

PATRICK ASHWORTH INTERVIEW

Key:

EHdK: Dr Eve Hayes de Kalaf (Interviewer)

PA: His Excellency Mr. Patrick Ashworth (Respondent)

Date/Location:

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EHdK 00:01 I'm here with Patrick Ashworth who is the former British High Commissioner to Belize. He was in post from 2008 until 2013. Patrick, thank you for agreeing to this interview today. I wondered if we could start by you telling us about your career. I know that you've had a long and very interesting career in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. And it would be very interesting to learn more about that.

PA 00:31 Sure. A long and completely undistinguished career in the Foreign Office(!) Well, I'm a Cumbrian by birth and I joined the Foreign Office in 1968. And I had quite a few postings. I started off in Tanzania where I met my wife. It's our golden wedding next year. And then I went to Saint Lucia, spent some time in the old Soviet Union, went on to Malta to Brazil, where I've been twice, and to the Netherlands. And then ending up in Belize in 2008.

EHdK 01:13 And in what capacity did you work in all of these different places?

PA 01:16 I've done everything. I was involved in trade, press and public affairs...These days, unless you're at a major mission, you just muck in and do just about everything.

EHdK 01:30 What took you to Belize?

PA 01:33 I had come to the end of a tour in the UK. And there was, I think, a call sent out for somebody who could go to Belize quite quickly. As they needed someone speedily, I threw my hat into the ring and just more or less got the job. And then after that six-month temporary posting, then I had to bid formally for the post, and I got it.

EHdK 02:01 Can you tell our listeners a little bit about Belize? Its history, its culture?

PA 02:06 Yes, it's a peculiar place probably completely different to the islands of the Caribbean. That's the first thing, of course, It's not an island. It shares that with Guyana. Guyana on the mainland of South America and Belize on the mainland of Central America. And it's sort of pinched between Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the east. And that is where the history begins with Guatemala. It's a very peculiar story about Belize but the first British people that went there way back in the 1600s...pirates, buccaneers, call them what you will. They went there because they discovered there was logwood there. Now logwood

for those who don't know is, of course, a tree from which you can make black dye. And in those days, a bit like today, black was the colour to be in. And so, the British began to take the logwood from that. And [Belize] has a long tradition in forestry which we will possibly get on to later. A long tradition of forestry.

EHdK 03:29 I think that many Belizeans after World War Two, they went and worked in Scotland, is that right?

PA 03:35 They did. The woodcutters. They went there towards the end of World War Two. And went there to do forestry. And, in fact, books had been written about them, learned articles have been written about them as well. Again, very few people from Belize, though, ever came to the UK. I mean, the whole thing about Belize is this strange thing. It was part of Spain, if you like. Part of Spanish Central America. And it's the only Caribbean territory claimed by another state. To this day, Guatemala in its constitution has a claim on most of the territory of Belize...It's the only former colony whose territory is claimed by another state. Guatemala claims that it was always part of the captaincy general of Guatemala. And so, when all the Central American states cast off the yoke of Spanish colonialism that became part of Guatemala. The argument from the Belizean side, which I think it was the correct one, that actually it was part of the captaincy of Yucatan. So, it was different from the rest of Central America. And so, the British carried on with their logwood. And more and more people went there. The Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years' War in 1763, for the historians, recognised the rights of the English settlers to cut the logwood there. And in 1862, Britain declared it a Crown colony which was then subordinate to Jamaica. That was when it became known as British Honduras. The people are completely different as well to other parts of the of the Caribbean. Many of them are still what they call Creoles, Afro-Caribbean as we call them, something around about 21 per cent now. The Mayans who, of course, were there in and around that area from ancient times. And there's now three types of them there. You've got the Kekchi who came from Guatemala, the Mopan who were the Indigenous Mayans and the Yucatec came from Mexico. And then you have people called mestizos which are mixed Spanish and Mayans, a distinct grouping of themselves. And then you have the Garifuna or the Garinagu...it's another of those stranger stories, as well, but they were, sort of, West African, Arawak and Caribs, a mixture. And they made the great mistake of supporting the French in the Anglo-French wars in the Caribbean. So, then the British rounded up all the most African-looking ones, more or less put them on a ship and sent them off where they landed at Roatán which is a small island off Honduras. And that was far too small for them.

EHdK 07:04 So principally what are the British interests in Belize?

PA 07:09 Well, it was mainly logwood. That was how it started. And that kept on until...because there were very few people there. And then later on, of course, it became sugar. A story familiar to many in the Caribbean. That kind of thing as well.

EHdK 07:31 And Belize gained independence from Britain in 1981. What can you tell me about migration around that time? Where were Belizeans travelling to? Where were they looking to settle? What's the story of migration in and around Belize?

PA 07:54 Yes, it's strange because there's never been a great migratory pattern from Belize to the UK. The traditional pattern of migration was north to the United States. Mainly because it was so easy. In two days, you can catch a bus from the border with Mexico, get on a bus there, travel two days through Mexico and end up on the border with the United States. A lot of people took advantage of that. And they've been going there since the late 1950s, early 1960s. I was speaking by Messenger to a friend of mine just the other day and I was asking him about this. And he just said, "Oh, my grandmother is 95. And she went to the United States in the 1960s." And I said, "Well, how did she go?" He said, she literally just got on a bus and went there. And it was very easy to get through the border in those days. There weren't the border controls that there are now and so that was the real reason. It was just so easy. There was never any direct connections between Belize and the UK. Even today, there are no direct routes, no direct sea routes, either.

EHdK 09:12 And also the economy, the Belizean the economy then, depends heavily on its relationship with the United States.

PA 09:21 It does well. Most of the tourists come from there. But, of course, most people reckon there's about 160,000 Belizeans in the United States.

EHdK 09:31 And how big is the population of Belize?

PA 09:34 Now it's about 400,000. In the 1960s when this began, it was a quarter of that, so it was round about 100,000 but it relies to a certain extent on remittances from those Belizean-Americans. I mean, I didn't know until I got there that athletes like Marion Jones was actually a Belizean and Simone Biles the gymnast as well. So, you know, they've got this great history in the United States. And to this day, we think there's only about 3,000 Belizeans in the UK.

EHdK 10:08 Tiny. We're talking really small numbers. So that brings me to your role as British High Commissioner. What do you remember from that time, knowing that you began in 2008? What were the main priorities in your role? What areas of work were you concentrating on? What conversations were you having?

PA 10:30 I can give you the formal answer, of course, that all High Commissioners were there to maintain relations. But, you know, Belize is part of the Commonwealth. It was the only English-speaking country in Central America. So, it was a great platform for the UK there. We'd had British armed forces in Belize for a long, long time. They were there originally to help British Honduras, Belize against the Guatemalan threat. Now it's a training unit called BATSUB, British Army Training Support Unit, Belize.

EHdK 11:07 And as we know, Central America was, obviously for the US, particularly during the Reagan period, was a very fraught and hostile time.

PA 11:21 Yeah, this is where Belize's population really exploded. Because it took in refugees from Central America, from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. The Guatemalan...what would we call it...repression, I guess, was particularly awful and particularly awful against Indigenous people like the Mayans. That's why there are so many but the Mayans, for example, don't recognise any of the borders. They've always crossed down that road, over that river. They don't see it like that. So, Belize took a lot of what we would call now refugees, I guess, just people and gave them a place to live. You know, they didn't have refugee camps or anything.

EHdK 12:07 What do you know about registrations particularly in the 1980s? Do you know whether people held any form of documentation?

PA 12:18 That's a good question. I certainly know that they registered them all because the UN [United Nations] set up an office for refugees in Belize at that time so they would have records. Yes, they would have records there. Most of the people are now Belizean and they're proud to be Belizean. But for that reason, in Belize now they speak as much Spanish or more Spanish than English, the lingua franca of everybody is Creole. It's fascinating.

EHdK 12:53 So, coming onto the Windrush scandal. During your role as High Commissioner, did you have any inkling or any idea of potential issues or questions of registration and access to citizenship and other matters concerning Caribbean-descended people, or people from the Caribbean, living in the UK? Did you hear anything through the High Commission?

PA 13:27 No, I mean, everybody knew about Windrush, about the Windrush arriving and the Windrush generation. That's just part of history now. But at that time, we didn't realise that there were going to be these particular problems. And also Belize, I guess, if it was in the UK press we would have seen it. But Belize didn't get the BBC TV, for example, BBC World, I think they call it now. It couldn't get that. The World Service, of course, had downgraded its Caribbean service. And so really places like Belize didn't get all that much British news until the Internet came then people could choose to download news. But it never came up while I was there. I was speaking to the present High Commissioner just to ask her. She said nobody on the official side has raised...

EHdK 14:22 And what's her name?

PA 14:23 Claire [Evans]...oh, gosh, I'm having a senior moment. I'll give you the name later...Nobody's raised it. I spoke to the FCO historian who deals with Belize and she said no, it just never came up as an issue, never came up at all.

EHdK 14:38 How about what was happening at the High Commission? Belizeans who were either planning a trip to the UK or needed a visa? How were you dealing with those processes and what was your role?

PA 14:49 Well, trips to the UK, no problem. You just turn up like with many countries, you know, and you get assessed at the border.

EHdK 14:58 So, visa free entry?

PA 15:00 Yes, visa free entry. If people needed to go to study or to work then they would need a visa. And that included Chevening scholars at the time and everything like that. Towards the end, they had introduced the new system and so you had to give biometrics and all the rest of it. But the problem was that they didn't set up visa handling stations in every country so if you're a Belizean, even say a Chevening scholar who is bona fide and couldn't be called into question, you would either have to go to Miami on the way out, hoping you're going to pick up your visa, give your biometrics, wait a couple of days and then pick up visa or go to Panama at that time to give your biometrics. Literally take a trip to Panama, give your fingerprints, get your picture taken and then come back.

EHdK 15:53 So there was no service available then for people to be able to apply to legally enter the UK?

PA 16:03 Yes, this was towards the end. You literally had to go and give your electronic...

EHdK 16:08 Was it always that way?

PA 16:10 No, before most countries used to have visa vignettes that could be issued and stuck into your passport.

EHdK 16:23 So that was closed down then? In Belize?

PA 16:25 Yes, they closed it all down. In most of the Caribbean...like Saint Lucia, for example, wouldn't have one, Saint Vincent wouldn't, Saint Kitts...Some of the bigger ones, Jamaica, would have a visa issuing office.

EHdK 16:36 You mentioned that you spent some time in Saint Lucia. In what capacity were you working there?

PA 16:43 I don't know what my title was now when I was there. I think management officer or something.

EHdK 16:48 Was that at the High Commission?

PA 16:49 Well it was then because at that time, Saint Lucia was what they called the West Indies Associated States (WIAS). So rather like Belize became in 1964, it was internally self-governing, but the foreign affairs and defence was carried out by the UK. We used to issue passports. We used to issue visas. And it was all done by personal interview. Passports were issued by hand. But as everything becomes more mechanised. It was mechanised first, now it's digitalised.

EHdK 17:20 What year was that?

PA 17:22 I was in Saint Lucia from 1975 to 1978.

EHdK 17:26 So, very different and this is what we're hearing as well with the High Commissioners that we're speaking to, a very different form of interaction took place before digitisation of visa processing services. Do you think in your experience, the comparison between Saint Lucia and your experience in Belize, do you think that is a positive thing? Do you think it's taken away anything from that service? Were you hearing any complaints or any comments from people about frustrations?

PA 18:04 We did. We certainly did because it's taken any flexibility out of the system. If you come to me as a, say, as a Saint Lucien, and to be fair we used to have a roving visa issuing officer. We would take the documents in and process them. And then the roving visa officer would come around every month.

EHdK 18:23 In Saint Lucia?

PA 18:26 In Saint Lucia, yes. So, what would happen if, for example...I'll give you a real example was that we were sending a Chevening scholar to the UK and they were going to take their family. She was going to take a husband, family, and they were going to take a nanny as well. So, they had a bob or two. And so, she put all her documents in but there was some problem with her documents from the University of Belize. The transcript wasn't quite right or it was the wrong period or something like that. And she got up to Miami and the whole visa was refused. So, a Chevening scholar, good, bona fide from a family with loads of loot. And it was turned down. Whereas, if she had come to see us we would have said, "Look..."

EHdK 19:15 So that happened when you were in Belize [correction: Saint Lucia]? So, what did she do to try and rectify it again?

PA 19:22 Come back and do it again. To add insult to injury, her nanny got given the visa. And so, that happened all the time. It has taken flexibility out of the system. I'm sure it's more efficient, more cost effective.

EHdK 19:34 But what was the reaction of this woman then? Was she angered by this? Was she frustrated by it?

PA 19:42 Both. But she kept her eye on the main thing which was to get to the UK to do her course, do her master's. But they do leave a bit of a nasty taste. And if you talk about soft power, being turned down for visa on a minor, I would say, a minor administrative ground isn't really showing soft power. And so that's what I say, there's no flexibility in the system. If there's no personal interaction, you can't tell them to go away and come back in 10 minutes with a different document.

EHdK 20:16 Where did they go in Miami? Was it the British Embassy?

PA 20:20 They give the biometrics, I think, at the various Homeland Security places now. I think that we've got an arrangement where you can do that...Don't forget, this is a couple of years back so things may have changed. And, yes, then they would go and get their visa from the consulate.

EHdK 20:39 It's very interesting that you talk about soft power, as well, because thinking in terms of diplomatic relations and maybe the image that Britain was projecting of itself overseas. Do you think that has caused any kind of ill-feeling or damage to the British reputation in the sense that people are being blocked, basically, from either acquiring certain visas or getting the documentation they need?

PA 21:13 Yes, I think it obviously does. And it's incremental. One, you can put down to just a minor administrative glitch. If it's two or three I think that people begin to smell a rat.

EHdK 21:24 And would people be told the reasons why their documentation was refused?

PA 21:28 Yes, they would say there's a problem there. But, unfortunately, it's not there's a problem there, we will hold your documents, give us another one. It's refused. And then you have to pay the visa fee again and those kinds of things.

EHdK 21:41 So thinking back to - sorry to jump again - but thinking back to Saint Lucia because I think it's really fascinating that you had this experience, a kind of comparative experience, right, with the personal interactions that people would have with the High Commission? Is there anything else that you remember from that time that you think changed over the past few decades?

PA 22:08 Well, the obvious one is we're much smaller now than we were then. I mean, I think when I got there, there was actually seven UK-based staff there. In Saint Lucia. There was an Information Officer. It wasn't a High Commissioner it was a British government



representative. And then, deputy British government representative and we had all sorts of...a big team. And now I think there's one person there in these small islands. So, things have changed.

EHdK 22:37 And we know that Saint Lucians have been quite heavily affected...for being such a small place, it has been affected by the Windrush scandal quite significantly. Can you think of any reasons as to why that might be?

PA 22:53 Why they're affected? I guess, it's just the sheer numbers. There was always a long tradition of connections between Saint Lucia and the UK. Direct flights is one thing. Banana boats being another one. They used to send at least every week, if not more, boats out to cut the bananas. Some of the crew was Saint Lucian. So, there was a bit of a pattern of Saint Lucian migration to the UK which is totally unlike Belize. So, I can see why that would affect some of these small islands as well.

EHdK 23:29 So Belize, in a sense, is an outlier, in that its migration has been principally towards the US. There are Belizeans present in the UK but the numbers are very small. And also, really, the Windrush scandal didn't resonate if at all with most Belizeans. I know that this is after your time because you finished your post in 2013. But when the scandal broke, where were you? Were you in the UK? What were your memories of what was happening? And also, what did your Belizean colleagues think about this? Have you spoken to them?

PA 24:14 I can answer that one. It's really gone completely over their heads. They're not involved. At a political level, of course, the Belizean government will go along to CARICOM meetings where these will be raised. And I'm sure they'll fall into line with the other Caribbean countries. And I think all this builds into this idea that they have to get rid of, if you like, any last vestiges of colonialism because they get nothing from it. That all the time, there are obstacles put in their way. And so, the idea that we can always rely on them, for example, to vote with our judge on an international court and those kinds of things. I think those days have gone and this doesn't help.

EHdK 25:11 Where do you see the future going in terms of UK-Belizean relations? What do you think the strategy is? I know that the recent visit of the royals to the country was met with a number of protests and there was quite a lot that came out in the press about people's reaction to that. Do you think there is a future for...?

PA 25:39 Well, I'm proud to say that - he says smiling - when I was there, Harry came out. And it was a great success. I mean, much more of a success than we could possibly have thought. Cheering crowds all the way and that kind of thing.

EHdK 25:55 Tell me about that trip. How did that come to be?

PA 25:59 It was part of the...I'm trying to think...it couldn't have been the Jubilee. But it was, I think...was it the accession of the Queen to the throne? It was some Jubilee. And like this one, everybody went. The royal family sent people out to all of the realms where the Queen was still the Head of State. And Harry was chosen to come here. And he went to Jamaica and, I think, to Bermuda. And, yeah, he was the proverbial rockstar. He was met with cheers and everything. It was brilliant. And then, of course, we had this one where I think there was one major protest, wasn't there, down in the south with the...? I think with the Mayans as well and so they changed the itinerary. I think it was still a success, though. And often... the feeling that you have in other parts of the Caribbean are because of our history. Now, the history is not exactly...how should I put this... without its problems in the Caribbean. But most people would recognise Britain. In Belize, the Afro-Caribbeans are only something like 20 per cent of the population. Still the biggest group, I think, just about. But the mestizos, the Garifunas...they probably have a long history with the UK but the normal, everyday Latinos, they have no connection with the UK at all. So, most people that don't feel this connection, have never had it. And so...

EHdK 27:49 Interestingly, I've been getting similar responses. For example, speaking to people in Jamaica and in other parts of the Caribbean that Britain really is being left behind in the sense that people feel more culturally aligned with the US. There's increased migration there. People are watching TV shows. And in that sense, I think it's quite interesting. If we think about the Windrush scandal because it didn't really, or from what I'm hearing, is that it didn't really resonate with people who were in the Caribbean. It was seen something that was a British thing that was far away. So, it didn't really feed into any kind of organised activism or protests.

PA 28:46 I can see that because the numbers are still small. If you said Jamaica, I don't know how many have been returned, deported, call it what you will. A few hundred I would guess. Jamaica's got a huge population. So, you can imagine it being very important for anybody connected with that. I mean, I would feel outraged if it happened to me. But in the great scheme of things Jamaica has a lot of problems and a couple of hundred people probably is for there not that much of an issue. It is a British issue and it's for us to resolve. And it has to be done with some sensitivity which I don't get the impression it is being done with any sensitivity at all. I'm not even sure it's really being addressed properly. That's what I think.

EHdK 29:31 The conversations you had as High Commissioner then, for example, when you went to activities organised by CARICOM or CHOGM or any kind of regional, organised events. What were the main themes that were coming up at the time? What was on the agenda? What were people raising as being the most important items they wanted to address?

PA 29:58 Belize very rarely hosted events like that. It didn't have the infrastructure. It is doing so now.

EHdK 30:06 Can I ask how many people were working at the High Commission at the time?

PA 30:09 About half of them?! Sorry, that's an old joke (!) There were, I think, from the UK two of us. It was tiny. A High Commissioner and a deputy High Commissioner. And that was it. There was another one who was a sort of a general factotum. But that post was cut. And all the posts we used to have were all mainly done by locally engaged staff. Good locally engaged staff.

EHdK 30:37 Did you have an office in the capital? Or did you share an office?

PA 30:44 No, we had our own building in Belmopan. And not very far from the government offices. There's a there's a little diplomatic enclave there where the offices are. We were right next to the Mexicans, that kind of thing. And the government offices were, as well, I could walk to them. Of course, I never did but I could.

EHdK 31:08 I'm sorry, I jumped a little. But I was asking about the items on the agenda of, for example, CARICOM meetings in and around 2008. What were the things that you were talking about with your contemporaries or the issues that you were trying address?

PA 31:28 CARICOM isn't obsessed with the UK. That's the thing. They have a region to look after. And especially, if it becomes CARIFORUM where it was the more economic side of it where they have Haiti and states like that as well. One of the things that that did crop up while I was there was reparations. But again, that wasn't a big thing. This was mainly, I think, Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica really pushed that one. But it's still there. They have a Reparations Commission. And I think that won't go away. But Belize is almost schizophrenic because half of it is looking towards the Caribbean and the other half is looking towards Central America. And so, it was a member of the Central American Organization as well. And I think it sees that's where a lot of its trade is going to go in the future. The other community I've not mentioned in Belize is a real-life community of Mennonites. And they're big farmers. And they were exporting a lot of beans and other produce, cattle, to Guatemala and other Central American countries. And they had signed partial scope agreements with the Central American Federation as well. So, Belize probably didn't even think as much about CARICOM as it did about the Central Americans.

EHdK 32:53 In that sense, it played...it stood in an interesting position, right? Well, it stands in an interesting position to have one foot, basically, in the Caribbean and one foot in Central America which I think is fascinating in terms of diplomacy and trade and the decisions that...

PA 33:12 It is. I think George [Cadle] Price, who was the first great top leader of independence, and the first prime minister definitely saw the future as being Central American rather than Caribbean. He's probably right as well. The trade flows from the Caribbean weren't that great. The trade flows mainly are from Central America and from North America. So, for example, if you want your Marmite, it usually comes with an American label on it because it's come from the UK to the United States and down in containers from the United States to the shops in Belize.

EHdK 33:52 You mentioned earlier that remittances are hugely important as well. Where do they come from mainly?

PA 33:57 From the US.

EHdK 34:01 I know you were saying that people were crossing the Mexican border. Are there specific parts of the US where there's a higher number of Belizeans?

PA 34:10 The ones I know about are New York, Boston, oddly, California...they spread out all over. I think in Los Angeles as well there are quite a lot. But they actually have, you know, they have Belize Days and all sorts in these places which you don't see. It's almost like they have their own carnival.

EHdK 34:31 You mentioned to me earlier that you also have a background in immigration. That you used to work in...was it in the immigration service or...?

PA 34:43 No, it was always in the Foreign Office but at that time we were immigration officers. The FCO used to do most of the immigration work. I mean, not all of it. There was always the Home Office but a lot more immigration work was done by an officer. So, I did my immigration officer training.

EHdK 35:05 Tell me about the day-to-day then. The ins and outs of your job. What was expected at that time and the kinds of decisions that you were faced with?

PA 35:13 Well, the most that I ever did at any one time was in Malta, oddly, rather than the Caribbean. And you just set half a day aside for interviewing people and the other half for writing up interview notes. Nothing was taped, everything was written by hand, précised by hand.

EHdK 35:38 Are we talking about the 1970s? The 1980s? And then what kind of decisions were you expected to make? What were people applying for?

PA 35:50 Everything from family visas, work visas, absolutely everything you can think of we did just about everything. Family reunification. Marriage visas were always very different. Because when the British office in Libya closed after the murder WPC Fletcher, all the

Libyans came to Malta. So suddenly, my job changed considerably. And there were a lot of Indian labourers in Libya. So, we began to get Commonwealth immigration. Malta, of course, was like that itself. So Indian immigration as well became quite a busy little immigration place.

EHdK 36:41 And, of course, as you know, people affected by the...as it's called the Windrush scandal, were not solely from the Caribbean, they were from...Asia and from other parts of the Commonwealth. So, did you pick up on any issues around passports or around birth certification?

PA 37:06 No, I couldn't say there were any. I think the only oddities we used to get was because of Libya's situation, we would have people coming in with old Palestinian passports from when they had been in the British forces in Palestine just after the war. Those kinds of things.

EHdK 37:26 And what was the attitude towards, for example, out-of-date documents or if people didn't have the right paperwork? Would you say that it was more relaxed? Or that the systems were different in those days? What do you think has been changing, basically, since the 1980s?

PA 37:41 Well, you make fewer decisions yourself, I think.

EHdK 37:43 Who makes those decisions?

PA 37:46 Decisions are now taken by immigration officers at central processing hubs.

EHdK 37:54 So they're faceless, then?

PA 37:57 They're faceless but we could, of course, ring up the visa office in the United States and explain what...why we thought this person should get it. And occasionally they used to say, "Yeah, perhaps we should have issued," and so we had a record...

EHdK 38:14 You had direct contact, basically, with immigration decision-makers and you had sometimes the ability to influence the outcome?

PA 38:22 You could ask for an administrative review, I think, if you were at the High Commission ringing up saying, "We really think this person is genuine. Could you do an administrative review?" And the chief immigration officer would often have a look and sometimes they would reverse the decision of the immigration officer. A lot of it, of course, is outsourced now as well. So, you're not necessarily dealing with Home Office immigration people.

EHdK 38:58 Who would you be dealing with?

PA 38:53 I don't know who the latest company is.

EHdK 38:58 Basically, decisions on British immigration are not actually being made by British officials, essentially, it can be outsourced to....

PA 39:09 They're all checked, I think, by Home Office officials. But the collection of data, the collection of everything is all done by companies.

EHdK 39:21 And where was paperwork being stored in those days?

PA 39:26 In the old days? Oh, you would keep it all. It was all stored.

EHdK 39:30 Piled high?

PA 39:31 No, it was all very well kept. That was the great thing about the Foreign Office in those days, everything was in folders, updated and then it would be returned to the UK. And it would be kept in Foreign Office Archives which I think is up in Hounslow Park now and would be reviewed as well. There was a system for recording and keeping archives.

EHdK 39:55 Given your experience of these practices and how and records were archived and how the immigration process worked...It's kind of asking you to think maybe a bit beyond your own career but can you think about or imagine some of the problems that people who were affected by the Windrush scandal might have encountered? Or some of the reasons why people were finding that they were being accused of being in the country...I don't like the term...but illegally? How do you think that came to be? I think the 1980s was such an important period in terms of changes to British nationality and how people were being...basically, if you're born in the UK, you were no longer automatically entitled to British citizenship.

PA 40:56 That was a British Nationality Act of 1981 which came in in 1983. It changed everything from if you are born in the UK, you're British to, if you are born in the UK and your parents are settled. That was the gist of it.

EHdK 41:10 Did that affect your day-to-day work at all?

PA 41:14 Well, we certainly had to do a lot of revision and everything.

EHdK 41:17 Telling people's children, for example, that they weren't British, would you...

PA 41:21 That would never happen. The problem seems to have been that the children of the people that came didn't know that they weren't. All they could remember was being in



Britain all the time. They were in their parents' passport. And you probably remember, in the old days you just used to add the child's name, no picture or anything. So, they came to the UK, grew up in the UK, went to school in the UK, got a job in the UK, national insurance, health service. And then, you know, something happened. They had to do a check on nationality. And the Home Office or whoever decided they weren't British. And if there was a crime involved, they would be considered for the new automatic deportation if you've got a prison sentence of more than 12 months. It was an unfortunate series of events.

EHdK 42:14 But how bureaucratically do you think...I'm thinking more about the kind of problems that people can stumble into in terms of their documents. Either people didn't own a passport or they didn't renew a passport or it was in their interaction with the British state, as you said, that they stumble upon this or realise that or are told that they're not British. So, I'm just thinking in terms of the kind of documentation issues or problems that you might have seen in your job.

PA 42:54 I can't say I saw any but, of course, don't forget that Commonwealth citizens, Jamaicans, were Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies. They had the same passport as you would. And it was only when things changed...a lot of them never bothered to take out British nationality. They thought they were British all the time. And so, when eventually the children came to do...they didn't know they weren't, everybody just assumed they were all British. And by which time much of the documentation would have been automatically destroyed.

EHdK 43:32 Destroyed in what way? How was the decision made?

PA 43:37 You can't just keep...there are rules about keeping records. I don't know what it is at the moment. You've probably heard of the 30-year rule for some records but records are reviewed regularly. So, everything is filed. And then even if you just forget that it's about passports and immigration, every year you would look and see what you would need to keep and every five years you would look and see if those that you kept needed to be reviewed again and then about every so often, you would send what was left back to London for safekeeping.

EHdK 44:13 So there will have been people caught up in the scandal who...there did exist records of various aspects of them living in the UK but those records then they could no longer access because they were either destroyed or...

PA 44:30 Yes, records are automatically destroyed after certain, you know, after they're examined. I think the problem was, as I understand it, of course. As they were British, they didn't need anything. They just got on the boat. They didn't need entry clearance, didn't need a visa so there's no record of that in Jamaica, say. They landed here because they had their landing cards which, as we know, is an issue in itself.



EHdK 44:59 Amelia Gentleman talks about that in her book although I know there's some controversy over whether or not that was as major an issue as talked about.

PA 45:08 The point being that a British person at that time came to Britain. It was a bit like freedom of movement in the EU. You just went to France and decided to live and then you would register just as people register at the town hall for a vote, they would register with the NHS.

EHdK 45:28 What to you has been one of the biggest failings of the British government in terms of basically allowing this problem to manifest?

PA 45:40 I think it's a lack of flexibility and a lack of...I wouldn't like to say humanity...but look upon it as an administrative exercise rather than dealing with human lives. And that was the one thing I always used to tell people right from the beginning, you're dealing with real people. You're not just dealing with a piece of paper. This can affect somebody's life. So, we always took great care when making a decision about a visa or anything like that. Or was that person eligible for a passport?

EHdK 46:08 But, of course, when you made those decisions, or you and your team made those decisions, you saw people face-to-face. So, you would see somebody who would come with maybe their partner and their children. You would see a family, right? Whereas now the process is very much done behind a computer screen. So, there's no...there's none of that actual engagement with a human being, right? You're not able to look in someone's eyes. You're not able to have that kind of personal connection with them.

PA 46:40 It's very much computer says no, or computer says yes, shall we say. I mean, if you just think of police work. Skilled interrogators can get to the truth and entry clearance officers used to be quite skilled. Not exactly interrogators but skilled at reading the person.

EHdK 46:57 Did you get that in your training as well. In your immigration training?

PA 47:03 I'm not sure we did. I think it came from experience. The training was pretty good. But I don't think we did get that...There's something wrong here. Let me let me press further. Often there was no issue...people are very nervous. People lie to you, for good reasons. I think he wants to know this. Not that you're not genuine. And this is the problem. And now if there's any discrepancy, you can't press further. That's just the end of the process.

EHdK 47:42 And it could be, in the situation you described about this a clearly well-off woman who had submitted paperwork that wasn't accepted. So, it could be a small clerical error. It could be something that is to do with the wrong date or, I don't know, a bank account that doesn't show the right amount. These kinds of decisions...

PA 48:06 Or a transcript from university that didn't exactly accord with our...

EHdK 48:10 Or a misspelt name? There's a lot of discrepancies between official documentation and then, for example, a birth certificate and a passport might not have the same name. That's not the fault of the individual whatsoever. But it's something that then can have an impact down the line. So, I find that very interesting. The idea around this move towards...move from paper systems to digital systems but also that lack of human interaction and that lack of personal...lack of rapport, basically. So, what impact do you think that is having? I have asked this question earlier but maybe now's a good time to come back to it on British diplomatic relations then on how people see the UK. What kind of impressions they get of how we treat immigrants and how we treat even our own citizens.

PA 49:08 There were always refusals before. We mustn't underestimate this. So, it's not very nice refusing people visas but you have to do it sometimes if they simply don't...

EHdK 49:19 What were some of the grounds you refused people on?

PA 49:22 The grounds for refusal are usually quite flimsy in themselves. It was always a double negative..."I am not satisfied that you do not intend to leave" You know...So, it would be...I've actually helped people while I was in the UK to appeal against visa refusals. And, funnily enough, the person was Jamaican. One of the grounds was: "This person's family has a history of immigration to the UK..." so they suggested...There is hardly a Jamaican family that doesn't have a history of immigration to the UK. So, to use that as a reason I just pointed out I didn't feel it was right and was throwing the kitchen sink in. And we got that one. It was a friend of my brother's as it happened. That kind of thing. But it sounds terrible really when you have to try to tell people it's got nothing to do with us. If you're a diplomatic mission and you're getting a whole series of people. And this was a Chevening scholar, don't forget. But there are others who just come in crying their eyes out. I've been refused. Why? They don't say. And all they get is this rather strange reason.

EHdK 50:38 That doesn't happen anymore, right? Because now people are turned away?

PA 50:43 Yes, essentially, they're just told they've been refused. And they will get a letter saying why.

EHdK 50:48 But there's no, there's basically no way of challenging that?

PA 50:55 You can always appeal but the grounds for appeal are always being narrowed down. I don't think you can appeal a visit visa, for example. And an appeal does take a long time. People will be better off trying again to apply to the whole thing again.



EHdK 51:12 Well, I think that's a really interesting discussion we've had today. I've enjoyed learning about not only your time as High Commissioner, British High Commissioner to Belize, but also your role in Saint Lucia, in Malta and in other contexts. And I think the immigration picture as well is something that's really fascinating because of the ins and outs of what you were doing. But you always worked in immigration for the Foreign Office, you said? Did you have any dealings with the Home Office?

PA 51:40 Yes, we did. Because it was kind of half and half. It was a joint Home Office/Foreign Office thing.

EHdK 51:46 What was the relationship like with the Foreign...with the Home Office?

PA 51:50 [laughs]. We always thought that the Home Office immigration service people were far too harsh. And I could tell you some stories but I don't know them first-hand...it was not very nice people being sent out to go through three years without issuing a visa, that kind of thing. But these are apocryphal. And so there was an element of that. The Home Office used to go to places like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan where they had major immigration centres that the Foreign Office would do them in the smaller places.

EHdK 52:25 I'm also asking this question for the benefit of our listeners but what is the difference then administratively between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as it was back then, and the Home Office? What different functions do they occupy?

PA 52:43 They are completely different organisations. The Foreign Office staffs embassies, High Commissions abroad. Where there are major immigration centres, you will find that a lot of the staff are then Home Office officials from the old immigration service as it was Border Force, I guess, as it now is. And they do most of the visa work there. It used to be half and half. Now, it's very much...most of it is done by Home Office staff who are sent abroad attached to a High Commission or an embassy. Not part of the Foreign Office although they are diplomats for the purpose of issuing or not issuing visas.

EHdK 53:31 And how does some upper management in the Home Office view the...how did they view the FCO staff and vice versa?

PA 53:40 Well, I assume that just as we thought the Home Office staff were a bit too harsh, they thought the Foreign Office were a bunch of people all prepared to do anything for good relations with the host government. But none of us...I don't know anybody that would deliberately issue a visa to somebody that didn't deserve it. I think it was where you drew the line of deserving. I mean, they were professionals in the Home Office, they knew their stuff backwards. As did we. And they used to have to take some difficult decisions on family reunifications and those kinds of things. That was an underlying tension but everybody used to get on.



EHdK 54:21 And you mentioned, earlier you were talking about soft power. Do you think now the changes to the ways in which we're processing visas and dealing with people's requests? Do you think that's affected British diplomacy in any way? Do you think there's been a shift? I say this because in an earlier interview with another High Commissioner, Arthur Snell, he was quite adamant that this has taken away a lot of the kind of...not just the diplomatic rapport that High Commissioners have had in the past. But it's also taken power away in terms of Britain's standing overseas. Because if anybody has an issue with a visa or if anybody needs to get a question answered or if they need...they're seeking some kind of guidance, they're turned away.

PA 55:25 No, I think it's impossible to say anything else. It's out of your control. If I'm sitting in Belmopan, or wherever, and there's a visa problem, I can do nothing about it. They can come and ask me and I can then relay that to...I mean, if the prime minister were to ring me up and say, "Issue my son a visa." Not that it's likely to happen. In the old days, you would have told him you would look into it. Now, you've got the choice. Do you say, "Oh, it's nothing to do with us Prime Minister?" Or do you try and get in touch with your colleagues in Miami or Panama? Or wherever it is you are in? And if the answer's no, it's down to you, you know. That will sour relations. I think in the old days, you could explain things to them a lot better. So, making it more rigid, more rigidly IT-based, has taken away a lot of this. These are intangible. Soft power in essence is intangible. And I'm not sure that intangible works anymore. For the government. They want to see results now.

EHdK 56:40 And statistics. Okay, well, thank you so much for your time today. Is there anything else that you would like to say as part of this interview?

PA 56:48 No, not really. It's just a fascinating subject the Windrush. Worrying at the same time and I hope it can get cleared up because there's some real people have been hurt by this and it's not their own fault.

EHdK 57:05 Okay, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

[END OF AUDIOFILE].