



ARTHUR SNELL INTERVIEW

Key:

EHdK: Dr Eve Hayes de Kalaf (Interviewer)

AS: Arthur Snell (Respondent)

Date/Location:

24th June 2022. Private Residence, Gloucestershire, United Kingdom.

EHdK 00:01 I'm here with Arthur Snell who is the former UK High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago. He was in post from 2011 until 2014. First and foremost, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview today.

AS 00:20 Thank you for having me.

EHdK 00:22 I wondered if we could start by perhaps revisiting your career trajectory. If you could tell us how you came to work at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. And, ultimately, how you ended up in Trinidad and Tobago and what your role consisted of?

AS 00:39 Yes, so I joined the FCO – Foreign and Commonwealth Office - as it then was in 1998, more or less straight from university. And the early part of my career was very much shaped by the sort of post-911 era. I learned Arabic and worked in Iraq and in Yemen. And I worked on Gulf policy and on counterterrorism issues. So that's most of the decade from 2000 to 2010. In 2010, I worked in Helmand in Afghanistan. Obviously, not really a diplomatic environment. I was attached to the British military there. And around that time, I'd never managed to do a foreign posting in an environment that can be considered a sort of family posting. And I was quite keen to be able to do that. So, the opportunity to apply to be High Commissioner in Trinidad and Tobago came up. I threw my hat in and I was lucky enough to be appointed. So that tells you that I was by no means a sort of specialist or had any expertise on Caribbean matters at the time that I was given the job. And, if I'm honest, it was as much about the sort of domestic circumstances of being able to live there and particularly because my wife, who's a doctor, would also be able to practice there. So those were some of the key factors. But, of course, like any job once you get into it, you learn an enormous amount about it and so on. If I was going to say a little bit about what the role involved...Trinidad and Tobago is a medium-sized country within the Caribbean region. It is not as big as Jamaica, but it is much bigger than the islands of the Eastern Caribbean, such as Barbados, and so on. Population over a million. It's also, by a long way, the largest economy thanks to its oil and gas wealth. On paper, it is quite a wealthy country. But it has quite a lot of social challenges which are not uncommon to the Americas region particularly the Caribbean. There was...there is and there was a lot of UK presence in the oil and gas sector. You've got, for example, BP which is the largest business in Trinidad and Tobago. And, of course, you know is a major British oil and gas business. So, there were those sorts

of interests that the British government had in terms of supporting British businesses. But there was also quite a lot about the role focused on what might be called sort of security questions. Trinidad's geography means it's very vulnerable to the illegal narcotics trade and a lot of drugs that flow through Venezuela into Trinidad then go from Trinidad across the Atlantic into Europe, including Britain. So that was quite a feature of our work. And if I'm honest it probably shaped the way we looked at the country as to some extent a threat vector. As much as a sort of a partner or perhaps more positive relationship. So that's probably a very brief kind of summary on the work I did. Just finally on immigration matters - and I'm sure we'll talk about this more in detail – but we had very little resource within the mission to handle immigration matters although it was a significant factor for people in the country vis-à-vis their relationship with the UK. It wasn't a very significant factor in terms of the work we did, you know, day to day in the mission.

EHdK 04:45 Okay, so that's an interesting term “threat vector”. Can you maybe expand a bit on how that framing impacted on your day-to-day?

AS 04:58 Yeah, so I think the way a country such as Trinidad, and perhaps Jamaica also, and I think often Trinidad is a kind of a mini-Jamaica in that it's a fairly large, within the Caribbean context, a fairly large island with a fairly large population and a fairly large diaspora in the UK. The way that those countries are often perceived from the London end is as problematic countries that bring problems to Britain. And this - I'm describing the framing, I'm not saying I agree with it - the framing is that there is criminality associated with the population. The framing is that illegal drugs are coming in connection with this country. Therefore, it's a problem to be managed rather than an opportunity to be seized or a positive relationship. So, the ways in which that manifested...I mean, one interesting example is to do with immigration. At the time, and I think to this day, if you're a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and you're visiting the UK just for a normal visit, you don't need a visa. So, you can arrive at the airport and fill in the appropriate paperwork. That is not the case for Jamaica and Guyana. And in both of those cases what's happened there is that the British state has sort of objectified the citizens of those countries as being inherently linked to kind of criminality and other problems. While I was in Trinidad, this is a period when, of course, the hostile environment was created and Theresa May was the Home Secretary. One of the initiatives being pushed by Theresa May's Home Office was to bring in a visa system for Trinidad and Tobago as well. The attempt was made to justify it on the basis of immigration management. But that's slightly visible because Trinidad's population is just over a million so you're talking about tiny numbers of people in, you know, relative to the UK. Just for comparison, at the same time they were discussing whether or not there should be a visa system for Brazilians and Brazil which has a huge population. So, it was rather bizarre that it was being considered in the same light.

EHdK 07:35 How involved were you in those in those discussions? Were these a part of your meetings in Trinidad?

AS 07:44 Heavily involved. Basically, the initiative was driven by the Home Office.

EHdK 07:50 Can you remember what year?

AS 07:52 This would have been, I think, 2013, roughly. The initiative was driven by the Home Office. But it seemed to me pretty clear that what was going on was that as part of the broader hostile environment framing the government needed to be able to say, "We have introduced tighter immigration regimes for the following countries." And then they could reel off a list. And there was sort of a long list and a short list. Now the long list included both China and Brazil. But this was also the period in which the government had its so-called prosperity agenda. And I've already talked about, for example, the oil and gas industry in Trinidad and Tobago but on a much bigger scale in countries like Brazil and China. The British government was seeking to change its foreign policy into one that was driving, perhaps we call it a mercantilist foreign policy, one that drove investment and business opportunities. So quickly, the argument around Brazil and China was, well, if you make it hard for these people to visit the UK, there'll be a knock-on impact on our economy. Now, the challenge with Trinidad... whilst it is a wealthy country, it's quite hard to say there would be much impact on the economy either way. Because, of course, we're talking about tiny numbers of people. So, my view as the Head of Mission and, you know, my job being to manage the relationship between Britain's government and Trinidad's government, my view was that this... this policy, this introduction of a visa, would not be in Britain's interests. And my reasons are fairly straightforward. One, it would obviously have a very damaging impact on our bilateral relations. Two, the argument around national security in the UK really didn't stand up again because it's a matter of scale, you know, the country just isn't big enough. And it's not close enough. It's not as if sort of millions or even thousands of Trinidadians are showing up every day in Britain and in some way creating difficulties.

AS: 10:00 The statistical arguments for it were nullity... and it was easy to see. There were all kinds of internal documents generated by the Home Office trying to make a statistical argument. But they were clearly meaningless. It was very obvious that what it came down to was: we need to say we've made it harder for foreigners to come to our country. And we have to target smaller and less influential countries because if we target Brazil and China it's going to materially impact our wider economic agenda. My counter argument was, and remains, that if, for example, you want the Trinidad government to work more closely with you on countering the illegal drugs trade or on issues of immigration management, you're not going to get a good level of cooperation if you come up with something that clearly has no basis in real data and is really just a kind of publicity stunt.

EHdK 11:03 What were the reactions of the government?

AS 11:09 The Trinidad government? Well, this is interesting. At the beginning of this process, we were under very strict instructions from the Home Office not to discuss it with the Trinidad side. And, in fact, at one point – this, to my mind, illustrates the way the Home

Office has no understanding of international affairs – the idea was that we would just announce it one day. We would say, as of next week you will all need to get visas.

EHdK 11:34 Was this happening elsewhere in the Caribbean?

AS 11:36 Well, no. So, on that sort of short and long list this was on a global basis. Within the Caribbean, as I mentioned, Jamaica and Guyana were already on the list. And after Trinidad, the countries are getting very small and I think even the Home Office, you know, can't really make a coherent argument that the population of Grenada or St. Kitts is somehow a threat to Britain's national security. Ironically, though, in the same period. Of course, we were still in the EU at this time. Literally in the same period. The Schengen zone countries, which we were not part of - although we were still in the EU - they were moving in the opposite direction. The Schengen zone countries, partly because of a lack of historic connectivity with the Caribbean, had required visas for visitors. They were withdrawing the visa requirements. So, if you were a Trinidadian going to France, Spain, Germany, you were being told that in a few months' time we will lift the visa requirement. And, of course, this was seen very positively. All while this was going on I knew (because of these internal discussions) that Britain, the so-called Commonwealth partner, the former colonial master of all of our kind of special relations, we were planning to do the absolute opposite. One, it was divergent within an EU context, and this was a period when, pre-Brexit, of course, seeking to diverge was by no means a government policy. But two, it was rather inexplicable because the Schengen policy was based on a lot of hard data. They had done a lot of analysis and they had seen that there were no negative implications within Schengen countries of having Caribbean people visit and there are lots of positive implications in terms of business and cultural connections and so on. One of the stressful things about this was knowing that at some point, roughly at the moment that all my partners and colleagues in the EU community were saying good news, that no more need for visas, I'd be saying bad news, that you now need visas. And clearly, that was going to land very awkwardly with the Trinidad Government. How is that that we're now good to go to Germany but we're not good to go to the UK?

EHdK 13:52 So what decision was reached?

AS 13:54 In the end, happily, on the specific point about visas. In the end, the Home Office backed down. We had already informed the Trinidad government of the proposal as something that was under consideration. And as you might expect, there was a lot of discomfort, dissatisfaction with the idea. But in the end the Home Office backed down. I think, because they accepted that: one, it would make no difference to Britain's national security and, two, even in the context of an increasingly hard right government playing the immigration card I don't think ordinary British citizens would be particularly impressed to learn that the population of a very small country in the Eastern Caribbean had suddenly needed to get a visa, you know, that wasn't going to address what might be an immigration concern that people had in Britain. So, I think the Home Office realised that all they were



going to do was create an enormous bureaucratic structure to handle something that didn't even give them sort of communication benefits which is obviously what they were focused on.

EHdK 15:05 Let's focus on the build-up to the scandal. And, specifically, I would like to know if you were aware of any issues or contestations or problems of either individual cases or anything that flashed up on your radar about people trying to...over access citizenship or documentation? Was there any one moment where you realised that this was maybe a much broader issue than had initially been understood? Or was it...was it a combination of things? Or can you remember anything that might have happened that sparked an interest?

AS 15:49 Sure. So, the thing about this question from the outset - and this is important to the wider question of how the Foreign Office operates overseas - is that, in general, foreign embassies around the world have had most of the immigration responsibilities taken away from them. So, for example, if you were a British citizen living in Trinidad and Tobago and you wanted to get a passport, you couldn't do that in our embassy. You would need to apply to a separate office which I think was in Washington, DC.

EHdK 16:34 There was an outsourcing, wasn't there, of UK documentation?

AS 16:40 Yes.

EHdK 16:41 That happened...as I understand it...was that in the early 2010s?

AS 16:44 I think it was sort of a couple of years before I had gone there.

EHdK 16:48 The decision was made by the Home Office - I think this was for Latin America and the Caribbean - for British nationals to then have to send their documentation to the US in order to either renew a passport or...

AS 17:05 ...or any kind of immigration type outlets.

EHdK So that was a human element that was removed.

AS 17:09 Yes, exactly. And as far as I understand this was a deliberate policy for two reasons. One is, the Home Office has an institutional distrust of the Foreign Office because the Foreign Office, by definition, is staffed by people who have an interest in foreign affairs and an interest in working overseas and an interest in interacting with other cultures and communities. The Home Office sees its role as, sort of, fortress Britain. I'm sure some at the Home Office might disagree with that but I think there's plenty of evidence that backs that up. So, the Home Office over time has sought to minimise the Foreign Office's role in immigration work because they think, basically, we're a soft touch. The counteracting issue

with that is that what they've also sought to do is remove the discretion that an ambassador has. And this is a really, really important point. An ambassador or High Commissioner, sorry. A diplomatic Head of Mission. This is really important because most people, whether they are government ministers of the government of Trinidad and Tobago, whether they're fellow ambassadors, you know, the German ambassador or someone who is there in Port of Spain, or anyone who is from a similar background, would have a reasonable assumption that the British High Commissioner has some discretion, has some level of influence, has some level of power and can deal with these kinds of problematic issues.

EHdK 18:37 What was the justification behind that? Was that brought to anybody to say...because I think for the purposes of this project we're very interested in that loss of power at the individual level. You're not just talking about people who are influential people, you're talking about people who have no recourse. They are not able to speak to a person face-to-face to actually resolve any potential issues.

AS 19:10 I'll come onto that. So, the reason I think comes back to one is the Home Office's institutional distrust of the Foreign Office. They want to minimize [their role]. They'll say, you know, Arthur's gone native, or all those kinds of classic tropes that you hear. But that the other thing is the cost-cutting agenda so that someone will look at a sort of dashboard of costs and say, the cost of running a small immigration team in each of these small embassies is excessive. Let's consolidate and stick it all in Washington or whatever. Now, interestingly, on that...usually - and I did quite a lot of research on this at the time - usually these so-called consolidation cost-cutting efforts deliver little or no actual savings. And, in fact, at the time when I was working, my colleague in Georgetown, Guyana proposed that if you were going to have a processing hub for immigration-type issues, it would make sense to do it in Guyana for the simple reason that Guyana has an educated population, native English-speaking and the salaries...It's very cheap to employ people there. Whereas if you want to employ people in Washington DC, they're much more expensive and a much more competitive labour market. His proposal was ignored. But, ultimately, in the hierarchies of the way government works, it's very unlikely that you're going to empower a mission in a country such as Guyana when you've got the British ambassador in Washington who's arguably the world's most senior diplomat, of course, they're going to get the work. I mentioned that not with any discredit to Washington but just to point out that the cost savings agenda...which is often easier to defend.

EHdK 21:06 That was the justification...

AS 21:08 Well, that will be the justification because that's easy to defend. Whereas what you can't defend very easily is this idea that we don't trust our ambassador which is actually what's really happening. So, to go back then to the issue of this human contact. What I saw from an extremely early stage in my time, which is not directly related to the Windrush scandal, but it is a kind of proxy indicator. There were often significant problems related to immigration questions that were related to people in Trinidad seeking some kind of access

to the UK. As I mentioned, you didn't need a visa but, for example, you might be applying to be a student so then a student does need a visa, or someone might be ... [need] a work permit or, you know, all those sorts of things. I would quite often...my first awareness of it was Trinidadian politicians, members of parliament, government ministers, contacting me, often in a fairly – bluntly – pissed-off way saying my constituent, his son has been awarded a scholarship in a British university, that he's going to miss the start of his course. Because...the visa thing. And who do we speak to? And this is where it's complicated because the honest answer for me as British High Commissioner was, "I don't know who to speak to. No one will tell me who you should speak to. And I have no power over the process." But, if you want to have any credibility in a country where your job is to have relationships with cabinet ministers, with senior officials, with influential people, that's literally your job. Saying that is a surefire way of getting nowhere. I discovered very early on that we were constantly in this very uncomfortable situation. The thing here is clearly this is not about someone powerful in Trinidad using their influence over me to skirt the system. It was about me having literally no access or means to the system itself. I had no way of being able to say, okay, I'm going to talk to the case officer on this thing. Give me the reference and I'll look it up. We were excluded from that process.

EHdK 23:39 Are you talking about from people at the Home Office or people in Washington?

AS 23:43 Normally these decisions would have been in Washington. But even in Washington it's not like we would be given a series of numbers and people to call and, you know, or we had access to some kind of online case management system. It was made deliberately difficult for us in order to undermine our ability to play a role.

EHdK 24:09 The system was set up in a way that was wholly designed to depend on the documentation that people were submitting. Was there any fact checking?

AS 24:19 Well, to the extent that I know the answer. I wasn't there in Washington so I can't claim to know a lot. But I was very often shown decisions that appeared anomalous or, frankly, ludicrous that people had just misread the documentation or had taken a sort of bad faith interpretation. And then have used that to throw the case out or to reject.

EHdK 24:50 Can you think of any specific examples?

AS 24:52 Yes, I can think of lots of examples. So, things like you had to show evidence of funds. Let's say you're going to be a student. You've got to show you have the resources to sustain yourself. You may then need to show bank statements with a measure of finances sitting in the bank account that would demonstrate that. Someone would say but these funds have been in this bank account for 75 days and we told you it had to be 80 days and therefore we're rejecting your application. Now, things like that. If someone can show me data which demonstrates that those five days make a material difference in, you know,



migration adherence, then I'd be very impressed. But I doubt it. It seems to me that is an example of people taking a bad faith approach. Another case study. A couple in Trinidad - a British citizen married to a Trinidadian - they were both professionals. The Brit was an oil and gas engineer. Had worked all over the world. Was bluntly loaded. He was clearly a very wealthy person. He and his wife were both, you know, co-parenting their seven-year-old child. They applied to move back to the UK. They applied for immigration status for the wife. They were rejected and told that this was a sham marriage. They had brought this child up for seven years. She was seven or eight, I think. This was a guy who had lots of money so there was no question about his financial status. There was no question about the status of his relationship and his family life. Clearly, to an individual, it's deeply wounding to be told that the child that you are co-parenting is part of a sham relationship. It's deeply wounding to your wife who you lived with for all the time you've been married, to be told that, effectively, she's sort of some bit on the side and it's not a real relationship. But also, frankly, it was entirely illogical. This is a very wealthy man who wanted to move back to Britain, in order to continue his family life there who would have, by definition, brought a lot of spending and investment. I know, for example, he was looking at private education and whatever anyone's opinion on that...that's driving the British economy. We're talking a high-spending person. We're excluding these people from living in our country.

EHdK 27:36 And so those cases are either of British citizens living in Trinidad or Trinidadians and their experiences of immigration, the UK immigration system I should say. Were you aware of or at any point or did you encounter any individuals who were talking to you about the problems they were having over their documentation? As British citizens, or on the understanding that they were British citizens?

AS 28:00 Yes. We only got the faintest glimmers of that. Now, obviously, what you've just asked me about lies at the heart of the whole Windrush scandal. People who have lived in Britain for decades, who basically viewed themselves as British or certainly dual nationals, and who had never really believed that they had problems. And then they were being thrown into these, you know, these impossible situations. In those contexts, periodically, we would receive representations that were hard for us to understand because one of the things it's important, remember, of course, is that the way that Windrush scandal unfolded was that often the people at the receiving end of it, they were never given an opportunity to regularise their situation. They were told that they were in contravention of migration rules but never given any reasonable opportunity to make it right. So, going back to the point that we had no sort of facilities or ability to make any kind of meaningful response. We would occasionally receive, sometimes it might be a physical letter posted across the Atlantic, or it might be some kind of other contact. Perhaps someone in Trinidad who said, my auntie back in Britain or my cousin or whatever, is trying to get some information that helps them deal with this.



EHdK 29:35 Would you receive letters sent from the UK from people who were experiencing problems?

AS 29:39 Yes. And the problem with these situations was that one, we didn't really understand because, of course, like many people, we didn't know what was happening to these people. We didn't really understand what the problem was. And, two, because of the withdrawal of all the kinds of immigration work from our missions, we had no access to any information or useful data that could in any way help these people. We would then find ourselves in a situation of saying, "Sorry, we can't help. You need to contact these people in Washington DC or the Home Office." Even as we did this, we knew that it was very unlikely that either of those institutions would be of any help because they were sort of institutionally structured to be unhelpful. I mean, that was almost the point.

EHdK 30:29 Did you take the decision to respond to some people?

AS 30:32 Oh, we responded. I made a point of responding to anything that came to us directly. We certainly wouldn't ignore anything. I had a very clear - anyone who wanted to talk to people who were in the embassy at the time - I used to say to people that consular and migration work was the way that most ordinary citizens interact with a diplomatic mission. Whilst it may not be seen as the important thing because we're very focused on sort of political and security and big business. The real thing that people have personal experience of is consular and migration work. And therefore, we needed to be as good as we possibly could with regard to resource implications and so on. We would try to respond where possible. We would try to be as helpful as possible. But, basically, the blunt truth was that the answer that we had was, "I'm sorry but we don't have any access to information that can help you and we don't have any resource or standing to enable us to get that information."

EHdK 31:45 This was happening at the same period that systems were being moved wholly online. Is that correct? People were being asked to apply via an online system. They would be given a code to access. Did that cause any issues?

AS 32:01 Yes, that caused a lot of issues. Because, particularly whilst Trinidad is a fairly online country, I'm not going to say that people don't have the internet there not at all. But just like in any society, elderly people, people who are less confident using computer systems and so on, would get very confused and feel upset. Then they would think, well I know what I should do, I'll just go down to that big building the British High Commission and someone can help me there. But we had a policy that the answer is, "No, you cannot be helped. I'm sorry, there is nobody here who can help you." And, of course, that's a very difficult message. People who knew me personally would often be contacting me saying, "Well, who do I speak to about these issues?" And, of course, my answer was there is no one. The assumption was that can't be true. It can't be possible that the British High Commission in Port of Spain, arguably the most high-profile diplomatic mission in the

country, has no facility to handle these issues. So quite often, I was in an uncomfortable position of people I liked and respected probably thinking that I wasn't telling them the truth. Whereas I was, it's just it was a rather unbelievable truth.

EHdK 33:25 So the go-to reaction then if people turned up in person, maybe with documents and with questions, they would be sent away? That would be their first encounter with the British government...essentially was to be turned away?

AS 33:41 Yes. They would be turned away. They would be told to call a number in Washington which of course is expensive and for a lot of people is inaccessible. Or to access certain websites, which again is not for everybody, is not realistic.

EHdK 33:54 Okay, so now focusing again on the scandal and thinking about what was happening around that time. You said that you received letters. You got some idea that there were people having problems but they weren't quite sure what that problem was. When was the time - and this can be after you left the High Commission - but when was the time that you really picked up on the fact that this was a really serious issue?

AS 34:27 Well, I'll be straight. I had no idea that things were happening to people living in Britain. So sometimes we would receive things that were coming from Britain. But I think like most people, I sort of assumed that if you're if you're living in Britain, you've been there for decades and you're part of the British Western Indian community. It's beyond believable that you would then be arrested, in prison, deported. These are things that would not have occurred to me because those are not the acts of a western democratic state. But certainly, one thing I did start to see more of was people who, as far as I could see, had an absolute right to a British passport being refused their application. Quite often, this would not be people who fit the profile of the sort of the classic Windrush generation. I don't want to say victim...survivors. For example, you might have people who came from some of the wealthier communities within Trinidad who, perhaps, their grandparents were white British who had had gone to Trinidad for whatever reason. And who enjoyed a high quality of life. Maybe they were business owners or had worked back in the day in colonial administration, those kinds of things. The reason I mention that background is because these were the sorts of people who could then hire a lawyer or had greater access to connectivity and to networks. I would encounter people in those situations who would find they were being told they didn't have the right to British citizenship. Although, as far as I can understand it, the right was pretty clear. During my time in Trinidad, I did not have any awareness of an unfolding scandal in the UK. But what I did have an awareness of was people who had a right in any reasonable interpretation of the law, to be considered as British being told that they were not British.

EHdK 37:00 And I hear that you even have your own personal example of this? Would you like to expand on that?

AS 37:05 Yeah, sure. While I was working in Trinidad, my son Edward was born. He was born in 2011. Going back to the issues I was talking about with immigration and other matters. Lots of people would expect that the British Embassy or British High Commission would issue a birth certificate. If you're a Brit but you're born overseas you would go to your embassy and get the birth certificate. But that wasn't something we did. So, at the time of his birth Edward had a birth certificate issued by the Trinidad and Tobago government which, you know, just like any other person born in that country. I was aware at the time of the challenges that British citizens born overseas were increasingly getting in proving their right to have a passport. We had a close friend in fact who...his daughter was born around the same time as our son. A bit earlier. The reason this is relevant is because they, these friends of ours, started to apply for a passport for their child and they sort of kept getting bureaucratic hurdles. This family that we knew, because they had the right to French citizenship because of their own cultural heritage, they just simply applied for a French passport. At that time, pre-Brexit, it didn't feel like a particularly significant issue and they got the French passport easily issued by the embassy in Port of Spain. And didn't think any more of it. Anyway, going back to the case of my son. He had his Trinidad birth certificate. Both of his parents – myself and my wife - both born in Britain. Both of our parents were also born in Britain. And, of course, I was a British High Commissioner. So, I couldn't be more British really if I tried.

EHdK 39:17 And the birth certificate doesn't come with Trinidadian nationality.

AS 39:20 Exactly. It's just evidence that he was born in a certain time and place. Then I filled in the relevant forms, sent them off to Washington. And I will add, at this time it's important to say there was no special channel. At this time, I just had the normal passport application system that anyone else would have had. I would have a reference number like anyone else that theoretically you could look up and go on a call to get information. But as lots of people know, those information lines are hugely unhelpful and very expensive. So, in that sense I was like any other applicant. And I waited. There was a slight nervousness because we had a planned trip that we needed to make and obviously he had no passport – I think it was so his grandparents could see the new baby – it would not be possible to travel if he didn't have his passport. And then we got the response that his application had been rejected. And you can imagine, you know, that at first I thought, well, there must be some kind of mistake.

EHdK 40:42 How old was he at this stage?

AS 40:44 He was probably four weeks old or something. Four or five weeks old.

EHdK 40:47 Effectively, if I may, your son was rendered stateless?

AS 40:49 He was exactly rendered stateless. What's interesting about this is that I had lots of Trinidadian friends. As you can imagine, as a High Commissioner I had a lot of networks at high levels. I had Trinidadian government ministers say to me, "Oh, well, get him to apply for a Trinidad passport." And I was seriously considering that. Trinidad is a country that confers nationality on anyone born there, a bit like America. However, there are certain exceptions, which are completely reasonable. And one of those exceptions is if you are the child of a diplomat.

EHdK 41:20 And that, just for our listeners, is pretty standard practice for diplomats around the world. If you're a diplomat and you have your child overseas, the logic is that the child cannot [receive nationality].

AS 41:33 Yes which is completely logical. He was there because his father was serving another state. There's no reason that Trinidad should take him on as one of their citizens.

EHdK 41:44 So, what happened?

AS 41:45 So what happened was, I had a son who was stateless. We obviously had to reschedule our trip. I did what all other passport applicants end up doing is going down this desperate road of trying to figure out well what's the problem here? What is wrong with this application? Why is this person not eligible? Eventually, and this is where clearly it did make a difference. I was the British High Commissioner. Eventually, I was able to figure out who in Washington I could talk to, or email, at least. I don't think I was ever given a phone number. Someone told me, "Well, we think you need to provide further details of you and your wife's nationality, to confirm that he's eligible". I continue to think that's absolutely absurd because how could you possibly appoint someone to the position of British High Commissioner if you didn't think that they were British? That's just meaningless. And we had already demonstrated that we were both born in Britain and were clearly of British citizenship. Nevertheless, I jumped through the various hoops that were required of me.

EHdK 43:00 So part of that process required sending your passports?

AS 43:04 Well, in fact, the passports weren't good enough. So, what was required of us was something that I never even knew existed which was a copy of the long form birth certificate. My wife and I both had to apply for that. Obviously, it cost a certain amount of money. We did that. I'm not going to claim that for me, given that I was working inside the British government, on a reasonable salary, this wasn't a big problem for me. But, clearly, these are barriers that are put in the way of people who have nothing to prove, really. Eventually, the passport was issued. But there was a period when you have a stateless child, when you don't understand what the issue is, why it's problematic. And, most importantly, if I found that slightly stressful and frustrating, imagine what it's like for somebody who...they don't have access, they don't have networks, they don't have all the kind of understanding of the

system that I had. That was what lots of people were experiencing, you know, a million times worse than my experience.

EHdK 44:19 So how was that issue resolved? Was it with a lot of frustration?

AS 44:22 Eventually, yes, but by spending money getting documents that were basically meaningless because they just proved what was already entirely clear. The usual bureaucratic runaround.

EHdK 44:35 I have a question as well now about deportations. Just to understand the role of the High Commission and its engagement with the deportees. Or even in policy, or meetings. What conversations are you having around deportations? Did you have any contact with people who had been deported from the UK?

AS 45:00 We had a couple. I don't think the ones that I was aware of would be classified as part of the Windrush issues. It was often people on release from prison would be deported. It tended to be that it was a fairly kind of unremarkable process where you were in liaison with the relevant parts of the Trinidad government. Whether it be sort of national security, prison service and other type of things like that. There was certainly an undertone on the Trinidad side that this was not a particularly gracious way for Britain to behave when it's a much bigger, a far more wealthy country with all these resources to be sort of deporting our problems. There was certainly a widespread view, widely held, and I don't know if this is correct or not, that the serious issues of violent crime experienced in the Caribbean region had a lot to do with deportations not just from the UK but from the US as well. So effectively, these wealthy countries were offshoring their own problems and dumping people.

EHdK 46:22 Thank you for that, that's something I wanted to ask about the role of the US. And its influence with the overall policy making within the broader Caribbean context. In terms of migration and criminalisation.

AS 46:35 The first thing is that, in a way, the Windrush affair has this kind of quaint historicity to it because that generation, the Windrush generation have not really continued, in terms of if you're a Trinidadian growing up now, and you think about immigration and migration opportunities. It's unlikely you're going to go...you're going to go to North America. Canada and the US. Because they're closer, they're bigger, arguably, offer greater economic opportunity and probably more culturally welcoming. The US in particular with its criminalisation – and whilst it is a country of immigrants it also has a very hardline approach. There was no visa waiver for citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to go to America. So, whilst I had no direct involvement of it, there was obviously a wide awareness of what was going on with some people seeking to go to the US.

EHdK 47:36 I'd like to ask you now about your own activism. When you became aware of scandal. The events that were happening around the CHOGM [Commonwealth



Heads of Government] meeting in 2018. I know that one of the CHOGM meetings was held in Trinidad 2010, as well, which maybe you picked up on that happening while you were in post? What was your own role? How vocal were you? How committed were you to either campaigning or to raise awareness about what was happening?

AS 48:13 So the important point there. In 2014, when my assignment in Trinidad ended, I also left the Foreign Office. It's not worth going into the reasons but in broad terms I had some disagreements with government foreign policies particularly in the Middle East. It was a good time for me to do something else. On leaving the Foreign Office, I'm a private citizen and I'm allowed to express a view. When I heard about what was happening with the Windrush scandal, largely because of the work of Amelia Gentleman and one or two other great reporters, I cannot say too highly how disgusted and outraged I was. I was never a supporter of the hardline immigration policies of the 2010 and 2015 government. In both cases, Theresa May was Home Secretary although I'm not going to say she's personally, solely responsible although she certainly holds a lot of responsibility. I think the idea to live in Britain in the 2010s and discover that you are living in a country where uniformed agents of the state will arrest people of colour, who are legal residents, detain them and deport them. There's a simple word for that which is fascism. I'm not going to say Britain is a fascist country but these are fascistic policies that were carried out with an unbelievable...literally to me I couldn't believe it at first. A kind of unbelievable level of disregard both for the human rights of those affected but also a disregard for our basic values as a country. The idea that the Commonwealth is a family of nations and then we treat our Commonwealth citizens in this way...is literally to me...I was disgusted by it. When I learnt about this, I publicised the question of my son's situation. Not because I was ever suggesting that my experience was in any way comparable. But it was to show that even people of supposedly high status with strong networks, which was my case, could find themselves falling foul of this system. There was a set amount of attention put on it and I hope that that attention drove the debate about the Windrush affair in the right direction. Because I always made it clear that I wasn't suggesting that my experience was comparable. Since then, I have been involved in one or two ways. I have helped some immigration charities where they've had cases where they need an expert witness type person who can say meaningfully these are the risks associated with sending someone back to a certain country. I've been involved as a volunteer with one or two immigration charities, and I continue to take a strong interest. I'll continue to talk publicly about these matters where relevant or where, you know, where I've been invited to.

EHdK 51:10 When you made public the issue about your son, did you do that in a public forum or was it via social media?

AS 51:16 It was via social media. Then I got a lot of interview requests. I did a few of them, I didn't want the story to be about me. I wanted the focus to be on those people in the Windrush generation. But I was interviewed by the BBC, The Guardian and one or two others but basically with the major media platforms. The other thing which I did. I continued

to have contacts inside government. I learned that the Home Office, surprisingly, were very worried about my case and they weren't worried about the Windrush people. But, again, I think it shows ultimately there's a structural racism there that as privileged white man my case matters more to them. So later on, I did try through Data Subject Access Request [DSAR] to get data on the Home Office internal discussions surrounding this case. I never succeeded. Clearly the Home Office has a very long track record of breaking data laws and of not honouring these requests. So, I mean, it's something that if I had more time, energy, perhaps I would go back to but I haven't.

EHdK 52:28 Did you speak to any of your former colleagues back in Trinidad about what was happening? I am just trying to understand if there were any campaigns or activist links back to the Caribbean at the time? Or was this purely seen as kind of a UK problem and a UK issue?

AS 52:51 I think it was seen as a UK problem and a UK issue. I know that in the 2018 CHOGM, because there were some very difficult moments when you had prime ministers of Caribbean countries coming to London just as they were learning that their compatriots have been foully mistreated. I think, ultimately, part of the challenge here is that the issue is here in the UK. These are people who lived in Britain. They lived as British citizens even if they were, in some cases, technically not. And they were legal residents of this country. To a large extent there was very little that the country Trinidad and Tobago could do, or there was probably very little that individuals in Trinidad could do. Clearly, if someone had been sent back then the issue is about their status there. But I think it was ultimately an issue that had to be fixed, sort of in the bowels of the Home Office, rather than anywhere else.

EHdK 53:56 So how do you see the future? How do you see this issue moving forward? We know the Wendy Williams update to her report came out earlier this year. And the Home Office received a lot of criticism. Do you have any hope?

AS 54:17 No, I'm afraid so I have an extremely negative and pessimistic view of how this will evolve. Post the Windrush affair there was then the Compensation Fund, which as far as I can see, is a fake fund that does not exist to compensate survivors. I'm not saying it's bureaucratic. I think it's a deliberate, cynical policy. There has been lots of evidence that it's been made deliberately difficult for people. So that's one point. The second thing. The ongoing structural racism and criminalisation of migrants. We see it literally as we're talking. This is only a week after the attempt illegally to fly people to Rwanda. People who could easily have a claim to asylum here but have had their rights taken from them.

EHdK 55:08 And the CHOGM meeting is taking place there in Rwanda right now as we're speaking.

AS 55:12 Yes, today they are in Rwanda. So, there are those kinds of ironies there. One of the things in terms of my personal activism. I have become involved with some of the charities that help people in Calais. You talk to anybody there, and they say, the government talks about, we've got to put the people smugglers out of business. You can do that in one way very quickly, very easily by establishing in Calais safe and legal mechanisms for people to apply for asylum. The government doesn't want to do that because, actually, the government likes the spectre of illegal migration because it drives support to the kind of white nationalist aspect of the Tory party's vote. So, I think you've got a government that has a track record of criminal acts on these migration issues and is, in fact, embracing them. There's lots of reporting that the government found that, although it was frustrated in its attempt to fly migrants, that it was politically successful because we were frustrated by lefty lawyers and by the European court. So that plays into what is, in my opinion, a very damaging culture war which is one of the main activities of a government that is failing in conventional delivery so it has to deliver on cultural and identity politics.

EHdK 56:26 Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview?

AS 56:30 I think the only thing I would say is I think that the Home Office - I am obviously not the first person to say this - the Home Office is a fundamentally flawed institution and effectively acts as a kind of semi-legal kind of mafia operation inside the British state. There are so many examples of the completely egregious sort of actions at the Home Office, I cannot see any way that you would ameliorate the situation without closing it down and starting again.

EHdK 57:01 Thank you very much for your time.

[END OF AUDIOFILE].