shemlan in an old American army jeep that I had bought for £25, stopped to climb in the Austrian Alps, got to Shemlan and Donald Maitland, (remember his name?) who was the Director, called me in the evening I arrived, and looking very serious, said that they had had telegrams from the Foreign Office who had been looking for me the last two weeks. Where had I been? I told him where I had been and he said: I have very bad news for you – and I thought this was something awful; my family had been wiped out or something. And the bad news was that Laos had been threatened, it was thought, by an invasion from North Vietnam. The South East Asia Treaty Protocol, the SEATO Protocol, was such that if that had actually happened Britain, the United States and some Commonwealth countries, would have been called in to defend Laos. The Foreign Office sent Sir Robert Scott out to Vientiane. He was a very great man, Commissioner General South East Asia in those days, and he decided that the Embassy we had there was insufficiently well informed about what was happening so he suggested that the Embassy should be reinforced by one aircraft for the Military Attaché and one Third Secretary, and the one Third Secretary turned out to be me because I was disposable. And I went to Vientiane armed with an ice axe and nothing else because my kit hadn't caught up with me. So that is why I went to Vientiane. I had a year there, a very, very fascinating year because it was such an extraordinary country in those days and ...

MM:

We are talking about 1959, aren't we?

Lord W:

We are talking about 1959, '60. So it was a time when the Royal Lao Government heavily backed by the United States and backed diplomatically by ourselves was in a continuing struggle with the Pathet Lao, the Communist backed insurgency organisation, mostly in the hills and it was a very sharply divided country. It was a very chaotic country where nothing much worked. It was delightful for a young man who when he wanted to see anybody in the Foreign Ministry hopped on a bicycle and bicycled round to the Ministry. It was the only way to see anybody. Or you went to the local hotel or the local nightclub where you would find most of the government. So it was a wonderfully open sort of place and very, very exciting.

MM:

That was the Lao Government at that time. What about the Pathet Lao? Did you have contact with them at all?

Lord W:

Very little and only by mistake, in that travel outside the capital was on the whole not advised and most foreigners, particularly the Americans, were rightly very cautious. We tended to be less cautious, so I came across the Pathet Lao only at road blocks, being held up by people with rifles and hurrying as quickly as I could to say in Lao: "I am not an American, I am British and I am from the British Embassy", before they actually pulled the trigger. So I came across them in that sense but we were not at that stage in any way ourselves directly or indirectly talking to or negotiating with the Pathet Lao. There were just absolutely no opportunities for that.

MM:

Right. Was this the time when Mervyn Brown got captured?

Lord W:

Mervyn Brown was there or I was there with Mervyn Brown – just towards the end of my time but when he was captured and the events about which he has written a book recently occurred after I had left – about a year after I had left. But in a way Mervyn was doing and got caught out in the sort of thing that we were doing, but not all of us got caught out. If I

remember rightly he went to try to secure the release of two Colombo Plan Britons who had been captured by the Pathet Lao and then got himself captured.

MM:

It must have been extraordinarily agreeable at that time in Vientiane itself for a young bachelor. I imagine the same kind of situation occurred there as in Bangkok in the early 1950's. Very agreeable girls.

Lord W:

Yes, I don't think it was a Bangkok type of society, oddly enough. It was so much smaller and therefore more constrained. I am not saying that there were not all around you very attractive looking Laotian girls and a certain amount of social toing and froing. But Bangkok to me, Thailand and Bangkok, has always been very different from Laos in that sort of way. My memory is that the girls of Laos were only a nice sort of backdrop because they were thoroughly nice, pleasant, beautiful and beautifully dressed in traditional Lao dress. But I have stronger memories of the village like atmosphere which prevailed in Vientiane; having to go around on a bicycle, travelling up into the hills of the country and trying to meet some of the minority, ethnic tribes up in the mountains and that sort of thing, rather than the more artificial social life of Bangkok. Bangkok to us, you see, was like going to the big town with the diplomatic bag. We got a chance to do that every few months. That was your time in the big town. Vientiane was the little village...

MM:

Moonlight on the Mekong?

Lord W:

Moonlight on the Mekong, yes, it was very beautiful.

MM:

Did you actually come across any of the tribes people?

Lord W:

Yes, I travelled a certain amount in the hills with a great, a very great friend, who was an American – a terrific expert on Thailand working for the Asia Foundation. Fluent Thai/Lao

speaker and married to a Thai/Lao wife and he and I and his wife and baby daughter used to travel in the hill country amongst the Meo. And that was absolutely fascinating because the Meos look in a way rather like the Scots in that they wear a kilt, or the women wear a kilt, a knee length kilt with beautiful silver ornaments all around their necks. It was wonderful if you went at the time of the lunar new year and took part in, and saw, all these wonderful games that they play. You go to a village and the boys would line up in one row, the girls would line up in another row and the game was to throw a padded ball backwards and forwards and if the girl dropped the ball there was a forfeit. And the forfeit was that you would go somewhere behind a bush and have an assignation. It was great fun. I am not saying that that was what I did, but I was watching it. And also on one occasion getting a tribal leader, Touby Lyfong, to dance the eightsome reel, because I took with me my practice chanter – I play the pipes. I can remember sitting playing reels on my chanter and teaching the tribal chief and some others how to dance the eightsome reel. It was a terribly young mannish, great fun, open sort of situation.

MM:

Of course the Meo are really a Chinese tribe, I think. You went from Vientiane to be a language student in Hong Kong?

Lord W:

Yes, the reason for that was when I wasn't able to start at Shemlan, because I never did start, the Office had said: after a year you can go back and do your course in Arabic. And having been in Laos and seen what South East Asia was like I sent a message saying, thank you very much but no thanks, I really like this part of the world and my object is to learn Chinese. The answer that came back was: No, you will learn Japanese. And I said, thank you very much, but again no thank you, I don't really want to learn Japanese. I said – and it sounds extraordinary now – I said my memories of the war and therefore my image of Japan and Japanese behaviour during the war was such that I just did not see that I would have the empathy for Japanese civilisation which I felt for Chinese. So after a bit of toing and froing – much helped, I must say, by my then ambassador, John Addis, who was a great China enthusiast who very kindly on my behalf said to the Office: if the young man wants to learn Chinese for heaven's sake let him learn Chinese. And then there was a slight blip in which I was nearly sent to Singapore to Nanyang University because the Commissioner General, by then Lord Selkirk, said: I need a young man who can tell me what the taxi drivers are saying.

So I was going to go to Nanyang and then I think something told the Security Services and they said: "You can't send a young Foreign Office official to Nanyang, it is a hot bed for communism". So ultimately I got exactly what I wanted which was not to go back to London but to go straight to Hong Kong, to Hong Kong University, which in those days was not done – you taught people for the first year at the School for Oriental and African Studies at SOAS and then a second year in Hong Kong and then a third year part time SOAS part time study in Peking. I didn't want to go back to London. I wanted to go to Hong Kong, so I was the first person sent initially to Hong Kong University.

MM:

And how did you start? Of course you had had this exposure to Lao/Thai, so that was a slight lead in to a tonal language?

Lord W:

Yes, tonal. It was quite interesting to me and quite encouraging because I didn't think that I was a linguist. I hadn't had much exposure before then to learn even European languages. Very schoolboy French and well, frankly, schoolboy French at the school I was at in the heart of Scotland was not well taught. So I thought probably I wasn't much good at languages. I also thought that my singing was not very great so I wouldn't be any good at tones, but actually it turned out that I found Chinese so totally absorbing and fascinating that I did not find it difficult. I found it relatively easy. I started at a language school attached to the university mostly peopled by students, missionaries, military, who were going in various forms either straight forward military or low level military intelligence, one or two private citizens who just wanted to learn Chinese and one or two, very few, diplomats from other countries. So I shared classes with an Indian diplomat who is a lifelong friend and who was here very recently and with whom, for a period of time, I shared a flat, an American Chinese who came to learn Chinese because he didn't speak it, and an American academic. All our teachers were from northern China. They were refugees. Obviously we had to learn correct Mandarin and hardly anybody in those days spoke Mandarin in Hong Kong. They spoke Cantonese. And for a time in order to get myself better attuned to it I managed to find a Northern Chinese family who were well enough off to have a spare room in their tiny flat down on the Wanchai waterfront, but badly enough off to be prepared to put up with having a foreigner there. So for about six or nine months I lived with a Chinese family, having got over the problem this time of Hong Kong Special Branch saying they didn't really think this

was a good idea at all. So that was a great help and then I shared a flat with the Indian friend I was talking about, where we imposed the rule that we had to talk to each other in Chinese until six o'clock in the evening whereupon the rule was allowed to be relaxed for a short time. So I had two years of solid study and I think it showed the Office, it certainly showed me, that taking someone and putting them straight into Hong Kong rather than trying to learn in the artificial atmosphere of London made a huge difference. Instead of taking three years in total before the final advanced exams, I asked if I could just take them all in one go at the end of two years and again after a certain amount of toing and froing that was agreed, so I just did the two years of solid study.

MM:

Very good, so that was a wonderful introduction to China and you then landed up going to Peking?

Lord W:

I was then sent to Peking for two years. As a Second Secretary, later a First Secretary, in what was then a very small mission, not even called an Embassy.

MM:

It was an office?

Lord W:

It was the Office of the British Chargé d'Affaires. It had been more complicated: The Office of the British Delegation Negotiating the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the Peoples' Republic of China. From 1949, when we recognised the Communist government up until 1954, if my memory is right, when during the Geneva Conference on Indochina, Eden had a brief exchange with Chou En-lai and they agreed orally, that the mission would not be a negotiating mission but a Chargé d'Affaires' office, so in all my time there we were, as it were, at the bottom of the diplomatic pecking order as we were a Chargé d'Affaires' office. We still had a Consulate in Taiwan which was a sort of irritant in our relationship with Mainland China.

MM:

There must have been a fairly small foreign diplomatic community there anyway.

Lord W:

Very small, and the Western component was extremely small. Of the Western Europeans it was simply ourselves, the Scandinavians and the Swiss. France hadn't recognised, the United States clearly hadn't recognised, Germany was represented by East Germany of course, so the non-communist Western group was tiny and that made it great fun because our missions were very small and we had in a sense socially and politically our backs to the wall, and as always happens in these circumstances everybody makes a terrific effort to get on with each other and that made it fun within the mission and also because the Western part of the diplomatic world was very small we all got to know each other and you mixed with people more than you ever would have in a bigger environment. And we had an extremely good Head of Mission Terence Garvey, a wonderful man who could not have been a better Head of Mission, as far as I was concerned, and his wife Rosemary who is still alive – we saw her just recently – and so they as Head of Mission and Head of Mission's wife created an atmosphere that was very good.

MM:

Was he Chargé throughout your time?

Lord W:

Yes.

MM:

What were the main events?

Lord W:

The broad picture was the relationship between China, (Mainland or Communist China) and the United States, and the way that spun out into other world affairs. One of my memories of life in the Mission, is particularly of Terence Garvey, trying to be very objective and intellectually honest about what the Chinese were up to and likely to do, and coming to the conclusion that they were not an expansionist power, that many of the fears of the United States about the Chinese simply sweeping into South East Asia were unreal. It was very difficult to persuade people in London that that was the case. It was an unfashionable, uncomfortable view for people in London and I remember particularly one occasion when

Terence Garvey sent a couple of despatches back to London on China's view of the world, foreign policy, whatever, and very unusually for those days they were not printed. They were clearly very important documents but they were so out of kilter with orthodoxy, as it were, and so uncomfortable in terms of the way we related to the United States that they were more or less sat upon.

MM:

Were they repressed by officials or by ministers?

Lord W:

By officials.

MM:

When you arrived there, we had only just got over the business of the semi-invasion of India by Chinese forces, of course.

Lord W:

That was in '62. By that time I got there oddly enough that was not really a hugely big issue for us. I was there '63 to '65. And it sounds very strange because clearly that had been a major incident, but that had really gone right on to the backburner, by the time I got to the post.

MM:

What happened? They withdrew didn't they or they ceased to threaten?

Lord W:

Yes. The argument, remember, was where exactly does the border go, particularly in the area of the North East Frontier Agency and whether or not the Simla Convention applied and whether the border ran down near the Brahmaputra or went along the line of hills, rival claims. No, that had become sort of quiet by the time I was there. One of the effects had been, coincidentally, that my Indian friend with whom I had learnt Chinese and who had rather expected to go to Peking with me didn't. He went back to Delhi to work on Chinese affairs there and only much later in his career he finished up as Indian Ambassador to China.

MM:

So he did get there in the end.

Lord W:

He got there in the end. He also became Consul General in Hong Kong at one point. And the other things? What was China in those days? It was recovering from that awful period, the Great Leap Forward, and the economic devastation that followed. It was very poor. The worst of the famines were probably over but Peking above all just felt extremely down at heel, very poverty stricken, and the food available in the markets was very limited and people's dress was standardised. It is a stupid illustration but in a way it sort of shows it. There is a main street in Peking, Wang-fu Ting and very, very crowded. I remember walking in it, quite often at a weekend, and you would suddenly smell perfume and you would look down the street and maybe 50 yards away would be a girl from one of the Scandinavian embassies. So little of anything like perfume and scent was available in China, you could literally smell a foreigner at a distance of 50 yards.

MM:

How nice that it was a pleasant smell.

Lord W:

Yes. The prevalent smell was oil and onions. I lived for a time in a Chinese house, a courtyard house, which was a great joy, because the whole British mission had been pushed out of its wonderful old palace building in central Peking during the Great Leap Forward into a new diplomatic quarter at Jian Guo Men Wei outside the Jian Guo gate in a very uninteresting sort of villa house both for the residence and the Embassy. The diplomats, us amongst them, all lived in a diplomatic compound, an extremely ugly block of flats and it seemed to me to be very unpleasant and very un-China, so I asked if I could have a Chinese house in town. You can imagine the mirth in our Mission that greeted this thought. Anyhow, they very kindly said (in retrospect it was extraordinarily generous), if you want to do this, you go off and see the Foreign Ministry and talk to what is called the Diplomatic Service Bureau. And lo and behold, after two or three months, the Diplomatic Service Bureau said, yes we will find a house for Mr Wilson. And I had a beautiful, fairly large courtyard house right in the centre of Peking, which was just a sheer joy. I lived there and bicycled to the Embassy. And then – I was a bachelor – a man called Alan Donald, a great friend, came as

the First Secretary, the so-called Chinese Secretary in those days, and he and Janet, his wife, had four children. They were senior to me obviously, so the Embassy said, not unreasonably, very sorry, but the First Secretary with all these children should have that big house and you're back in the diplomatic compound. So I went back to the Chinese Foreign Ministry Diplomatic Service Bureau and said: I am terribly sorry, this wonderful house, I really enjoyed it, but somebody else now has it, can you please find me a courtyard house with only one bedroom. And to people's even greater astonishment, they did. So the British Embassy unlike most – one or two of the Scandinavians had kept Chinese house, but in fact, for several years right up until to the Cultural Revolution, we had two Chinese courtyard houses in town. And the nice thing is, this is rolling forward, I have a son who is in the Foreign Service and he was sent to learn Chinese and work at the Embassy about thirty years after I did. A few years ago I went to see him and he had been extremely anxious to find a courtyard house to live in. He hadn't managed to do it, either they were modern houses he didn't like, or they were in areas of Peking that the Chinese government wouldn't allow him to live. He found an old Chinese series of courtyards in a little back lane, called Hutong, as he was cycling along...

MM:

Called what?

Lord W:

HUTONG. It is the little lanes in old Peking, and he saw the notice for the hotel Haoyuan and he went in and discovered it was one of those hotels that were allowed to put up foreigners. So he took a room, or two rooms in a back courtyard, and simply booked them for a year and a half. And he lived there. He was the first person in the British Embassy – after, during the Cultural Revolution, we lost the two houses that I had lived in – who managed to go back and live in a Chinese house in the city.

MM:

So China was still struggling to recover from the Great Leap Forward and it was a fairly self-contained power. Was there any mention at that stage of the future of Hong Kong?

Lord W:

For us it was there the whole time, the issue of the future of Hong Kong, but it was not on the top of the list for two reasons. One, our relationship with China was so difficult and our

contacts with the Chinese so sparse that it was very difficult to raise the issue in any sensible form. We did raise it and always got the answer, that this was a problem to be settled in the future, when conditions were right, that was the phrase. It was also the case that there were still nearly forty years of the lease to run and therefore it was not top of the agenda for Hong Kong either. So it was very much there in the background but it was always a potential difficulty in our relationship with China. The relations between the Hong Kong Government and Mainland China was virtually non-existent. The Chinese Government in those days did not recognise the British Government of Hong Kong. They would not even use the word Government of Hong Kong. Just to make the point, they used the Chinese phrase Dang Jiu, which means the authorities, so it was the British Authorities of Hong Kong and there were no official connections with it, so it wasn't an auspicious time at all. There was no great pressure to talk so it remained very much on the back burner. It's also worth remembering that our relationships with Chinese officials were very scanty. We had some official contacts - almost all low level. The first ever visit by a British Cabinet Minister to Communist China took place while I was there. Douglas Jay came to open an exhibition and I was attached to him as a sort of ADC. He met Chou En-lai, and that for us was a quite an event – in fact a very rare event to have a direct meeting with Chou En-lai. Our personal contact with Chinese - either officials or non officials were again virtually non-existent. You had occasional rather formal social meetings. I was very fortunate personally in that I managed to establish one or two friendships with Chinese people. If I say they were clandestine it is just that one carried them out with great care so as not to make life difficult for those people. You would not use your own telephone to ring somebody. In the days when I lived in the compound there were guards on the gate to stop any Chinese coming in; you would always go and pick somebody up from the street corner in your own car. When I lived in my own house though, I didn't have a guard. Although these relationships were semi-clandestine, I am absolutely sure that they were actually known to the Chinese Security Services and so in a way it was a sort of game – a sort of theatre, and both sides understood the rules. But for me, just those sort of personal contacts, which I was extremely lucky to have, made my life a degree more interesting, I think, than the lives of most of my colleagues.

MM:

A housekeeping point; when you were living in this courtyard house did you have a car?

Lord W:

Yes.

MM:

Where did you keep it?

Lord W:

Believe it or not, my courtyard house had a garage. I didn't use my car much. I had a little red Triumph Spitfire sports car, which...

MM:

That must have stood out.

Lord W:

Yes, it really stood out. When I stopped in Peking with the roof down, huge crowds arrived and people said: what do you do when it rains? And the classic of all classics to me was, on one occasion I was looking after a Dalmatian, a lovely Dalmatian dog belonging to Michael Wilford who was then the Counsellor, when he was on leave. Now I couldn't bicycle in to the Embassy with a Dalmatian running alongside. In those days there were no dogs in Peking; they had all been killed. Whenever the spotted dog appeared, people would say in Chinese "leopard". So I had to use my car. On one occasion there were big demonstrations outside the Embassy against us as a surrogate for the Americans for something the Americans had done. There were huge demonstrations lasting two days. And I drove into the Embassy in my open topped red sports car with a Dalmatian sitting on the other seat. The huge crowds going past the Embassy were shouting anti-imperialist slogans. As I drove up and wanted to turn across these demonstrations thronging the gates of the Embassy people turned around and saw this sight of a spotted dog sitting on the front seat of a red sports car they fell about laughing and opened up a large gap for me to drive into the Embassy. So it had its uses.

MM:

Do you think that the demonstrations were deliberately staged?

Lord W:

Totally theatrical. You knew for how long. If you were in for a major demonstration i.e. one or two days, you would know, because temporary latrines were set up in the street. They were entirely staged. Entirely.

MM:

Did they have television?

Lord W:

Very, very few; there were television sets in some shops. Very few in houses in those days.

MM:

So it would be for press photographs?

Lord W:

Press photographs. Photographs would appear in the press indicating the righteous indignation of the masses demonstrating. It was all organised.

MM:

I presume one of your main duties was to go round reading the wall newspapers and things like that.

Lord W:

Not in those days, because there weren't any. The wall newspapers were from the Cultural Revolution period. Very occasionally there would be something on the wall. Actually, it was usually an announcement about somebody who had been executed with the character being named in red ink. And so you certainly looked at those. Yes, it was part of my job, part of my interest simply to wander around Peking on the bicycle, just to get a feel of things. You had to try to find out where places were because China was, I suppose, spy conscious; no office of any sort and certainly no factory had a name outside it. So we were amongst other things trying to establish where things were. There was very little travel in China. You were allowed in the main cities and that was all, not into the countryside, twenty kilometres round Peking, a little bit out to a place called the Valley of the Ming Tombs and a little bit to the Great Wall. You were allowed out on one road to the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall you passed a notice saying: "No foreigners beyond this point". That was the last check point, but

if you got someone to drive you, you could hop out of the car as it was moving, not quite rolling into the ditch, but you hopped out of the car to see if you could get from there to the Great Wall, where you were allowed to go, through the countryside without anybody noticing you were there and get picked up at the other end and brought back. That gave you a chance just to wander through the real countryside of China. It always seemed to me tragic that in those days the Chinese government would not allow us to travel because we would have finished up, I am sure much, much more sympathetic to the problems they faced than if we were only seeing it through a glass darkly.

MM:

The countryside? Was it productive?

Lord W:

The North China plains are fairly dry, cultivated like all of China for all you could manage, but very, very poor.

MM:

Sad really.

Lord W:

Yes.

MM:

Anyhow, after that stint, you came back to the FCO. You were there for three years – 1965 to 1968. What were you doing in that period?

Lord W:

Initially I was put not onto China, but onto looking after relations with Nepal and Korea of all things. Nepal was the main bit of interest. And I stopped off in Nepal on my way home and had gone trekking in Nepal. Also in Bhutan which to me was fascinating because we had no relations with Bhutan and our diplomats in India were not allowed to go there, but I managed to get permission from both the Indians and the King of Bhutan.

MM:

What was his name?

Lord W:

Wanchuck Dorje. He was the father of the present king, Wangchuck Jigme Dorje. So the main interest was Nepal and the military connection, but for a relatively short time, because not long after I was there the Cultural Revolution broke out in China and I was put on the China desk. I was on the China desk during the most tense part of the Cultural Revolution including when our Embassy was burnt in 1967. That was a very interesting period to be there.

MM:

What was the reaction in London to these events?

Lord W:

The sort of reaction was what the heck could we do? If you remember there were riots in Hong Kong and the survival of the Hong Kong Government as an effective power was put, in a sense, on a knife-edge. The Portuguese Government in Macao had lost control and they never really got it back. The Government in Hong Kong was under terrific pressure from organised demonstrations, some bombing, and in May of 1967, if I remember right, there were massive demonstrations in which the demonstrators were doing things like pouring tomato ketchup over themselves, then falling to the ground to be photographed, saying they had been shot by the police. The Hong Kong police to their great credit, for they must have been under immense pressure and strain, because most of the police of course are Hong Kong Chinese, held firm with complete discipline. That was a turning point. The police were not overwhelmed by the crowds. Then there was a longer period when there were big demonstrations against Government House. Government House was plastered with posters. The Governor had to use the back gate. But the Hong Kong Government was brilliant. They did things like putting up special notices for those who were coming to protest. A number of the leading pro-communists were also fat-cat communists and would turn up in their expensive Mercedes cars. So a notice was put out saying "Petitioners' car park this way". Right in the centre of town, the Bank of China was using its enormous great building to put loudspeakers on the top and broadcast anti British government, anti Hong Kong Government propaganda...

MM:

Was that in place at that stage?

Lord W:

Not the present building, the old one was still a very big building right in the centre above what was then the cricket field. So the Hong Kong Government used one of its buildings to put up bigger loudspeakers and they were broadcasting popular music to drown out the Bank of China. Eventually the Hong Kong Government won but in the process a number of pro-communists and communists, including journalists, had been arrested. There were demonstrations in Peking against the Embassy. The Chinese Government demanded that they should be released and when the deadline passed, and we thought it was yet another of those, as it were, artificial deadlines, demonstrations were organised outside the Embassy, which probably either got out of hand genuinely, or, more likely, extremist elements from the Red Guards didn't just demonstrate, they attacked and burnt the Embassy. And that was a fearful period for us in London. I remember being in a meeting of the JIC Assessment Staff in the Cabinet Office preparing a report to Ministers on what was happening and what might happen and I got a call from my Head of Department telling me to come back straight away. A message had come from the wireless operator saying "they are breaking in." And then the line went dead and we heard nothing. We heard nothing for several hours. We had no idea whether our people were safe or not, and it wasn't until many hours later we got a message through the French embassy saying that they were all alive, but one or two had been hurt. But all our people were all alive. So what do you do? What we first of all tried to do, since we'd lost communications with our embassy in Peking, was to try telling the Chinese embassy that they couldn't use their diplomatic wireless. They went on using it anyhow. There was nothing you could actually do about it. And then the next thing was, since they had limited the movement of our diplomats to the diplomatic compound where they lived in flats and the residence, which was not burnt and which we then used as an office, we said: right, we will restrict Chinese embassy movement. We did that, and we had a series of incidents. I remember the Chinese Chargé coming to the Foreign Office and I had to meet him in the corridor on one of the sofas (which you remember, in those days, was about the only place where people could wait) when he was summoned to see Arthur de la Mare, who was an Under Secretary. The Chargé, who I knew of course, was almost incoherent with rage and I couldn't think what was causing it. Indeed, I couldn't immediately understand what he was saying he was so incoherent. But I then realised that he was pointing. At about five, six feet

away from him in the corridor was the largest London policeman I have ever seen, who simply followed him into the Foreign Office, because he had been told, you follow these guys wherever they go. Anyhow, the next thing that happened was that there were demonstrations outside the Chinese embassy, genuine ones in this case, and the embassy was surrounded by our own police. They were guarding the embassy but also restricting their movements. At one point the members of the embassy erupted and attacked the police with baseball bats, axes and goodness knows what else. We thought, right, here's a way we can do something. We will discover who are the main culprits in the Chinese Embassy attacking the police and we will declare them persona non grata. The rules of the game were such that they would almost certainly declare some of our people persona non grata, so we'll get some of our people out because they were stopping them from leaving. So I called for photographs of this incident and I got them from two different press agencies. One showed nothing but small Chinese attacking large policemen with baseball bats and axes, that was straightforward aggression by the Chinese. A second lot of photographs though showed nothing but big London policemen sitting on small Chinese people, so it showed nothing but the police being brutal to the Chinese diplomats. Anyhow, the net result was we decided we couldn't use all this and we just sat it out until gradually things relaxed, and gradually our people were let out, particularly Tony Blishen who had been injured. And things slowly, slowly, slowly reverted to normal.

MM:

Extraordinary interlude, really. What on earth did the Chinese hope to gain from it?

Lord W:

It was, I think, a time when there was an extremist group in the Foreign Ministry when the Foreign Minister Chen Yi was under great pressure from the Red Guards and when any Red Guard activity within a ministry was getting approval from the Cultural Revolution Leading Group – what later became known as the Gang of Four. There was an episode in Jakarta when the Chinese embassy was under siege and they, if my memory is right, attacked their besiegers and got praise in the Chinese press. That was led by a youngish man called Yao Deng-shan. He got a lot of praise for that. I think it went to his head. He began to be a key figure among the revolutionaries within the Foreign Ministry and my guess is that, learning from that and what he got praise for, an extremist group took control. But interestingly enough, that burning of the British Embassy was the turning point of the Cultural Revolution.

From that point on, the authorities, and particularly Chou En-lai, began to re-establish control. Eventually, next year, the army established control.

MM:

It all fizzled out again.

Lord W:

Well, eventually. For a long time our relations were extremely difficult. But by that time I had left the Office.

MM:

Ah yes, before we get on to that, could I just ask you about housing? At the time of this attack on the embassy, had we still got people in courtyard houses?

Lord W:

We had two. The two houses I had were both still in the hands of the embassy, one of them being lived in by John Boyd, who is now Master of Churchill and the other by somebody else. At one point though they were withdrawn from those houses on the grounds of safety and brought back to the compound. We never regained possession of those houses. A great shame. I have been to see them since though.

MM:

You resigned. Why did you do that?

Lord W:

The sin against the Holy Ghost.

MM:

Leaving the Garden of Eden.

Lord W:

Yes, yes. The reason was this. As I said, I found myself on the China desk during the Cultural Revolution. China became quite important to us. Pretty unfathomable. I found myself being treated ...

MM:

Important to Britain?

Lord W:

To Britain, because it was so difficult, handling the issue was so difficult, and what might bubble over into Hong Kong or anywhere else. I found myself being treated as the sort of Whitehall expert on China and increasingly I began to realise that I had no right to consider myself an expert on China. I had spent two years studying Chinese. I had spent two years living in Peking, but I simply didn't know enough. So I thought, right, I had better go and learn something about China and I'd better do it, perhaps, by doing a PhD. I phoned up Personnel Department and said I have this plan: I would like to go and do a PhD, may I please have three years leave of absence? I got a sort of pat on the back and they said: young man if you want to go off for a year, okay, you go off for a year. Do what you like; we don't care, but come back after a year. And I said: I am sorry, but it's going to take me longer than a year. And if you won't let me off, I think I am going to have to resign. So I did resign, slightly with my heart in my mouth. Coincidentally, I met the person who was then Editor of the China Quarterly, which was in those days the leading English language journal about 20th century China. He was Rodrick MacFarquhar, who is now a Professor at Harvard, but he was then wanting to become a Member of Parliament and had just got a constituency. So he was going to have to give up the China Quarterly. I happened to meet his wife, also a China specialist, while I was thinking about what to do. She said Rod MacFarquhar was leaving and looking desperately for someone to take over the China Quarterly – how about me? So I did take over the China Quarterly, which then at exactly the same time moved into the ownership of the School of Oriental and African Studies. It had been one of a group of journals which were owned by the Congress of Cultural Freedom, like Encounter, China Survey, etc. About that time there were student protests in the States as well as in France ...

MM:

And London.

Lord W:

And London, but less in London, I think, than in the States. It emerged that the Congress of Cultural Freedom was actually being funded by the CIA. I think one of the great things the

CIA did in the post-war years was to try to re-create an active intelligentsia. Anyhow, it was anathema to most academics in those years to have anything to do with something which, even indirectly, had a CIA connection. Understandably in those days. So, the China Quarterly left that stable and came under the School of Oriental and African Studies. Indeed, for me taking over as Editor one of the conditions I set was that the process should be finalised before I took over. So I took over as Editor and part of the deal was I should have time to do a PhD in my spare time. So I had five years doing that, editing and also writing a PhD, which I did on British relations with the Kuo Min Tang (the KMT), the Chinese Nationalist Party in the 1920s. The reason for that was that I knew there was a big gap in my knowledge. I knew a certain amount about contemporary Communist China, a certain amount just by reading about traditional China, but very little about how one had got from the old empire to the communist regime. And the other thing was that I wanted to look into how it was we in Britain got into conflict with the Chinese. There were two occasions when we very nearly went to war with China; we sent troops out to Shanghai in 1927. This was when the Northern Expedition set out from Canton, took over the British concession at Hankow on the Yangtze and took it over without negotiation; took over most of Shanghai but not the International Settlement which was British run; captured Nanking, where we had a big Consulate General, it was not then the capital, and in doing so nationalist troops entered the British Consulate General grounds and shot at least two people. At that stage we sent troops out to Shanghai. We might have gone to war or attacked the Kuo Min Tang, the left wing bit of it, the communist inspired bit of it, if the Kuo Min Tang had not split. It split with Chiang Kai-shek in one direction and the more extreme – the left wing – going in another direction. I think frankly we just didn't know who to go to war with. There had also been an earlier incident in Canton when the Kuo Min Tang were holding Canton and in their anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism mode had boycotted Hong Kong. There was a Seamen's Strike, when the boycott of Hong Kong nearly brought Hong Kong to its knees. This was eventually resolved partly by talking but even more, oddly enough, by extremely astute work by the Consul General in Canton, a man called Brennan, who was a China specialist and who had a sense of how to both handle the Nationalists and deal with them and how, it has to be said, to use cleverly and sensibly a bit of gunboat diplomacy. At the key moment he managed to arrange for some gunboats, which we had in Hong Kong to go up the Pearl River and occupy the pier in Canton from which Hong Kong was being boycotted. I have short-circuited this. It was all much more complicated. But he chose his moment right. Very limited action, no guns were fired but he broke that strike. At that particular moment it just so happened, that

the Nationalists were setting off on their Northern expedition and they didn't want trouble in the south. So to me it was a fascinating series of events. There were a number of other events in which there were tragic deaths both in Canton and Shanghai, - a series of incidents involving Britain and this new nationalist party. How did Britain look at the new nationalist party and how good were they at assessing it? And the answer was we had some people who were very good and we had some people who simply didn't understand what was happening, particularly the merchants in China.

MM:

The British merchants?

Lord W:

The British merchants in China, who were strongly opposed to the nationalists. For them, this was the end of the world and the end of life as they knew it. They were very unsophisticated. We had an extremely good China specialist as an Adviser to the Far Eastern Department in the Foreign Office, Sir John Platt. He was from the China Consular Service. But a lot of people were much less well-informed or sympathetic. It was fascinating to see how we looked at it and then to look at the other side of it - as it were the mirror image - and see how the nationalist looked at us and how off the mark they could be too. The various conflicts that we got into were massive misunderstandings on both sides, in which each side thought the other was infinitely clever and devious. As you look at the record on both sides, particularly ours which is a fuller record, you realise, as anybody who has worked in Government service knows, that the cock-up theory is the right one; the devilish Machiavellian plot is not right. It just isn't like that.

MM:

We can't even understand the French.

Lord W:

Anyhow I did that. And I took a year's leave of absence from the China Quarterly to finish my PhD and went to Columbia University in New York as a Visiting Scholar. At the end of all this, wondering what I should do next, should I go on as an academic or should I do something different? It didn't look to me as though being a British academic was attractive for the sort of person I am, which was not sufficiently specialised either as a historian or a political scientist. The British system just isn't like that. Indeed my predecessor, as I said,

Rod MacFarquhar could not find an academic post, brilliant though he was, so he went to the States. So university life did not look as though it probably would be right. And I bumped into Percy Cradock, a great figure in our relations with China and then the Head of Assessment Staff in the Cabinet Office. He said that he wanted somebody who would do long term thinking on East Asia - China, Japan, and East Asia as a whole, and would I consider joining the Cabinet Office, join the Assessment Staff to do that. That looked very attractive, but frankly it did not look like a long term road ahead for the future. I said I would be very interested to do it, but only if I could rejoin the Diplomatic Service. That was quite interesting, and I am rather pleased that it happened because so far as I know, I was the first person who had left for a substantial period of years – as much as five - and then been taken back as a career member of the Service. People like Con O'Neill had left and gone back. I think Con did it twice; but always on contract, whereas I insisted that if I was going to go back, I was going back as a full member of the Service. Eventually that was agreed and I hope that it now has become more possible. The penalty was – how stupid can you be as a young man? - I realised that I had resigned after, I think, 9½ years in the Service and you only had a pension entitlement after ten years, so I lost the lot.

MM:

You just don't think of that.

Lord W:

You just don't think about it. So I said okay, if I am going back, it would be terribly nice if you would reinstate this pension entitlement. As you can imagine, eventually they said they would reinstate half of it. Anyhow, the net result was that I did rejoin the Diplomatic Service, but at the rank I had left it at, which was still a First Secretary, and joined the Assessment Staff under Percy Cradock to do long term thinking initially, but ultimately to run the current assessment groups dealing with Asia. We had groups dealing with each bit of the world and when I joined, Percy himself, quite understandably looked after Asia, and then I took over that from him and so did a lot of current work as well as longer term thinking about Asia.

MM:

Did you overlap with the Planning Department in the Foreign Office?

Lord W:

In terms of talking about?

MM:

Long term thinking.

Lord W:

A bit. But we were doing really rather different long-term thinking. It tended to be more precise things like – where was Chinese military development going? Things where the intelligence input would be significant. Or take Japan. Was Japan going to become a nuclear power? Or, I remember doing India; was India going to become a nuclear power after Pakistan had tested a weapon? So it tended to be things where doing it in the Cabinet Office, the Assessment Staff had its own added value as it were, different from what the Planners were doing.

MM:

Yes, that is a very interesting distinction really. So that was your time in the Cabinet Office.

Lord W:

My time in the Cabinet Office.

MM:

Where there any major events in South East Asia during that time?

Lord W:

Communist victory in Cambodia.

MM:

Yes.

Lord W:

All of that. The takeover of Phnom Penh, the terrible events that happened there. And my memory of that is getting a piece of low grade intelligence saying that if the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh, their intention was to remove the population and send it out to the

countryside. To my shame I treated it as a piece of very obvious black propaganda. It was so outrageous, that it couldn't possibly be true.

MM:

It was?

Lord W:

It was true.

MM:

And what could we have done about it?

Lord W:

I don't think we, the British, could have done anything about it.

MM:

And you were standing aside from the Americans in Vietnam?

Lord W:

Yes, yes.

MM:

Supported but ...

Lord W:

Yes, I think really to the extent that we were there, we were trying to be as objective as possible over what was happening at a time when emotions tended to run quite high, and we were in a position, we in the UK, we the Assessment Staff in the UK, could step back. I found it intellectually, if this doesn't sound arrogant, very interesting. How do you take all these different sorts of information – both overt and covert – and translate it into something which is one sheet of A4, comprehensible to a busy Cabinet Minister, be accurate and fair and never allow your prejudices or what the government's position is, to influence what you're saying. I found that extremely interesting and moving from the academic world.

MM:

Sounds like an impossible job to me.

Lord W:

I don't think so. And doing it with Percy Cradock was very good. For three reasons. One reason: he has one of the sharpest intellects of anybody I came across amongst many sharp intellects. Two: he had brilliant use of English – very crisp. Three: he had an absolutely razor sharp mind combined with intense intellectual honesty. He would not let anything which could not be supported go through. It was a wonderful atmosphere to work in.

MM:

But then you are dealing with politicians who eventually take the decisions?

Lord W:

Yes.

MM:

In your day, did the politicians take decisions or were they happy to be guided, to take advice? The problem about Mrs Thatcher was that in the end she invariably just took decisions on her own and one rather fears that that might be happening today.

Lord W:

We may go on to that in a moment in the time scale. I think from the Cabinet Office point of view and the Assessment Staff, and remember I had been away from the Service for five years, so anything that was happening on the other side of Downing Street was anecdotal to me, I think in those days officials had a huge amount of influence. The politicians of course took the decisions. The politicians put a political gloss, whichever way you want, of emotional reaction which is partly just personal, partly the vibes they pick up from Parliament, which of course is their job. So you get people who are trying to look at things extremely objectively, obviously with their own emotional background, and politicians who are not looking at it quite like that but have an eye on public opinion, on Parliament and again their own prejudices. No, I think the combination on the whole works pretty well.

MM:

That was the end of the Heath government and the start of the Wilson regime, wasn't it, in '74?

Lord W:

And also the resignation of Wilson – '76 that was.

MM:

Oh yes, that is right. You were in the Cabinet Office then at the death of Tony Crosland?

Lord W:

Although I must say the Wilson resignation came in a note to me while I was chairing a meeting as a complete surprise. It impinges on me but the death of Tony Crosland I'm ashamed to say didn't go so far.

MM:

So how about the Wilson resignation then?

Lord W:

Complete surprise, total and complete surprise.

MM:

He had told various people though.

Lord W:

Very few, yes very few. And I don't think we yet know exactly why, whether he knew that his health was deteriorating.

MM:

I suspect that.

Lord W:

I think he probably did, which is tragic.

MM:

I have got a feeling that he told – I am pretty sure he told James Callaghan.

Lord W:

Is that right?

MM:

We were talking about Harold Wilson and his resignation without really speculating about that and we shouldn't do that ...

Lord W:

Looked at from the point of view of somebody working with the Assessment Staff these things were generally way above our heads and we were in that sense almost monastic. We were trying simply to look at the hard facts of the world that we were dealing with and in great detail, but unlike what you would feel, I guess, when you were in a post abroad and even more if you were working in a Department at a senior level in the Office. It did not matter that much, I hate to say it, but it did not matter much who the political masters were. We were not tailoring our product to the political masters, so we went on with our assessments, whoever was there.

MM:

Were you not conscious of the fact that some of our leaders were responsive to the information you gave them in some way, maybe not?

Lord W:

No, I think you simply took the view that you were producing the best thing you possibly could, and you hoped that it was being read, and you got enough feedback from either the Minister concerned or from a very senior official to make you feel that it was all worthwhile. I never had any doubts at all, all the time I was in the Assessment Staff. First of all, I found it completely fascinating, and that it was very worthwhile, that it needed doing and, incidentally, we had a far superior system for doing it to the Americans. You see the other bit of what I was dealing with quite often impinged on, or was connected with, things the Americans were working on. If you take some things like the Chinese military, then we related to, and depended to some extent on, American product but were not always taking the same view. I remember one particular issue, concerned with the expansion of one particular

bit of a Chinese weapon – I think it was a rocket – when an American coming to see us had said we think this and this and this is happening. He said this in a meeting with Percy Cradock which I was attending. It all was very informal, nobody was taking notes. But at the end of it Percy Cradock said: You know that is absolutely fascinating, it is different from what we think, reconstruct that conversation. Write me an account of that conversation, even if you have not got a note. So I did that and we thought this was very important stuff, we'd better follow up, follow up with the Americans. So Percy and I went across to the States. There were many other things to talk about, of course, we had these regular discussions, but I took on the China bit, and I went to see the China person, one of my opposite numbers, and he said, oh fine, let's go along and we will talk about it with the people who are dealing with this. We walked along the corridor and there in a room were about 30 people who were covering my subject. But what it taught me was that we, through the Assessment Staff, had a superb way of bringing in from all the agencies every bit of intelligence we had, plus diplomatic reporting, plus newspapers, plus everything and distilling it into something which we all either agreed on, or had argued out, whereas the Americans had many more people on it, better information and intelligence, most of which was shared with us, but they had so many different agencies that they went on discussing it and putting out rival versions, so that our version – whatever has happened to it since – don't let's get into what is happening to-day - I thought was a superb instrument.

MM:

And rather encouraging.

Lord W:

Well, I found it very good.

MM:

Anyhow, from there you became Political Adviser in Hong Kong.

Lord W:

Yes. Than which in those days there could have been no better job for me, but it involved turning down another job. And I thought I was jeopardising my career. Personnel said they wished to send me to Portugal. I'd better be careful, because my daughter-in-law is Portuguese. But I did not, I am afraid, wish to be sent to Lisbon as a First Secretary. So I

said, sorry I am not going. I thought that was the end of my new career in the Office – but lo and behold – what happened was the then Governor of Hong Kong, a wonderful man called Murray MacLehose, whom I had known – he had been Head of Far Eastern Department when I was in the Far Eastern Department.

MM:

Another Scot.

Lord W:

Another Scot, yes – Scottish Mafia – asked for me to be his Political Adviser and I was offered that. It just could not have been more what I wanted to do.

MM:

So obviously you got on well with Murray. What was your actual job there?

Lord W:

Political Adviser is an odd title. It actually covered – not in the sense of intelligence cover – a mini Foreign Office working within the Hong Kong Government dealing essentially with relations with Mainland China and South East Asia. It was always staffed in those days by one person from the Foreign Office, usually a Counsellor, and then backed up by someone from the Hong Kong Government or later backed up by a second more junior Foreign Office person. So it was a little Foreign Office implant in the Hong Kong Government but working for the Hong Kong Government, I mean not working to the Foreign Office except perhaps at one remove. It dealt very directly with a great deal under delegated authority (that sounds almost too calculated – perhaps rather constructive leaving alone), dealing directly with and independently with a lot of Mainland China affairs across the border and a lot of South East Asian affairs, again more or less directly, just keeping the Foreign Office in touch with what we were doing if it seemed proper to do so. So that was just a wonderful job to do. A tiny little mini Foreign Office dealing with China and South East Asia.

MM:

What kind of problems did that involve?

Lord W:

Right. First of all one bundle: Mainland China. I said earlier that the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China was almost non-existent when I was in Peking and that went on right through the Cultural Revolution. When, during the Cultural Revolution, at the height of it – 1967 – the time came for Mainland China across the border to turn on the water supply which was essential for Hong Kong (because the reservoirs could only last during the rainy season, we had an arrangement that water was pumped across the border.) it was impossible in the absence of sufficient contact with the authorities across the border to know whether or not they were going to turn the water on. And it was crucial for the health of Hong Kong, to put it mildly, that they should turn it on. What happened on the due day? People were watching from the Hong Kong side of the border, and a man on a bicycle came cycling along the path with a turnkey and dead on time turned it on. But nothing had been said. Nobody knew whether the water was going to be on or off. It was as bad as that. Now, shortly before I became Political Adviser, in the time of my predecessor, Alan Donald (the China Mafia and indeed a Scottish Mafia again), Mao had died, the Gang of Four had been arrested, and things began to change. In Alan Donald's time as Political Adviser, we began to have a relationship with the Chinese authorities across the border on things of immediate security concern. So for part of my time, my job was to build that up both for practical reasons and long-term thinking about the future of Hong Kong. And a lot happened during that time. I am not saying it was because of me, but a lot of it had to involve me and it is things like the very first direct transport contacts between Hong Kong and Mainland China since the early 1950s. There was no direct train. You got out of the train on the Hong Kong side of the border, you walked across the bridge and got on the train on other side. There was no link by boat. There was no air link. The first direct contact was chartered flights from Shanghai to bring Shanghai crabs to Hong Kong at the right season. And that was the sort of test case on both sides. It developed into regular flights, boats going up the river to Canton – ferries – to the re-establishment of a rail link straight across the border. It is astonishing to remember how recent that all is. That is 1979. And also the reaction we got. I said we had delegated authority or a relaxed attitude from London. We in Hong Kong, first of all through the railways, our own railway system, dealing with the railway system on the other side, and then through me as Political Adviser with what was called the New China News Agency, which had a little diplomatic capsule in it ...

MM:

In Hong Kong?

Lord W:

In Hong Kong. They didn't have an embassy or an official office. We worked out how this would be managed and how to deal with border controls and reached agreement. And at the end of it I thought: Gosh, I had better report this back to London. So I sent a letter back to London saying we had established a direct rail link to China. And after the usual pause, about a month later I got a very brief letter back from Far Eastern Department saying, thank you very much for letting us know. We are very interested in the development and entirely approve of all this and then P.S. 'I rather regret the fact that you no longer have to walk across the bridge carrying your suitcase.' So that was that, direct communications. It was direct talking to Chinese officials in Guangdong about security affairs, economic developments and we sent – we hadn't done that before – a trade delegation across into Mainland China in Guangdong. At a higher level – Hong Kong to Peking, Peking dealing officially with the Hong Kong Government, there were feelers from the Chinese side and there were feelers from ours. The way it went at one stage was like this. We were told that the Chinese Minister of Foreign Trade was coming to visit Hong Kong. Murray MacLehose, apart from being a great Governor, had a sense of China because he had originally been in the China Consular Service. He had originally been sent to Malaysia to learn Chinese, had been arrested by the Japanese, worked for Naval Intelligence behind the lines, and he had a feel for China. He said, when he heard this, would I get hold of this man, through my contacts, and invite him to tea in Government House. No Chinese official had been to Government House, as far as I know, since 1949. And the man came to tea. Eventually, a few months later, there was a certain amount of sort of to-ing and fro-ing behind the scenes (but this is not an official diplomatic contact) there was an invitation to the Governor to visit Peking officially from the Ministry of Foreign Trade. This was a suitably non-committal channel as it were for the Chinese Government. He went and I accompanied him, as indeed did the senior Chinese member of the Executive Council. That was the first official visit by a Governor of Hong Kong to Communist China since 1949. One Governor, Sir Alexander Graham had paid a private visit to the Chargé d'Affaires and had actually met Chou En-lai and had some conversation, but apart from that nothing. The first official visit and we did raise at that time (after carefully working it out with the Foreign Office) the question of the future of Hong Kong. Things were relaxing enough for us to feel that we could raise it and coming close enough to the time limit of '97 for us in Hong Kong to be beginning to get worried. The view we took, and this is partly what we were getting from businessmen, particularly American businessmen, was that

unless by the mid 1980s it was clear what was going to happen after 1997 in terms of property, then investment was just not going to come in. Every land lease in the New Territories ended three days before 1 July 1997. So we felt that we had to raise this issue. Eventually, without going into all the details, which are well recorded in published form by people like Robin McLaren in a Chatham House booklet, we decided we would raise the issue directly with Deng Xiaoping. And we would say that we did not know when Hong Kong would revert to Chinese sovereignty, but it would come some day. The Chinese were then always saying, "when the time is ripe." Meanwhile we said, we have a practical problem. There is a possible practical solution, which is we issue land leases, which have no terminal date. But we can only do this if we know that you are content. So that was absorbed. And several months later, shortly before if it had been possible the Governor would have announced it in his annual speech, we got a message back from China saying that it was not acceptable and they were not prepared to do this. But from that point on, discussions about the future of Hong Kong began and about how we could solve the problems. So that was the first time we actually put forward a very practical suggestion at a very high level with Deng Xiaoping. It didn't work, but the thing was on the table as it were.

MM:

They began to think about it?

Lord W:

And realised it was a serious problem. And if I might just make another point – because I think it redounds to the credit of Murray MacLehose and you can see I have great affection for him. Another person we heard was coming through Hong Kong was the Head of a thing called Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office at the State Council. In those days it was an unacknowledged part of the Chinese Government. We knew it existed, I guess most people knew it existed, but it was never publicly acknowledged. He was a very important man called Liao Chengzhi. We heard he was coming through Hong Kong and was on his way back from the States. He had gone for an operation and he had to apply for a visa. Murray MacLehose said, I would like to talk to him; he is the key figure in the Chinese apparatus dealing with Hong Kong. He knows a lot about Hong Kong. He lived in Hong Kong. His father was a great figure in the Kuo Min Tang in Canton way, way back. So I rang up my contacts and said the Governor would like him to come and have tea. And the answer came back saying: No, we don't think that is appropriate, he is here on a very private visit and we don't think it

right that he should go to Government House. So I thought that was a bit stuffy of the Chinese. And I went back to Murray MacLehose and reported this. Murray said: Well, we know where he is staying; he is staying at one of the Chinese guesthouses up on the Peak; say I will go and visit him. Great. So he did this and incidentally we said that the Governor would go incognito. He would not use the official car, the car with the crown and the flag, and they accepted. And so Murray and I set off in an unmarked Special Branch car and went and called on him. Now, we had a very good discussion about Hong Kong and Liao Chengzhi was a very knowledgeable, good, thoughtful person. But that to me was Murray showing what long China experience, willingness to go down the unorthodox route, just do something which is sensible and forget about protocol. Anyhow, that was the sort of thing that we did then.

The second of a number of issues was Vietnamese boat people, which were overwhelming us during those days. We must have had in 1979, the same year as Murray MacLehose went to Peking, something near 100,000 - 90,000 from my memory, arriving in a year. Resettlement in the rest of the world was happening but very slowly. It was just a colossal problem and we had Vietnamese hijacking boats – apparently hijacking the boat, and the crew pretending they had been hijacked, but actually it was part of the deal for which they had paid to come to Hong Kong. And we had a whole series of episodes, which were very difficult. So that was a major concern. A major interest arising from it was the way in which gradually Hong Kong began to play a role in its own right on the international stage. A visit by the Governor to Peking is one. For the Geneva conference on the Vietnamese boat people issue, the Governor went. Off the top of my head in 1979, probably. As the British territory most affected by all this it had been agreed by the UN – by the UNHCR which was running it - that the Governor himself as a member of the British Delegation should make a speech. Now that was Hong Kong playing a role in international affairs, which is really several steps up from anything that had happened before. And again, interestingly, when this was suggested and agreed with us, Murray MacLehose, given his sense of China, said: look, go and have a word with the Chinese Delegation who were there, tell them what is being planned, and make sure that they know so that they are not taken by surprise, and that there is no untoward adverse reaction. They understood perfectly. So that was us playing a role on the international stage. And then because we had some problems with the Philippines, the Governor went on an official visit to the Philippines to visit Marcos. Again, that was something that hadn't happened before which made it all a very interesting thing to be doing, this Political Adviser job.

Can I just add one last one and this was an internal event in Hong Kong. It was the beginning of trying to increase the amount of representative government in Hong Kong, which for a variety of historical reasons had always been at a lower level, mostly because most Hong Kong people had fled from China from politics and wanted nothing more to do with politics. As a younger generation grew up it became increasingly clear that you had to involve them, and the process was started at district level with the idea of elections. There again, we made a point of saying to the Chinese, in advance through me and my contacts in the New China News Agency, what we were planning to do. It's worth recording that even that tiny move towards an election system at a very low level, and only partial elections, caused concern to the Chinese. They accepted that we were going to do it anyhow, but they were worried where this was going and the worry was twofold. Would it raise the level of politics in Hong Kong and destabilise Hong Kong, maybe by competition between the Kuo Min Tang and the Communists. And, secondly, perhaps more acutely, was this the beginning of a process where we were trying to push Hong Kong towards independence like we had done with every other British colony?

MM:

Was the question of illegal immigration from China solved?

Lord W:

Yes, big problem.

MM:

The boat people were a problem but ...

Lord W:

Illegal immigration was a big problem. We had by that time constructed a large fence all along the border, which was regularly patrolled by the police and either by British army units or by Gurkhas; the Gurkhas were the most effective. Yes, it was a constant problem and we also had marine police patrolling the borders. By that time we were sending back to China anybody who we found. The original Hong Kong Government policy, you may remember, was a wonderful British pragmatic policy called Touch Base. It wasn't quite playing rounders

or baseball – jolly nearly. If you were caught coming in to Hong Kong either across the land border or near the sea border you were sent straight back. If you got into the heart of the city and the thought was, you had made contact probably with relations, you could go to the Immigration Department and get a residence permit. If you touched base you were there. And as a pragmatic policy it was superb, because as it were the best of the illegal immigrants got across. And you avoided what we could have had which was riots if you tried to get people out of their family environment. But the pressure of numbers became so great, the attitude to population changed. The dimensions of the problem changed, and the Hong Kong Government brought in a policy, which was when somebody was found without an identity card and couldn't prove that they were Hong Kong residents, they would be sent back. And that was done in cooperation with the Chinese. But it was nothing like what happened when I was a student when at one point huge numbers, thousands and thousands, marched from Guangdong Province to the border, pushed down the fence and simply swept into Hong Kong. I went as a student up to the hills and watched the lines of people simply crossing the border fence, being rounded up by helicopters and by police, put into vans, taken back, and then coming back across. And for about three or four days at that time, I guess it must have been about 1962, '61 or '62, the Chinese authorities lost control of the border on their side, either deliberately or by accident. I think, by accident, it just got out of hand. And not until they imposed order on their side was it closed off. Anyhow, that was that.

MM:

You went back into the Foreign Office in 1981 to '87; you were Head of Southern European Department and then Under-Secretary. What would you like to say about that?

Lord W:

First of all, I did not see why on earth I should be placed in Southern European Department. The answer to that was a letter from Teddy Youde, ultimately my predecessor as Governor of Hong Kong, who was then Chief Clerk, and who said: I see you are coming back from Hong Kong. I really do think it is time that you did something that is not too adventurous. You really must do something else and get wider experience. So I became Head of Southern European Department. Of course, with no background on Southern European Affairs. So I was slightly worried about it. It turned out to be very interesting, although I always felt I might suddenly walk into a minefield without knowing that the minefield was there. As you will remember, Southern Europe in those days, covered Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar, that bit,

and then Malta, Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. So you saw a number of key points as it were. Most of it was, as it were, straightforward; key problem areas were Gibraltar, Gibraltar/Spain, Cyprus and the Cyprus problem, and bubbling away in the background Malta, but not sort of top of the pops.

MM:

Malta?

Lord W:

Malta because of the slight, constant aggravation with Malta and Dom Mintoff. Just sort of pinpricks. But as I said nothing really...

MM:

Turkey?

Lord W:

Turkey/Greece as a problem, constant problems there. Turkey as it affected Cyprus, Greece as it affected Cyprus, divided Cyprus more acutely. Declaration of independence by Northern Cyprus. I was post-invasion, long post invasion. Where I am is the time when Denktash finally broke the overarching umbrella of a common Cyprus with everybody along with that, and declaring his independence and the attempts to try to stop that. How did we deal with that in United Nations? Gibraltar being the other sort of big practical area if you can call it that. The border was closed when I took over. Sad to say it remained closed by the time I left. At one point it looked as though it was going to open, but that failed. But there were a whole lot of issues. And then there were issues with the docks in Gibraltar and privatising the docks and the difficulty that created with for instance trade unions in Gibraltar. My first memory of Gibraltar for what it's worth was having recently come back from Hong Kong, I went out there, and as I said, we thought the border – at long last we were going to get the border opened - and it was just fantastic good news. I went off to see the Chamber of Commerce in Gibraltar and I said, look, I think we are getting there. I think there is a chance that we may get the border open in the relatively near future. And they looked as sour as a couple of prunes, or maybe three prunes, and they said, oh that is terrible. I said, why is that terrible? Ah, they said, we know what is going to happen. All those Spaniards will cross the border, they will come into Gibraltar and they will be spitting on the streets and it will be just

awful. And all the Gibraltar people will go across because there are cheaper goods on the other side of the border. It will be disastrous. I remember getting absolutely fed up and saying: look I have just come back from Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a trading base with Mainland China until the Korean War. The United Nations imposed an embargo on trade with China, and it killed the trade from Hong Kong, the whole existence of Hong Kong. What did they do, did they sit down and weep? No, they didn't, they built up their own industry and they have been successful. Why can't you take the same attitude? It went down like a lead balloon, as you can imagine.

MM:

Let's move on to your final period. Governor of Hong Kong. So before we go on to your period as Governor of Hong Kong, Lord Wilson, could you tell us a little about your time in the Foreign Office, as Under-Secretary, when you must have been dealing with the Joint Declaration and various other rather pressing matters of that sort.

Lord W:

I had been out of area as it were, as Head of Southern European Department and I was then asked to become Assistant Under-Secretary Asia Pacific, succeeding Alan Donald. I think I said this was part of the Scottish/Chinese Mafia. I had succeeded Alan as Political Adviser in Hong Kong. I worked under him in Peking and I now succeeded him as AUS. Oddly enough, and this I am sure would not be what anybody would imagine, my job as AUS was to be AUS for Asia Pacific, with the exception of Hong Kong. So I was to have the Afghanistan to New Zealand sweep of the windscreen wipers, as it were. But by that time, the negotiations on the future of Hong Kong had started, Percy Cradock had come back. He had finished his tour as Ambassador in Peking, and had come back as DUS in the Foreign Office and simultaneously Adviser to Margaret Thatcher in No 10. So he was in charge of the negotiations from the Foreign Office end. He with Hong Kong Department had a team dealing with Hong Kong, so it was thought that I was surplus to requirement and I should deal with the rest of Asia. Now life never works out as planned. What actually happened was that Percy when having meetings – large-scale meetings on Hong Kong – would tend to ask me to come along, even though it wasn't technically part of my remit. But then, more important, the negotiations which had started in 1984 were meant to be concluded by 1986. But by mid-1986 there was nothing written down. There had been long negotiations at a high level during a first stage of the negotiations which got absolutely nowhere. They were arguing about what

they should be talking about. The Chinese wanted to get from us an agreement that we would cede sovereignty and administration. We eventually gave a conditional undertaking that we would do that providing that an agreement was satisfactory to us and to Parliament and was acceptable to the people of Hong Kong. As it got nearer the deadline which the Chinese had imposed on the talks, which was before Chinese National Day of 1984, it became apparent that something had to be written down. One couldn't just go on with these high-level games of tennis, diplomatic tennis. There had to be a group that was going to work on it day in and day out and it was decided to set up a working group with a British side and a Chinese side and it was decided I should go out to head the British side. So I was sent off to Peking in the summer of 1986 to lead the British team, actually writing down the text of the agreement and over two long months in the summer in Peking, that's what we did. There were very intense negotiations on the text. Absolutely fascinating, enormously worthwhile and at some stages quite difficult. Because what we were trying to do on our side, was put down the maximum amount of detail about how Hong Kong was run, on the grounds that only if this was laid down would people in Hong Kong have confidence and only if Hong Kong was run on these lines would it be successful and therefore benefit both its people and China. We had a massive tome from the Hong Kong Government containing all the things that were essential to the running of Hong Kong. It looked slightly like the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Chinese had a very different view. They had something like ten basic points about the future of Hong Kong which had been laid down and they said, all we want is a declaration that both sides agree to it. So where did we finish up apart from the actual wording of this declaration part, of which there were some bits that we had to get changed and did? What we agreed, was that there should be an annex or a series of annexes. And the series of annexes should lay down in detail how Hong Kong was run. Negotiations on the future of Hong Kong, started in 1982 with Margaret Thatcher going to Peking, were totally in the doldrums for at least a year. The Chinese laid down that it had to be concluded by 1 October 1984 and unless that was done they would simply make their own declaration. Now, therefore in the summer of '84 we sat down to negotiate a text and it consisted of a very short joint declaration of the views of the two governments on the future of Hong Kong, which is handing over sovereignty with all sovereignty reverting to China, and then a series of annexes.

MM:

Quite short?

Lord W:

Quite short, but with a huge amount of detail in it, and if you look at the Chinese text, because Chinese is a more sparse language, as it were, more concise than English, it is even shorter. It became apparent to us that the Chinese were under instructions to have the shortest possible agreement, if possible just the declaration; we wanted the longest possible agreement with as much detail as possible. The task of the negotiators was to reconcile these two. What we actually did on our side was a lot of the time to precis what the Hong Kong Government had said was essential and to try to get it into the shortest possible form. We believed, I think correctly, that if we could do that, we could persuade the Chinese side of the negotiating team to agree it. And we sort of believed, and I have no idea if this is correct, that the Chinese team had a limit, as it were, you can have x thousand characters and that's it; you can't have any more than that. So that is what we worked to and that precis and the sort of training that we have was quite useful. And then there were obviously some actual key – very key - issues, about what should be happening in Hong Kong. The legal system in particular and continuity of what, as a Scot, I would call the English legal system, the common law system. Continuity of a neutral way of appointing and dismissing judges, terribly important. Hong Kong having its own currency, looking after all its own economic affairs, looking after all its own cultural and sporting affairs and so on.

MM:

Democracy?

Lord W:

Ah, I'll come back to that one. So it was to be a Hong Kong run as much as possible by the Hong Kong Chinese except for foreign affairs and defence. And then how do you preserve Hong Kong as it was in 1984? We, the British, said, it is essential to continue like things are if it is to be successful. Interestingly, the one thing that we the British also said was that we did need a great change in representative government. At that time it was only just beginning in Hong Kong. At that stage the Legislative Council was entirely appointed by the government and always had been. It was actually, in parenthesis, rather like the House of Lords. It worked very well, but it looked odd. We insisted, and the reasons for that were quite obvious for confidence in the future, that there had to be an elected legislature and one of the last, last things to be resolved was putting that in, with the Chinese eventually, right against the buffers, agreeing that the Legislative Council should be chosen by elections. That

formula was a point for dispute later, never specifying what sort of elections, and it was quite clear that those were not specified so you could have indirect as well direct elections.

Anyhow, that long, long period in the summer of '84 produced a draft. It was an absolutely fascinating piece of work. And just one little bit about it – two bits about it. I am told and I think it is probably true that that is the last major foreign policy, diplomatic exercise that the British have carried out on their own. By that I mean the European Union was not involved and we were not operating with the Americans. And it is probably true on a really major issue, it is the last time that Britain has been entirely operating on its own. We were keeping people informed, but it was our problem and we dealt with it alone. And then the second bit was technically absolutely fascinating: how modern technology began to come in. We, the negotiating team (we were part Foreign Office and part, mostly, Hong Kong Government) with me as the sort of leader, had to communicate very quickly back to Hong Kong and London. What we did was that we took these annexes and as it were leap-frogged from one day to the other. So we took annex A on day 1, annex B on day 2, annex A day 3 and so on. So you discussed annex A on day 1. We then sent a report back to Hong Kong and London saying this is what we have discussed, this is what the Chinese have said, this is what we recommend we should do. We had a day on the next annex and by day 3, very early in the morning, we would get a reply back. Hong Kong would have looked at it, into the late hours of the night in their case, early hours of the morning in London because of the time difference, finished it in daylight and got the instructions back. That worked extremely well. The other thing we did was to realise that what mattered was the Chinese text as much as the English, because most of the people who were going to be affected would read it in Chinese. In the past, it had often been the case we knew, that China had negotiated the English text and they had then translated it and there would be variations in the translated text at the very best or there would be a completely separate discussion about the translation. We negotiated simultaneously two texts, an English text and a Chinese text. We had technology, in the early stages then, by which we could send in cipher a Chinese text back over the wireless system to Hong Kong and to London. So the whole time we were dealing with a Chinese text simultaneously with an English text. We negotiated simultaneously. And from a technological point of view it was quite interesting.

MM:

What about the politicians? Your relations with the Foreign Secretary at the time and of course Mrs Thatcher?

Lord W:

Geoffrey Howe was then Foreign Secretary. Of course he had been very much involved in the whole thing. The first time I began to get involved was at Easter 1984 when Geoffrey Howe went out on a mission to Peking with Percy Cradock and I went along with them. It was at the stage where Geoffrey Howe decided that we would have to tell the Executive Council of Hong Kong that continuing British administration was not an option. That was what they had all wanted. Geoffrey Howe I thought was superb. He was meticulously careful, extremely thoughtful, very good at dealing with Chinese leaders at all levels, because they could see that he was totally sincere about what he was doing and a straightforward person. He had one failing, which didn't matter in the end, and that is that he talks with a rather low voice. If we had not had a translator, I think that in some of the big meetings no one would have heard what he was saying. But as we did have a translator, it didn't matter. He was terrific. In the background, you alluded to it earlier, was Margaret Thatcher, who – I think it is no secret – was deeply unhappy at the thought that we should be negotiating the hand over of British territory. Because we were not only saying the lease has ended in 1997, the lease of the New Territories, therefore it goes back to China. But we were actually handing over Hong Kong island which by the Treaty of Nanking of 1842 was British territory. She had just won the war in the Falklands and to her it was anathema to hand over British territory. That it should be to a Communist government, which she thoroughly disliked, was even worse. So that, to people like Geoffrey Howe and Percy Cradock was a big problem. The thing which I think is not often, or not always, realised is that although that was her basic, emotional position and she always said how terrible it was that she was pushed into things by the Foreign Office, on every point where it really came to the crunch she took the sensible, pragmatic decision and said yes. Later she would say; I should never have done this; I regret that I was persuaded; my arm was twisted. But actually when it really came to the crunch she was pragmatic and sensible. But it must have been very unpleasant, and I sympathised with Geoffrey Howe because he bore the brunt of this and it must have been quite difficult for him.

MM:

Of course, it was at a good stage in Margaret Thatcher's career, wasn't it? '82 to '84.

Lord W:

It was just after the Falklands. She was riding high.

MM:

Anyhow, I think that probably deals with ...

Lord W:

Just one final point. This is a little anecdote about the problem of negotiating with the Chinese in those days. This working team on both sides was set up at the last minute and had to work very fast. The Chinese initially found rooms in a big hall in the International Club, which is very close to the new British Embassy. It had the disadvantage that it had no air-conditioning, and it was the height of summer; and it had no security, so when you left the room you found the Hong Kong press just outside the door. But it was within walking distance of the British Embassy, which was our communications hub. After about a month, the chief Chinese negotiator, Ke Zaishuo, my opposite number, came to me and said, we have made much better arrangements for the final stage. There is a state guesthouse on the west of the city. Very comfortable conditions. Air-conditioning. If we have to go on we can have food there and it is in a huge compound so that we won't be bothered by the press. And so I said, well that is very kind, but actually communications are vital for us, quick communications, and it is going to take us forty minutes by bus, so thank you very much, we will stay where we are. He came back next day and said, I really think this other place would be much better. So I said, no thank you, no, we would really prefer to stay where we are. On day 3 he came back and said, actually we only have this room for one month, they won't renew it. Just an example of the fact that a huge part of the problem - not the whole problem, there were massive, massive key issues - but the problem for somebody like me trying to get it done in detail, was trying to find out what the real problem was. If you could find what the problem was, you could usually find a solution. But, typically, the Chinese would say when we produced a draft, that is no good: go away and think again. And you would say, why is it no good? They would say: no good, go away and think again. And you would have to try to think, why? What is the problem? And gradually, informally, we could get some sort of quiet talk with them, but usually it would be very difficult. Very often we discovered that when they looked at a piece of our drafting, and this goes back to my PhD thesis, they would think the British are infinitely clever, very subtle, desperately devious and we don't trust them an inch. So they have put this wording in to reach this conclusion. And we hadn't done anything of the sort at all; we had no idea that it had that sort of chain of possible logic. And once they would say, look if you have this wording, it means this, this and this, and the result

could be this and this, you could find a solution. But it was a matter of finding the problem first and then finding the solution. Anyhow, enough of that.

MM:

Let's go on to Hong Kong. The Joint Declaration had been made and you were dealing with the aftermath of that, presenting it to the Hong Kong residents. Any problems with that?

Lord W:

Well, first of all it was an enormous surprise and shock to be appointed Governor. If you remember, Teddy Youde died. He died in Peking. As I said I was the area Under-Secretary and when we were looking at things like the timing of when the governors changed (although most of that was probably above my head), the one thing we had never thought of was that a governor would die. Our governors never died in office. Murray MacLehose, incidentally, nearly did. He got a stroke at the last minute and all the farewells were cancelled. So that was a tragedy of a major order, a great tragedy. But to me it came as a great surprise to be asked to be the Governor. At that point obviously I had never even been a Head of Mission. I was an Assistant Under-Secretary, not even a Deputy Under-Secretary. I was aged 52. I was well aware of the fact that many people in Hong Kong and everywhere else would say: look this person is too young, and some of them had already said, I know, that they wanted a major political figure. I am not sure if they actually liked it when they sent one, but that was what they were saying. So it was a great surprise to be asked to do it. But that said, there could be no more interesting or worthwhile job for somebody like me who had spent his time interested in China, and with a huge amount of my adult life involved with Hong Kong. To be Governor is unlike any other job, well it is unlike any other Diplomatic Service job. So it was a wonderful thing to be asked to be. Problems, apart from psyching myself up that I was going to be head of the administration of this huge territory, 4½ million people, very prosperous in a very difficult political time of its life? It came, as you just said, after the Joint Declaration had been agreed, so people knew what the future was. I think that is unique again in history, that people knew 13 years in advance, what was going to happen in 13 years time. When the Joint Declaration came out, most people in Hong Kong were astounded by how much detail it had in it and how "good" it was from the Hong Kong point of view. To such an extent that, I think it is fair to say, most people disbelieved it and said it would never happen like that. In the whole of my time as Governor, I think every day, virtually every day, people said, how can you assure us, how can you guarantee that the Chinese will carry out their

declaration? All I could say was, well I believe it. They have invested a huge amount of political capital in this. They didn't have to do it like this, and I believe that it has been the case that whatever the Chinese have done to change their policies, a huge number of policies, they have not reneged on international agreements. It may seem strange, but it is true. I believed it, but how do you persuade people? So one of the major issues was confidence in Hong Kong. Secondly, springing from that, how do you establish a working relationship with Chinese officials so that, in that transition phase, you can deal with practical issues and eventually get to a situation where the handover in 1997 is as seamless, undramatic as it possibly can be? That meant trying to establish working relationships, for instance sending Hong Kong officials into China which they had done very little of; for a long time they were banned from travelling to China. All those sorts of things: confidence-building measures. So that is one chunk. Then there was a hunk of economic issues if you like, but those are perhaps so obvious that they are not worth dealing with, except perhaps things like the 1987 crisis. The run on the stock market and the closure of the Hong Kong stock market which followed happened when I was in Washington on an official visit. The decision to close was taken by the Chairman of the Stock Exchange and the Financial Secretary, and the Hong Kong market remained closed for three days, which was a very dramatic period. So there were those sorts of issues, but they were as it were rather straight forward ones. A more complex issue was trying to get the relationship with China as good as we possibly could against massive mistrust on our side and a lot of mistrust on the Chinese side too; and I think we did well on that until 1989 and the demonstrations in Peking: Tiananmen Square and the massacre that occurred then. It didn't actually occur in Tiananmen Square although people said it did. The main bit occurred outside; but those dramatic events absolutely knocked Hong Kong sideways and killed morale. I have never seen anything like it. We had a million people demonstrating peacefully on the streets, wall to wall coverage of events in Peking on the television channel. People were just desperate. Hong Kong people were saying this is what is going to happen to Hong Kong. I simply didn't believe that. Nevertheless, most people worried about it.

MM:

It was extremely worrying.

Lord W:

It was awful. And then the breaking off of relations. The European Union decided to have no contact with China, so that hit us; we broke off talks and things were very strained for ages. Also China was deeply suspicious of Hong Kong because it was from Hong Kong that help for those demonstrators came, money, tents, general support, so, as they saw it, some Hong Kong radical elements were trying to interfere with the government of mainland China. The Chinese became deeply suspicious of us. So that was very hard and patching that up took a long, long time. So that was a big issue. It also spilled over into a practical thing, which was building the new airport, which in a way was quite an interesting case. Hong Kong had an airport, built just after the war at Kai Tak. It was getting terribly overcrowded; it was also potentially a very unsafe airport. All the prognostications were that it would be completely jammed up within three or four years and we would have to turn flights away. That was going to have a huge effect on the economy of Hong Kong. In my predecessor, Teddy Youde's time, a decision had been taken to look into building a new airport and a lot of the work had been done. There was then an economic crisis and the Hong Kong Government decided to shelve that. When I went, I decided, on advice, that we should revive the project and we should make a decision by the autumn of 1989. I went in '87, early '87, this was in my annual speech. So all the work was planned to begin. The work was concluded about June/July 1989, exactly the time of all those incidents in Peking we have been talking about with their catastrophic effect on Hong Kong. The decision then was for us, myself and the Executive Council: Right, this is an appalling situation which is affecting everybody. Do we shelve this because it is in the too difficult box, or do we go ahead? And we took the decision that, above all at this time when confidence was collapsing, we must show confidence in the long term. We must build that airport. It would take a huge amount of our resources, financial and administrative resources, the result would not be seen ...

MM:

The Hong Kong Government resources?

Lord W:

Hong Kong Government resources. The result would not be seen under that scheme until early 1997 and it would then be for Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty. It would be us helping to set up a Hong Kong which will go on in the future. So we took the decision to go ahead. It meant great problems with China. We had told the Chinese what we were going to do at several levels but as it came at the time when all high-level contact had been broken by

the European Union, frankly I don't think anything was registered. Then we announced it as planned in October 1989 and the Chinese then became highly suspicious of us, egged on, I fear to say, by some of their supporters in Hong Kong. They felt that this was another devious British trick. Why would we do it? Why, if we were going to depart, should we do this? Answer, obvious. We were going to hand all the contracts to business, and probably the Hong Kong Government, the Governor included, would get a cut. The Governor was going to retire to a castle in Scotland. Trying to persuade the Chinese Government that that simply wasn't true and that we were not going to denude the Hong Kong coffers took ages. Eventually, it was done, but it required very protracted and difficult negotiations. Part of the solution was that we eventually ring-fenced a block of money and all the sales coming in from land, and set up an institution by which we would only use a bit of the land sales money on projects which the Chinese side had jointly agreed. So they would know we were not using up all the resources and we actually handed over quite a lot of money. Probably a bigger dowry than there had ever been in any transfer of territory. And Hong Kong had some of the biggest reserves in the world. Anyhow, that was a very difficult period, and if it does anything it shows that a steady attempt to build up a relationship with China can be completely destroyed short term by an event like Tiananmen Square. It takes ages to repair on both sides, because most people in the West had lost faith in China. Some people had seen the Soviet Union collapse and thought China was going to collapse. It turned out to be rubbish. If you looked carefully at China you could see that it was different from the Soviet Union. It was not likely to collapse. But I think a lot of the attitudes that we the British Government had in those days were based intellectually on the thought that the communist regime was going to collapse in China. There was another bundle of issues. Vietnamese boat people came back to haunt me, but in a different form. When I had been Political Adviser, the Vietnamese boat people were genuine refugees. They were ethnic Chinese, most of them from South Vietnam after the Communist victory and they were being pushed out by the North. It changed. It became ethnic Vietnamese from North Vietnam. Who could blame them, looking for a better life? They were coming in huge numbers into Hong Kong but the compassion of the world had dried up by then. Impossible to send them back because of world pressure. It was just impossible to do it. Before I came back to Hong Kong, Hong Kong had decided instead of running open refugee camps to run closed ones behind wires. So we had this appalling problem of locking people up. It was just horrendous, with numbers increasing the whole time and the numbers going out for resettlement virtually nil. The world unsympathetic. All the world pressures, Americans, most Europeans, most political voices in

Britain, saying you can't send these people back, but neglecting to say what we should do about them. It took many years before that changed. One of the people who helped to change it was, interestingly enough, Sergio Viera di Mello, who has just been killed in Iraq. He was a senior official in the UNHCR and one of those who involved himself in the politically difficult matter of negotiating with North Vietnam to send people back. Eventually we did. The first attempt was quite difficult. It had to be forced upon them and it caused quite a political furore. It was Francis Maude, who was then responsible as the Junior Minister for Hong Kong who was very courageous and dared to push that through in Parliament. Most people ran a mile at the thought of sending people back to a communist country. The first episode had all sorts of problems, a lot of bad publicity, but eventually it was established on a regular basis and the problem ended. But, during my time, it was a colossal problem and we just felt terrible about locking them up. We had riots in camps, we had camps burnt. It was horrible. Then there was the thing that made all the newspaper headlines with every newspaper in the world covering Hong Kong. Why did we not have a more democratic system of government? We were right at the beginning of having a new representative system in the Legislative Council with, first of all, what were called functional constituencies: that is trade unions, bankers, lawyers teachers etc all having their own representatives. Then we moved to geographically based constituencies as well. The aim was to try to establish a system by which there would be an upward gradient going on through 1997 and eventually finishing with the choice of having a fully and directly elected Legislative Council. We had a long series of discussions with the Chinese on this because it was a hypersensitive issue. I inherited a commitment to have in 1987 a public consultation in Hong Kong on the first move towards a directly elected Legislative Council. To the Chinese that was anathema. They tried to say, you can't do it, we now have a Joint Declaration: it is intolerable that you should now move ahead with this and unilaterally decide on what could happen after 1997. But I had a commitment. It had to be done. It was done. So there was a consultation of public opinion in 1987, very soon after I arrived. It produced a variety of different views about when we should make the first move towards having directly elected seats. The result was that we said, we the Hong Kong Government, yes we will do it, but we won't do it yet. There will be a delay. That caused quite a furore because to the radical democratic camp, this looked like just putting it off. There were accusations that we had fiddled the results. We hadn't actually fiddled the results. We did though give less weight to massive petitions signed by hundreds of people at railway stations than we did to individual people writing in. But we published all material so that everybody could see what everybody had said. It was also said that we had

made the questions too complicated. I think that's fair comment. They were complicated questions. It's also true that it was convenient for us, in terms of handling the transition with China, that we did not have, as we saw it, overwhelming pressure from people in Hong Kong to move straight away into direct elections because we knew that doing that would be very difficult for the Chinese to accept. I'll explain a bit later why. What we had finished up with, and what we proposed to do was something we could just and only just persuade the Chinese to accept. I said that the Chinese found it particularly difficult to accept that we should make a move on something as significant to them as direct elections at that time, partly because the declaration, the Joint Declaration, had been signed. They felt that they, as the future sovereign power, should have a say in these developments more directly because they were then discussing a thing called the Basic Law, which was to be the constitution of Hong Kong post 1997 and in which a key bit would be the structure of the Government, that is what the Legislative Council would look like. So they said, not unreasonably, look, what are you doing pre-empting this in a way that makes it difficult for us in drafting the Basic Law? Why should we agree? As we finished up, we had a lot of criticism from, as I said, the more radical democratic wing. Also a huge amount of criticism from around the world. But we had something which was workable in terms of China agreeing to go straight through to 1997 with progressively more democratic elections to the Legislative Council on an upward slope. We then, and this is short-circuiting slightly, went on with negotiating and discussing what should be the Basic Law for the future structure of the Government. We had no direct locus in that. The Chinese made it absolutely clear that we had no direct locus. We had though on their discussion panels a lot of people from Hong Kong, some of whom were friendly towards the Hong Kong Government, some who were not, so we had lines into that. But we also – more importantly really – made sure that we had lines directly into the Chinese Government, using the rubric that these were suggestions we were making informally which might be helpful to them. We were very careful that they should not be public because that would have embarrassed China very much and would have made it harder to achieve what we wanted. So we said: it's your affair to get on with. But you might find these ideas helpful. Part of all these discussions was precisely about the structure of the legislature and how quickly you should move on this upward slope towards a fully geographically elected Legislative Council. That went on for a long period of time. It was completely upset by 1989 and Tiananmen Square. And the final draft Basic Law was coming out just at that time. It made informal negotiations extremely hard. But there were a lot of exchanges. Most of this is now in the public domain, so I don't think it is worth me going into, but it involved a sort of private

mission, as it were, to China by Percy Cradock in his No 10 position. And a lot of very high level exchanges till we eventually got agreement between us on what would be in the Basic Law and what we would do before 1997. From the history point of view, I suppose it is important that I should say that we reached this agreement with the Chinese that, if they made the slope upwards to a fully representative legislature steep enough, then we would match it in the period up to 1997 so that there would be a straight transition to after 1997 – the so-called "through train" for the Legislative Council. But, if it was not as steep as we would like it to be, I can't remember what the exact wording was, we reserved the right to come back for further discussion. I think it is important to say that because of the huge difficulties my successor, Chris Patten, got into on precisely that. Anyhow, we did reach agreement, and we got the Chinese to accept that in those circumstances the Legislative Council would go straight through. This through train was terribly important to us as it would give confidence in Hong Kong that the Legislative Council would go straight through. The second bit of the through train, although it is a different issue, was that senior officials in the Hong Kong Government should, to the greatest extent possible go straight through 1997 as well. That is anybody who worked in a senior position if they were Hong Kong Chinese. For the Chinese to accept that those who had worked for the British Hong Kong Government should go straight through to work under sovereignty of China was, when one thinks about it, an absolutely staggering thing, given all the differences etc. etc. etc. Anyhow that was a major issue in my time but it really became an even more major issue and a source of huge contention, as you know, in the time of my successor, whose policies were different to mine. I'm extremely careful never to make any public comments on it. But the one thing I would say here is that, poor man, for reasons I simply do not understand, was never shown some of the exchanges between the British and Chinese Foreign Ministers on precisely that point about the composition of the Legislative Council and the through train. Whether or not he was right to go ahead with what he did, and the way he did it, is arguable. But it must have been desperately difficult for him, having made an announcement about what he was planning to do which was to act differently from what we had planned and what we had actually agreed with the Chinese. No, making a public announcement and saying I will discuss it with the Chinese later, was not the right way to do it. However impressive in the Western press, it was back to front. He then went to Peking and apart from tearing a strip off him for doing it that way round, the Chinese said, look, what about our agreement? He had never seen it. To me it is unbelievable that he was not shown the papers and that officials never briefed him on that. I just cannot understand how that can have happened. It may not necessarily have changed

the way he would have handled things. But it must have been very embarrassing for him and as you know from that point onwards, his own personal relationship with China was completely fouled up. He had no further contact with Chinese officials. Now, anything else from my own time in Hong Kong?

MM:

Not very much, I don't think. I think you have covered everything very satisfactorily indeed..

Lord W:

The other thing, I would add, if I may, is that part of what I was trying to do about the Legislative Council was trying to set up a system in as much agreement with China as possible, so that it would go straight through in 1997. The other thing that needed to be done was to make sure that there were Hong Kong Chinese getting into positions of authority so that they too could go straight through. Most of the Hong Kong Government was Hong Kong Chinese. Although at my time both my Chief Secretary and my Financial Secretary were from the UK, the bulk of the work was done by Hong Kong Chinese, and had been for many years. They were very, very good those officials. So we wanted to do something about that. And I wanted, if I could, to develop the role of the Executive Council, which in those days was entirely appointed by the Governor and had some senior officials but a majority of non-officials – who were either significant figures in the community or members of the Legislative Council. What I wanted to do was to work if I could towards acquiring a ministerial system. That needed care because you had to do it without incurring deep suspicion from the Chinese side – could this be going towards independence? Anyhow, we made preliminary moves towards that but actually didn't get very far beyond discussing it and working out a system amongst ourselves in the Executive Council by the time I left. Chris Patten took a different attitude and got rid of the connection with the Legislative Council, but that is history. Interestingly, many years after we transferred sovereignty, the present Chief Executive is once again trying to build up a ministerial system.

MM:

Tung Chee-hwa?

Lord W:

Tung Chee-hwa.

MM:

I think that is about it. One final question. What do you think Britain lost when we granted independence?

Lord W:

To?

MM:

To China.

Lord W:

To Hong Kong? Well, we didn't grant independence, that's the first thing. We transferred sovereignty back to China, so it never became independent.

MM:

But there were problems?

Lord W:

Yes, but there was no question of independence. Hong Kong was part of China so it reverted back to Chinese sovereignty. It is very difficult to answer your question about what Britain might have lost. The beginning of the answer sounds slightly odd. We lost much less than people think we lost, and we lose only if we think we lost. Why? Too many people, in my judgement tend to say, we no longer run Hong Kong therefore there is no longer any role for us in Hong Kong. I simply don't believe that is true. For many, many years Hong Kong had virtually run itself under a British umbrella with some UK Hong Kong officials and the link to the UK Government and to Parliament. But Hong Kong ran all its own affairs. It ran its economy. It was totally autonomous economically. Interestingly, I remember trying to explain this to a Chinese official, watching his eyes and seeing that he thought that I wasn't telling the truth although of course I was in saying that, when the budget in Hong Kong was prepared, the Financial Secretary discussed it with me, quite rightly, because I could tell him to strike something out. But there was no discussion with London. A sealed copy went back to the Foreign Office and the seal was not broken until the Financial Secretary got onto his feet in the Legislative Council.

MM:

They would never believe you.

Lord W:

No, I don't think they believed me. We had a complete financial autonomy and we had huge resources.

MM:

We? Hong Kong Government?

Lord W:

We, Hong Kong Government. Sorry, I keep having to remember who 'we' are.

MM:

This is part of the problem of course when I'm trying to explain....

Lord W:

Let me tell you another thing. I am still coming back to the question. One of the difficulties about the 'we' - and as it got nearer 1997 I became acutely aware of it - is that at the London end this 'we' in relation to a colony was very difficult for people to understand. As I had grown up with some involvement with dependent territories and as I had tried to go into the Colonial Service ...

MM:

You understood.

Lord W:

I understood instinctively. I had seen enough of life in a Colonial Administration, and I had been Political Adviser for four years, to have seen the strange relation between a colony and the metropolitan country. The metropolitan power does have power but generally it doesn't use it. People in the territory are terribly sensitive about the extent of their own autonomy, but in certain things look for support. And where it really comes to a crunch is when you get people, businessmen or Ministers, coming to Hong Kong and lobbying for the Hong Kong

Government to buy British products. British businessmen complained vociferously in London that the Hong Kong Government did not give them a special deal. British ministers, I hate to say, would come and lobby me to have the Hong Kong Government buy British products. My answer was that we ran an absolutely level playing field, and the worst thing I could do as the Governor they had appointed, would be to tilt that playing field. Not only was it wrong to do so in terms of Hong Kong then, but just think of the consequences in the future. I am bound to say that I don't think many Ministers understood that. And, similarly, the difference between being there to be avuncularly helpful or to give orders. That was quite difficult, increasingly difficult, for people to understand right down the chain – probably the more junior you got, the harder it was. You could sense that people either dealt with Hong Kong from London as though you were a County Council and you could be bossed around; or as though you were an independent power and they could be nasty to you if they felt like it.

Now, what did we lose? I think we lost only what we may have thought we lost. And if people think that, because it is no longer a British administration, it is not worth going there to work and to make a living, then of course they are totally wrong and a great deal is lost. The opportunities are there for young people, particularly for hardworking people. Good jobs in Hong Kong are superb. Nothing has changed. It is a place of great opportunities. What else have we lost? Of course, there is a good deal of nostalgia. As for me personally, I loved Hong Kong. I actually think the British administration there did a superb job. I have huge admiration. Generations of civil servants came there with great, great dedication. Of course there were some who weren't good; some were arrogant, all of that, but on the whole they were astonishingly good and I have a great sense of pride in that. It was sad that day, the 30th June 1997. I went out for the final ceremony.

MM:

Oh, did you?

Lord W:

Yes. And it was taking place, well the final British parade was taking place, very near where I had lived as a student in a tiny flat with a Chinese family on the waterfront downtown. The parade took place with huge high-rise buildings all around to show how much that area had changed. Then the last British battalion in Hong Kong was the Black Watch. The Black Watch beat the Retreat and all I can say is that the fact is it was bucketing with rain was a

good thing for otherwise the tears going down my cheeks would have been very obvious. I loved Hong Kong and I think we did a wonderful job in it and I feel a degree of nostalgia. But I also feel pride. I really do feel pride both with what the British administration had done and how we negotiated the future. I do think that so far (and this may be a hostage to fortune), but it has worked out astonishingly well. It is quite remarkable, the degree to which China has not interfered. The degree to which, quite honestly, China stuck to its side of the bargain even though arguably we moved back from our side of the bargain. They could have said, well you have done this, so why should we stick to our side? They stuck absolutely to their side and so far the degree of their interference has been very slight. Back to what we lost, I think it is again only what we think we have lost. We have lost the nostalgia, the sense of empire or the feeling of being in charge. This (pointing to picture on wall of Master's Lodge) is a picture of Government House, Hong Kong with the Union flag flying. You felt a sense of pride in being a British Governor with all the responsibilities that entailed. And of course that is no longer there. I had one successor, but no more. But that was inevitable. The great thing was that we did a great job in the way we left.

MM:

One final question: I see that you were made a Knight of the Thistle, a very exclusive Order of Chivalry in the United Kingdom. Would you tell us when and how that came about?

Lord W:

The Thistle of course is in the personal gift of the Queen, like the Garter. Ministers have no involvement in these particular honours. That makes it very special to have it offered. I think it is fair to say that no honour could give me more pleasure or make me feel more honoured. As to what one does to deserve it, who knows? All I can say is that, in addition to it being in the personal gift of the Queen, the Thistle, with its particular connection to Scotland, brings enormous joy to a Scot who had, until retirement, spent all his working life outside Scotland but remained deeply attached to his own country.