VICTORIA DEAN INTERVIEW

Key:
EHdK: Dr Eve Hayes de Kalaf (Interviewer)
VD: Victoria Dean (Respondent)

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EHdK 00:03 I'm here today with Victoria Dean who is the former British High Commissioner to Barbados and was also non-resident High Commissioner to Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines from 2013 until 2016. So, firstly, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview today. I'd be very interested in learning about your career as a diplomat and your timeline up until you began working as British High Commissioner.

VD 00:43 Absolutely. Well, look, thank you for having me. Thank you for inviting me. I joined the diplomatic service a little bit after university in the year 2000, I think. And I spent about 18 years as a diplomat. And as is traditional in the British diplomatic service, I did a wide and wild variety of things in that time. And, in fact, for me, one of the things that I enjoyed most about the service is that there isn't really a specialist focus although that has started to emerge more recently, I would say. So, I started my career working on issues through the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] principally in the Balkans and in the Caucasus which was completely new to me. I'd never been there. I had never worked on it before. A real baptism of fire both in the region in, kind of, post-conflict issues and in how multilateral organisations can be at their best and their worst. The OSCE is always the multilateral organisation that everybody forgets about because it's neither OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] nor the UN [United Nations] and we used to joke about the fact that our office was on a mezzanine between two floors. So, we literally were a forgotten organisation! And then I went to serve at our embassy in Paris. So again, wildly different to the thing I'd been doing in the first instance. I did a variety of things there including I went on secondment to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs where I, six months in, found myself as speechwriter to the new French foreign minister which again was a bit of a wild experience for a British diplomat certainly. And then I worked on justice and home affairs issues in our embassy in Paris which I loved and is not what we think diplomats do. But actually diplomats do a lot of things that aren't pure foreign policy. And then I went to our mission in Brussels back in the days when we were a member of the EU, I did a number of jobs during the UK's presidency of the European Union which was a particularly interesting time because Britain was riding high in the EU at the time. That feels very, very different, obviously, to recent years and certainly where we are now in terms of the relationship. I then went to Washington. So, I'd sort of done Paris, Brussels, Washington,

the big three, if you like. I think if you care about the world and diplomacy, those are three environments to really understand.

EHdK 03:19 You were head of the political team in Washington. What did that entail?

VD 03:29 We have political teams in every embassy around the world and the job is to understand the political movers and shakers. What's happening. What might happen. And what might it mean for Britain. So not to express a view on the politics but to really understand. And in the US, to understand both sides of the story because there are only really two in a system like the American one. And to build relationships with future stars or prominent players who might not be obvious. So, in a way, it's about thinking about the next wave rather than engaging with the existing administration.

EHdK 04:01 And then you went on to the deputy head of Africa policy?

VD 04:06 I did a brief stint working in our Africa department principally at the time on the Somali crisis.

EHdK 04:12 Was that here in London? And then you did a little bit of work in strategic finance, as I understand?

VD 04:20 I did which is a crazily important job. And yet it looks like the most boring thing on my CV because it's about negotiating with the Treasury, the future funding arrangements for the Foreign Office and its network of embassies overseas. And so, the strategic question is, how much money are you going to need to run your network and deal with crises and conflicts over the next five years? Which is an impossible question to answer because you have no idea that Ukraine is going to kick off in the way that it did, or Afghanistan would become the diplomatic story and crisis that it did. So, you're sort of trying to juggle and then negotiate with the Treasury.

EHdK 04:53 That would also mean that in terms of areas that were being deprioritised as well. So, seeing where the cash flow was going and where the priorities were going in terms of investment from the UK. And then, I believe, you were head of…director, is that correct? What did that entail?

VD 05:19 In the old days before Brexit, all domestic European policy was run out of the Foreign Office, plus bilateral relationships with European countries. And so, the Directorate did both of those things. We divided it roughly into two. So, my fellow director took half the European countries, and I took the other half. And then we took half the issues each. And that's really strange because, in a way, you're spending quite a lot of time with other government departments in the UK thinking about farming policy or fisheries quotas and things like that that are, again, really not foreign policy. But you're the coordinating body for

EU policymaking decisions and at the same time doing some pure diplomacy which is managing and owning our relationships with European countries.

EHdK 06:04 How did you then come to your post as British High Commissioner? How did that come about? Did it come out of the blue or was it something that you felt you were transitioning towards in terms of the direction your career was taking?

VD 06:21 It was the job I desperately wanted, and I fought very hard to get it because in many ways, I wasn't an obvious candidate. So, having spent the time that I had in the Foreign Office, I'd done as I think I said to you just now, some of the big stuff. I had done mega embassies. I'd been in Washington, Paris and Brussels where the world pays attention. British government ministers are visiting and travelling all the time. There's all sorts of levels of engagement between the UK and each of those countries or those organisations. And the embassy, or the mission, is a part of that and a facilitator. But I really wanted to go and do pure bilateral diplomacy in a place where there's much less attention. You know, the prime minister doesn't turn up every other week for a summit or a meeting or a handshake. And, therefore, where me and my team were it. We were Britain's relationship with that country or that region. Now, that sometimes might be due to doing it in a very small country which it did. But I wanted to do it in a small country, or indeed, a set of countries because I feel very firmly that I was the British High Commissioner to the set of seven Eastern Caribbean countries even though we weren't physically present in all of them. They are strategically interesting and complicated. So, they are middle income countries in most cases but right on the edge of that. And there's plenty of development issues, poverty, risk, etc. They have an affinity with the UK and also a huge problem with the UK. And that's a fascinating, important, delicate balancing act. They are small island developing states [SIDS]. So, they are at huge risk to economic and environmental changes around the world. So, they use this phrase in Barbados a lot that, you know, if England sneezes, Barbados gets a cold and all this kind of thing. So, this sort of phenomenal knock-on effect. And they have this complex and fascinating history and culture of their own. They have terrible infrastructure. And yet, weirdly, Britain knows them as these fabulous holiday destinations. And I found that whole mix intellectually interesting. And then there are a couple of other things that kind of don't crop up so much. But there is a huge drugs transit problem through the region that directly affects the UK. Increasingly, I think we were and still are seeing Russian and Chinese influence in the region being bought up a little bit. And the UK doesn't have nor ever would just go and splash its cash around in order to buy influence. So how do you run counter to that? All of that made me think this will be a strategically interesting job probably beyond what people think when you first say what do you do for a living? Oh, I'm the British ambassador to the UK to Barbados. They think you're on the beach all the time.

EHdK 09:21 Thank you. So, you were based in Barbados where there is a High Commission. I was recently at the High Commission there which is an enormous

building. Where was the diplomatic representation and a physical presence of an office?

VD 09:38 So at that time, and it has changed since, we had our hub mission run by me and my team in Barbados, as you said. We had an office in Saint Lucia. And that was it. We then had honorary consuls who we chose as basically volunteers. Often British, not always, who could be on hand for particular things on each of the other islands. And then we had to do clever, creative diplomacy to be present and show up in those places. I spent a lot of time on small LIAT aircraft visiting the other islands and so did my team. But we were not…we didn't have a permanent presence in anywhere other than Saint Lucia, but I then oversaw a couple of other missions, including our mission in Trinidad and Tobago where we had a permanent office and in Georgetown, Guyana.

EHdK 10:30 How large was the team that you were managing and what took up the bulk of their focus and their time?

VD 10:37 So, the size of the team waxes and wanes a little bit. Just under 100. And that ranged from kind of classic embassy engagement team if you like, where the job was to understand what's going on in the region, meet and know the politicians, meet and know the journalists and engage with them on the issues that matter to the government of the day, British government, of the day. A large consular team given the number of British nationals visiting or living in Barbados and the region. And the number of Barbadian and other nationals wanting to visit, travel, spend time, money, etc in the UK. And quite a big burden on the consular team, actually, given the number of visitors. So, although the region is pretty low in crime, we still had a whole host of problems that occurred.

EHdK 11:37 Such as?

VD 11:40 Rape, murder, theft, victims of crime, perpetrators of crime. So, in both directions, there's a lot of prison visits. Because if a British national commits a crime and is imprisoned overseas then it's the consular team's responsibility.

EHdK 11:55 Drug trafficking as well?

VD 11:5 Not actually on the time that I was there. Some of that in other parts of the Caribbean but I didn't actually have any particular cases of that in my time.

EHdK 12:07 How much of your day-to-day consisted in - you've already talked about Trinidad and Tobago and also Guyana - did you have travel, for example, to Jamaica, typically, or to other parts of the Caribbean?

VD 12:20 The British government has a large team on the ground in Jamaica. Probably the largest in the region, actually. And so, they ran their own show. We were all in touch. And

the sort of network of fellow High Commissioners or ambassadors in the region spent quite a lot of time being virtually in touch and sharing some kind of common issues and themes. But I never set foot in Jamaica.

EHdK 12:44 You would host an annual get together of High Commissioners of the Caribbean, is that right?

VD 12:48 We kicked that off in the time that I was there. I think I think we did the inaugural one. And, I assume, in fact I'm fairly sure, it still happens. I think I saw a photo of it on a former colleague's Facebook page recently. So, yes, and I think they probably have started having calls, virtual meetings monthly or something in between those actual in-person annual gatherings.

EHdK 13:14 And was there anything that came up in conversations with your colleagues who were based in the region? Things that you had in common that you shared and other areas that maybe weren't very specific to kind of the Eastern Caribbean to your very unique role let's just say?

VD 13:35 So, yes, I think there were lots of common themes around the work that we were doing as British representatives in the region. And they varied from, if we're really honest, moaning about not enough attention from London or not enough funding from DFID [Department for International Development] or not enough Chevening scholarship places or whatever it might be. And trying to, kind of, come together creatively to make more of an impact back in London as a collective group of High Commissioners to challenges and difficulties in just operationally doing the job. I had a role as the representative to both CARICOM [Caribbean Community] and the OECS [Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States]. So, I was often seeking views from my colleagues in order to ensure I was accurately representing their issues, concerns, etc. I do think there are also things that were very specific. So, if you're in Jamaica at the time, there was a huge amount of talk about the building of a private prison that the UK Government would fund, etc. There were no proposals to do that in my bit of the Caribbean. It just it didn't come up but if you were in Jamaica, that was a huge issue at the time and a huge issue therefore for my fellow High Commissioner.

EHdK 14:47 I'm interested in Britain's role and its interaction with CARICOM and the OECS. I recently interviewed David Comissiong who is the Barbados ambassador to CARICOM. I'm still trying to understand what kind of engagement, interactions and discussions the UK had and where it sees its role.

VD 15:16 I mean, on the one hand, I think the UK has no role in CARICOM. It is the organisation of Caribbean States, quite rightly. It's a mess. It hasn't quite worked out what it's for or what the rules of the road are. And you can sort of see plenty of parallels with other organisations. The UN, the EU etc. Until you decide what voting rights are, what power or

place the organisation has, it's a bit of a talking shop and ditto with the OECS. So, I am a little bit sad for CARICOM and the OECS that they haven't yet found a way to be really valuable additional regional bodies for that region. A region which really needs a voice. And really, because we're talking about mostly very small countries, that shared voice ought to be really important. So, in a way what the UK or the US or any other external country has to do with that is you're invited to kind of share some views as an observer. The theory should have been that every once in a while, there would be issues that all or enough CARICOM members shared. That they wanted to talk to the UK about and couldn't. And maybe they would do it through that. I mean, if we're honest, that was weak, but I think I think that's the intention. And that's the theory. But I didn't see it working effectively. And from a UK perspective, it was a kind of nice, diplomatic thing to do. It was quite a useful way to go and see the leaders of lots of Caribbean countries in one go in one place. But very little beyond that. Which is a shame.

EHdK 16:56 For many decades, the UK has been deprioritising the Caribbean in terms of a diplomatic interests, economic interests. I'm quite interested in your financial experience of that and the repositioning of priorities within the region and beyond. What can you tell me about where the Caribbean lies in terms of its importance with the UK Government? Has that changed or shifted in the time that you were in your role?

VD 17:39 I'm five years out of the Diplomatic Service…six years out of the Diplomatic Service now. So, my knowledge, in that sense, is outdated. At the time that I got interested in the region and applied for the role and then moved out there exactly what you've said was very clear to me, that the UK had deprioritised the Caribbean. Perhaps for understandable reasons. There's only so much money and resources and people to go around. And this is a very small region and quite far flung. My argument at the time was that we were losing influence because of that deprioritisation unnecessarily because it doesn't take a huge amount of resource or time or effort to get a lot out of the Caribbean given that kind of natural affinity for the UK and shared history and tendency to have colleagues, relatives, friends, your diaspora, etc. And so, actually, when I pitched for the job, which for a long time had been done by end of career diplomats, and always by men, I said, “You need to modernise the relationship with the region. And one of the ways you do that is to send someone like me and start to build a slightly more modern agenda.” I think they had a go at that with people like myself and a few other colleagues in the region. I'm not sure that the view has massively shifted. We did have some successes. So, in the time that I was there we delivered the first visit of a serving prime minister to the region for absolutely ages. We brought David Cameron to Grenada and it was fabulous. I mean, he had a huge impact, as you can imagine, in a tiny country like that, a serving British Prime Minister turns up.

VD 19:22 Was that at the same time he visited Jamaica?

VD 19:26 Yes. So, I fought really hard that if he was coming as far as Jamaica, he needed to come to one of the Eastern Caribbean states to see a different version, to hear a different story, to show up differently. Off the back of that visit, colleagues and I were able to argue because it's always the way for prime ministers coming, they are going to have something to announce, right? We knew that. We know how the world works. So, we were able to argue for a doubling of the aid budget and a doubling of Chevening scholarships. Which was fabulous. Quite often when you're a diplomat or a civil servant, you want to engineer a ministerial or prime ministerial visit. Not because of the gladhanding down on the day but because of what you can often argue for what comes as part of it. So that felt like quite high watermark and very promising. I think leaders in the Caribbean haven't always played their part either in ensuring that they stay on the radar of the UK and UK Government in the right way, if I'm being really frank.

EHdK 20:27 This comes to my question then about the High Commissioners. The Caribbean High Commissioners who are based in the UK. What interactions did you have? Did you have any engagement?

VD 20:39 Yes but because I chose to, not because I needed to or they needed me really, if I'm honest. So, I mean the diplomatic service for these countries is very, very different. It's tiny. There often isn't a diplomatic service fully fledged. So, the big ambassadorships or High Commissionerships, London, the US, Canada, etc will often go to a well-known individual in the community or somebody close to the prime minister or something that. There is a very different system. And you quite rarely have career diplomats in those roles. And they have very, very small embassies or missions. I got to know them by choice. But they have very different roles, right? You're not exactly competitors but their job is to ensure Barbados gets a hearing in the UK. And my job is to ensure the UK gets a hearing in Barbados. They're not pushing the same agenda items, haven't got the same set of constituents and you haven't got the same audience. It's the same job and yet it's a wildly different job.

EHdK 21:39 Let's talk about the Windrush scandal. You were High Commissioner, as you said at the start of this interview, from 2013 to 2016 which was the time that Theresa May was rolling out her hostile environment policies and was also close in the build-up to when the scandal erupted during the CHOGM [Commonwealth Heads of Government] meeting in 2018. I know that was a little bit after your time but it would be very helpful, I think, for us to understand not just the conversations that were taking place at that time but also the changes in terms of how the High Commission was interacting, for example, with British nationals who were making, who needed documentation, or were applying for, I don't know, passports, or needed a birth certificate and these kinds of things. I just would really like to know what was happening at the bureaucratic and institutional level. But also, if there was anything

there…maybe the picture that we're building, if there's something we're missing there in terms of what was actually happening for the point that when we got to 2018, the scandal erupted in such in such a big way.

VD 23:07 Yeah. So, on the one hand, I would say as the High Commissioner in region, you had almost nothing to do with it. You weren't part of the story. It wasn't sort of obvious to us because we were in region. We were trying to pursue the UK's agenda in region around drugs, investment services, environment, those sets of things. And we weren't really looking at the story the other way as it were, so going into the UK. I mean, I had all sorts of frustrations with the Home Office and Visas UK and all that kind of thing. Because, actually, when you think about people's interaction with a High Commissioner or an embassy is usually that, right? I need my passport, I need my child's birth certificate authorised, etc. It's the only kind of front-of-house service provided. And yet, a lot of the tools to deliver that were taken away from us, frankly, long before I got there in 2013. And they were being outsourced in various ways. And, really, I was just almost endlessly, the team and I were asked things like, when is my passport going to be ready? How do I get my visa? I sent my documents off two weeks ago, I haven't had an update. Why don't you know what's happening? With this pretty weak answer which was we don't know what's happening. It's nothing to do with us. It's outsourced. It's done somewhere else. I can't even remember where it was outsourced to.

EHdK 24:38 When I interviewed Arthur Snell, he was saying that the paperwork from Trinidad and Tobago was being outsourced to Washington. I don't know if there were different areas. I know that there are also visa processing centres. I think the more important thing is to note that documentation was being sent elsewhere.

VD 25:02 It never came to us. It didn't come to us to be checked, authorised or stamped and then sent on through some clever internal mail system or anything. The visa one in particular I remember people could make an appointment with the visa processing team who would visit the island once a month. Or it may not even have been that frequent. And we wouldn't even know how to help people book an appointment or what happened if you turned up late. The meeting would happen in a hotel in town not at the High Commission. I mean, it couldn't have been more separate and at arm's length I guess is what I'm saying.

EHdK 25:35 Did you have people who were living in Barbados who were either of British nationality but of Caribbean descent who were having issues in terms of trying to access…either physical documentation or access information about how to go about applying for a passport?

VD 26:00 We used to get lots and lots of questions about…Passports we could do. Emergency passports we could do but visa or longer-term status or rights to work or any of those things.

EHdK 26:16 Emergency passports tend to go to holidaymakers who have lost their documents.

VD 26:22 Exactly. I'll be honest with you. At the time, it didn't strike me as a particularly elevated or unusual level. It was part of the course of normal business that people were trying to get things done or get their passports or get access. And in any embassy I've either served in or known or visited or looked after in some role, this is one of the most challenging services to provide. And everything from the system is bad. To we process it wrong. To people turn up with the wrong set of documents for the fourth time in a row. So, it didn't strike me as any more or less challenging than in the normal course of business that I'd seen elsewhere.

EHdK 27:00 If people needed any kind of information they would be told, go online and have a look at what documents are available. Or was there any outreach or kind of efforts to help facilitate that process? I say this because the Jamaican authorities [Passport. Immigration and Citizenship Agency, PICA] were recently in Birmingham and London and they did kind of…it was bit of a passport roadshow, really, to help people - Jamaicans who are now settled in the UK and their relatives - access their documents and be able to make a claim to Jamaican nationality. Which I thought was really interesting to see how open and how receptive they were to giving people the information that they needed. So, I was there with Andrew Wynter who was the person in charge of that whole process. And it was fascinating to see how that works. And then to compare that to the Home Office's response in the UK to people who were trying to get information and trying to either know what was happening with their documents or how to get help which was very much part of the hostile environment response.

VD 28:15 There are two bits to your question. On that comparison you've just drawn, I'd say they are very different things, actually. And if you are a small island in the Caribbean experiencing massive population loss and brain drain, and people, often for economic opportunity, and they're not coming home, you have a real interest in trying to persuade them to rekindle with their country of origin and help them to get their nationality.

EHdK 28:46 To invest their pensions, buy land, come home.

VD 28:49 So I think there are different motivations. And if you're a small state losing your bright young people who are going elsewhere…

EHdK 28:59 When I was in Jamaica, one of the motivations that was flagged to me was that post-Brexit people in the UK don't want to be in the UK.

VD 29:07 And there may be more reason to go home. Yeah, absolutely. I think they're very different setups. I'm not sure that we can read…the openness on one side but they've got

particular motivations. And then, as you describe it, closed on the other side but with different motivations. I tell you what we did have. We had a thriving consular team. They were the best staff in my embassy, and they were open every day. And there was 24-hour helpline, and they would answer or try to help with any inquiry whether that was something that they could or couldn't do something about. And as I said, a lot of stuff was taken out of our hands, and they just couldn't answer but they would try. They would try and push people in the right direction, give them the right phone number to answer, etc. And they would provide advice if somebody came in thrusting a bit of paper and saying this is the thing that I think I've got that demonstrates something, they would try to help them. But they weren't empowered or equipped to do so. But they would always try and help. And we got every type of inquiry. For example, they wouldn't be the decisionmakers on an issue like, is this the right bit of paper? Or do you think my application will get through? They can't say yes or no. It's not their job. They're not skilled. They're not the decisionmaker. But would they help somebody by saying, this scrappy bit of paper that you've got probably isn't going to be enough. Can you get this? How about some bank statements? Whatever it might be, they would always try and help and guide because if you're in that consular profession, you are the sort of person that wants to help. But they're not the decisionmakers and so they will be doing that out of kindness rather than tasked to do so.

EHdK 30:54 Did you receive visits from the Home Office? In-country visits? Because I know that they sometimes do.

VD 31:01 They do quite often do that. It depends which bit of the Home Office. I don't think we had any particular Home Office visits. But we had a big National Crime Association [Agency] team out there. We had quite a big financial fraud and customs team out there. We had a big sort of drug squad team out. I think what you mean is the sort of immigration and nationality part of the Home Office. No, I didn't see.

EHdK 31:32 Okay. I've been putting the focus a bit more on Barbados. But what about the other areas that you worked in? Was there anything that came to your attention in terms of either people's issues over accessing documents? Particularly if there wasn't a High Commission to actually to go to? What were people's choices there, for example? I don't know if Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had any representation. So, what would somebody from there at the time do in order to access these services?

VD 32:17 Tell me which services you mean.

EHdK 32:20 For example, if somebody wanted to apply for British passport, how would they go about doing that?

VD 32:27 So they would apply online which is the same as somebody would do in Barbados or in Trinidad where there happens to be an office. So, all of it moved to online in the time

that I was there. I suppose the difference is you could come to a physical building in Barbados and ask for some advice or say will this photo count? Or, I don't know what, but in the same way as in the UK, unless it's emergency circumstances, really, all apply for our passports online. The same was true overseas. So, I would argue that, in reality, the service was perhaps no different. But I think not having a place to go and not having somebody you can consult was a huge problem. And I was very struck that post-Brexit or post the Brexit referendum, rather than post-Brexit actually being executed, one of the things that Boris Johnson did was open a number of additional embassies, right? Several of which were my little bit of the Caribbean. So, there are now offices. You would have to check because it was after I'd resigned and left. So, I'm fairly sure there is a permanent office now in Antigua. I think there's still nothing in Dominica. I'm pretty sure there's something in Saint Kitts and in Grenada.

EHdK 33:44 Okay, so there's now at least kind of processing offices or somewhere that people can go to?

VD 33:49 They're still not processing offices for passports or documents because that's not really what the Foreign Office does. But they are on the ground, permanent representations. Representatives doing a smaller version of what an embassy does.

EHdK 34:04 Okay. Thank you. That's really helpful to get an idea about what services are accessible to people. Do you think it makes a difference that there's a physical representation?

VD 34:16 Yes, I do. I really do.

EHdK 34:18 In what sense? I mean, even if the information that people are getting is not…even if they're not engaging with the decisionmaker, for example.

VD 34:24 I don't know if makes a difference to that. I think it makes a difference to Britain's presence, Britain's ability to engage.

EHdK 34:31 And Britain's diplomatic image, right?

VD 34:34 Absolutely. If you don't have an embassy somewhere, you're sort of saying I don't care about you enough to have one here. And that's okay. It's not right necessarily to spend British taxpayers' money on having staff and offices in every single part of the world just for the sake of it. There's a delicate balance to be found in should we be everywhere? Can we afford to be everywhere? Is it right to spend British taxpayers' money on that rather than a hospital? Really difficult judgement. But my experience of trying to do diplomacy, be present in a region, understand what was going on and understand the risks and the opportunities for Britain and Brits there without staff or physical presence on the ground…it's just harder.

EHdK 35:15 A huge difference between Barbados and Jamaica is also that Jamaicans really have to go through a whole…They have to overcome a number of obstacles to get a visa in their Jamaican passport to be able to visit the UK whereas people from…so Barbadians and in most…Is it all of the Eastern Caribbean?

VD 35:36 I think all of the OECS, yes. It was at the time that I worked there. [On 19 July 2023, just three months after this interview, the UK imposed new visa restrictions on all persons holding a Commonwealth of Dominica passport wanting to visit or transit the country].

EHdK 35:38 They can enter the UK because they're much smaller territories. Because there's not as much concern for overstayers. So, that dynamic between the Eastern Caribbean and Jamaica is very different and places all sorts of different expectations, basically, on citizens.

VD 35:56 Totally.

EHdK 35:58 …in terms of what they have to present. And I'm hazarding a guess, and please correct me if I'm mistaken in this, but again that affects the kind of diplomacy and international image and people's interactions because if they see the UK as being a welcoming place and a place where they can easily…they have family members and those kinds of transnational links that people have are much more accessible because they don't have to go through a lot of…

VD 36:25 So, Barbadians can sort of come and go as they please to the UK. If they wish to stay for a significant period of time, including for students, then you have to apply for a particular visa that allows you to stay. But really the sort of visa processing that I was being asked about was foreign nationals, neither Barbadian nor obviously British, who lived in the region who wanted to go to the UK and needed a visa. So, you might have a Brazilian or a Puerto Rican [nb: Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States and Puerto Ricans hold US passports] or as somebody who needed a visa to either go to or transit through the UK. So, it's a very different conversation than when you have it with Jamaicans in Jamaica who need to jump through hoops to get the right visa to go to the UK.

EHdK 37:08 That's really interesting. I think, also, in terms of the practicalities of it. For example, if somebody from Barbados who has a right to British nationality or to a British passport. Because they can enter the UK and if they're not trying to settle then it's much easier to apply for local document, a foreign document. Whereas in Jamaica that again is more of a challenge. So that's very helpful, I think, in terms of trying to understand some dynamics.

VD 37:42 It's a reminder that the Caribbean…there's no such thing as the region the Caribbean because they're all so wildly different in terms of their history, their status, their challenges and their relationship with their former colonial powers.

EHdK 37:57 Exactly. Okay. So, we've interviewed for this project…we've talked at length with Guy Hewitt, who, as you know, was the High Commissioner. In the UK, he was the Barbados High Commissioner. He's written extensively about the Windrush scandal. I was recently in Barbados as looking at a fascinating project that he and a number of his colleagues were a part of in terms of celebrating the Windrush generation and talking about British migration. And in one of his articles, he talks about this term "guerilla diplomacy" because he was with Kevin Isaac and with a number of other High Commissioner colleagues sat around the table at the CHOGM meeting. And it was really then that the issues around the Windrush scandal really kind of blew up. But also, he was really key. A central figure in demanding basically….

VD 39:12 He was, quite rightly, an agitator, a catalyst, a champion.

EHdK 39:17 I wondered what your relationship with him was in terms of professional relationships? And also maybe just some insight into what you found. How you heard about the scandal.

VD 39:34 So, in terms of Guy and Kevin, they were the two I knew most well. Guy and I actually were really quite friendly. My children were at the school his children had been at. Plus, if you've spent any time on a Caribbean island, you know that these are both incredibly small and incredibly friendly places. So, everybody knows everybody. And if you're even moderately famous like you're the British High Commissioner or you're Guy Hewitt then everybody knows who you are. We used to joke about having dinner parties where one day, I said, I'm going to host a dinner party where at least two people don't know each other. And I have been the cause of their coming together because what normally happens is you discovered they're all cousins or something(!) I think that Guy is wonderful and I think that he is an example of an unusual diplomat or a diplomat that you wouldn't get in a more traditional diplomatic service, actually, because he was an advocate for a number of issues. And he campaigned. He campaigned for Barbados to get a proper hearing. He, as you rightly said, agitated, raised the issue, raised awareness to bring awareness and knowledge of the scandal about but he fought quite hard around funding, around small island developing states (SIDS), around the arguments for small countries who have recently emerged into middle income status to not be forgotten. He argued on…oh what is this terrible name…there's a particular type of airline tax that kicks in. I can't believe I can't remember its name [Air Passenger Duty, APD]. Because this was such a big part of my llfe for a while!

EHdK 41:14 I remember attending a number of meetings on this in my old job. And it was such a big theme which never took off in the end did it?

VD 41:23 That was an example of something quite clever in the way the region went about it. And I don't know if they did the same thing on the Windrush because by then I'd gone and I really wasn't party to it. But they did come together on some issues like that like the airline taxes. Or on exemption from some of the rules that meant they couldn't receive funding in the way they used to when they were low-income countries. And there, they would kind of act together. Or, at the very least, the British government was hearing the same argument from lots of them over and over again whether or not they really coordinated, I don't particularly know. So, Guy I think is an exceptional person. An exceptional diplomat. He has a huge respect and affinity for the UK but also really knows how to use his voice and his platform. He was and still is a pastor, and, you know, the way he speaks is very compelling. And so, I think he was the right person for Barbados in that role and continues to be even though he's no longer in the job explicitly. And in that way, he was also very well connected in both the UK and Barbados and it makes all the difference. So, I thought he was wonderful. In terms of how I learned about the scandal. I was heartbroken. I was horrified. And I was ashamed.

EHdK 42:42 Were you shocked?

VD 42:46 No. No.

EHdK 42:48 Would you like to elaborate on that?

VD 42:50 I was shocked in the sense of, I actually can't believe that we've allowed this to happen. That we're now handling it so badly even once it's emerged. But I suppose I wasn't shocked because my anecdotal sense as well as often my policy experience when I was a civil servant, is that the Home Office is a place that likes to say no. And if no is a doable, easy answer that's what they will say. And I…now as an independent citizen and no longer a civil servant and no longer under any kind of restrictions, I think that that has got worse, not better. And so, I think a really interesting question for me is, why didn't that scandal open up the hood in a way that meant significant change has happened? Not only have we as a country not done a good job of addressing the awfulness that occurred through the Windrush scandal but it didn't lead to change, right? I don't see any evidence that it's led to better, more open policy or processes.

EHdK 44:02 A recent Human Rights Watch report just came out saying exactly the same thing. That the government has categorically failed in any efforts - if we can even say that there were efforts - to address the scandal or to properly compensate the people affected by it. The Wendy Williams report, for example, has also provided 30 recommendations that now Suella Braverman has decided to drop three of those recommendations, I believe, so they won't even be implemented. It is continuing. Where do you see this going?

VD 44:54 I don't know. I mean, the good news is the scandal came to light, right? And so, people affected have a genuine claim. And for those that can continue to have the energy to fight for their rights, there is no reason they shouldn't be heard and get what is due to them. The Home Office looks chaotic and badly led. And I think you see it in all sorts of things, including the small boat scandal, the ridiculous Illegal Migration Bill. Except I don't think they're looking to actually make things better. I think they're looking to score political points and say enough of the right things to the correct bits of their party in the run-up to an election. So, I suspect that we have no chance of seeing real change in the Home Office until the other side of an election whichever party were to win. And so, I'm not expressing a political opinion on which party but I don't think we will see change anytime soon. For me, there has always been a piece, actually, that I'm sure you think about and write about, about the broader understanding of Caribbean contribution to British history. I have children in British schools who know the only reason they know about the Caribbean, the only reason they know about slavery, the only reason they know about the sugar trade, the only reason they know how rich Britain got off of a tiny island like Barbados, is because we used to live there. And I was the British High Commissioner. And I'm not really sure that a stamp and a - beautiful though it is and I love it - statue in Waterloo Station is the answer. I think debate, conversation education, celebrating, commemorating, truly talking about those things matters.

EHdK 46:42 The sense that I got from my recent visits to the Caribbean is that the theme of reparations is becoming the big policy issue. I think the FCDO [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office] is more aware of this. [They are] starting to write reports about it and push for it behind the scenes. Whereas I think, really, in kind of the day-to-day in Britain and the British Parliament, it's just not getting through. And I find that fascinating in the sense that you were in the region and these kinds of conversations and debates were gaining momentum and now they've really kind of reached quite a high fever pitch. But were you to read the British tabloids, it is not something that - beyond certain communities and certain groups who this is such an important issue for - not being acknowledged. So, in your role in working in communications…maybe you could tell me a bit more about what you think about a) the debate itself and in terms of policy and how it's being discussed but also b) where you think it's going.

VD 47:59 I really don't know in terms of policy and where it's been discussed because we've been out fully out of government for six years.

EHdK 48:07 Who discussed it? Would it be the Caribbean?

VD 48:11 Oh, yes. Barbadians would raise it with me all the time, quite rightly. And I did not have a good answer. And I found that very difficult.

EHdK 48:21 Did you ever have any engagement with any community groups or activist groups?

VD 48:26 We did. Most of it in my time was done through Sir Hilary Beckles at UWI [University of the West Indies] who, I would argue, is the leading advocate and expert on this issue. And I find his concept of reparative justice rather than pure reparations, very interesting. And I spent a lot of time talking to, debating, arguing with him about it. And frankly being educated by him if I'm honest. What I found was I was sort of treading a line. I was trying to report that back to London and explain to them how difficult an issue this was. And there wasn't a huge amount of interest. Nobody quite said to me, just do what you need to do to make it go away. But it just to be clear, nobody ever used those words to me. But my sense was, London didn't know what to do and they weren't massively interested. And it would have been very hard for the Foreign Office to get a hearing on this amongst the other bits of government where they would need that.

EHdK 49:24 What you say completely resonates with the findings of the Wendy Williams report which is exactly that. It says, an institutional ignorance. There is a very limited grasp of Britain's colonial history. And it's not so much a lack of will to engage with it but it's just simply something, this historical forgetting, that needs to catch up and address some of these traumas

VD 49:50 And I have to say for me, that's why…and maybe this isn't a good answer. And certainly Hilary Beckles would say it's not a good enough answer. For me, the piece around recognition and education and knowledge is as important as the piece around cash. And I'm not saying one or the other. But I don't think this is a purely financial conversation. I guess it is what I mean. I find it still odd and embarrassing that we in Britain don't know or talk about or celebrate or commemorate or whatever the appropriate word would be…the role that these islands played in our country's success and history through very shameful ways. And I assume that's why we don't talk about it because we're all a bit embarrassed and British and, you know, look at the floor, because we don't want to talk about some of the awful ways in which we behaved. But I think that is not the way to go. And I think by pretending it didn't happen or looking the other way, we do everyone a disservice.

EHdK 50:52 I am conscious that, at the time you were leaving your post, but the role of Brexit in terms of its relationship to the Windrush scandal. Do you see any correlation there? Because I would imagine that in your meetings, it was obvious that the UK was really taking a much more nationalist stance. There were politicians who were being openly anti-immigrant. Was that filtering through and was that damaging the way that Britain was being perceived?

VD 51:36 Look, I left about a week after the referendum. So, I think we were still all slightly in shock. And don't forget that I was a representative of the British government. The British government were campaigning to remain. And right up until pretty much the last minute,

we're pretty confident that they would win that debate. And so, my instructions from London, which I duly carried out and which I happened to personally believe in anyway, were that of course Britain should remain, and the vote is going to go our way. And then overnight, I had to go on Good Morning Barbados and sort of literally turn on its head my statement that I'd been making for the weeks in the run-up.

EHdK 52:15 I'm trying to think about the timing. Was that around the time of Brexit as well when Cameron visited the Caribbean?

VD 52:26 That was slightly before. And also, we tried to make that visit about the Caribbean. And about shared issues and areas of interest and not really about UK politics. So, can I see a link between the two? Not necessarily, actually. I think Brexit is a whole world of pain and a history and story about campaigning and about tapping into emotions, which one campaign really succeeded in doing and the other didn't. I think it's too simplistic or read to say that Britain was becoming more nationalistic and Brexit showed that. I think there were always quite inward-looking elements of Britain. And they were sort of tapped into around this kind of sovereignty argument.

EHdK 53:21 I think my point was more the interpretation. How that was being interpreted, basically, as that was going on. As the campaign for Brexit was gaining momentum.

VD 53:29 Honestly, in the Caribbean it felt a million miles away. They're having a weird debate about that thing called Brexit. Why wouldn't they want to be part of the EU? Locals raised and the local government in Barbados raised concern with me that the UK had often been their gateway to the EU. And sort of a champion for the Caribbean within the EU and what might it mean for them to no longer has that.

EHdK 53:56 That's precisely what Arthur Snell was saying. As they were having conversations, the EU was making its visa regulations easier, making access for people from the Caribbean easier to enter the EU with the Schengen area and that the UK was going the other way. And that was definitely raising concerns when he was in Trinidad and Tobago.

VD 54:21 So again, Barbadians would have an automatic Schengen entry in the same way as they had an automatic UK entry. So that particular piece about access or ease of access didn't really come up? Bananas, rum, sugar. It was about trade and produce and access to markets. And just not having this…knowing that the UK had sort of perhaps traditionally or instinctively and often, I think, not as overtly as Caribbeans would have liked but had tended to be a voice for the Caribbean within the EU. And who would they rely on instead?

EHdK 54:58 Great, okay. As come to the end of the interview is there anything else you would like to add? Maybe that we haven't covered or anything you would like to say about your time working with the Foreign Office?

VD 55:12 I think the only thing I would say is that it would be worth talking to a number of…and I'm sure you have or your colleagues have…a number of the long-time Brits in the region. I think they have a really interesting perspective. And they have a very privileged position, right? British nationals who get to live in one of the most wonderful, welcoming, incredible countries in the world. But they've seen Barbadian governments, they've seen British governments. They've seen how some of this works from their perspective and I think they have a really interesting view. Most of them, frankly, were quite dissatisfied with me as High Commissioner because in the old days High Commissioners in Barbados used to host tea parties and British women's clubs and croquet on the lawn and all that kind of thing. And I just didn't think that was the job. And it was not what I was there to do. And so, we didn't do it. But, of course, that made me unpopular with a proportion of the community who still wanted and expected that were quite cross that I did.

EHdK 56:16 Great. Well, thank you ever so much for your time today.

VD 56:18 And thanks for having me.

[END OF AUDIOFILE].