



Interview: Andrew Fulton: The spy who eluded me

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THERE is something surreal about arranging to meet a spy. Rendezvous: Starbucks, Hillhead, west end of Glasgow. Time: 3.45pm. I'll be wearing a black coat and carrying a copy of that day's newspaper.

On the appointed day it's raining and I find myself standing in a sheltered doorway next to the underground station. It's not deliberate, but it feels so Orson Welles, particularly as I step out of the shadows to greet my interviewee...

Actually, Andrew Fulton, ex-diplomat and MI6 officer, is long since away from all that cloak-and-dagger stuff. He could tell some stories if he so wished, but he never will.

"There is hee-haw chance that I would write a book," he says. "I do not approve of those who do. If you have made a commitment you should stick to it." He waves a pointed finger in a slightly menacing way that suggests there'll be an unfortunate accident if anyone asks him again.

And so he has kept his counsel since retiring from the Foreign Service in 1999, bringing to an end a 30-year career that took him from war-torn Vietnam to Rome, communist-controlled East Berlin, Oslo, New York and finally Washington.

He worked through some fascinating times, "having great fun" and being part of history in the making. His favourite posting was Vietnam, 1969 to 1972, "the beginning of the end" for the Americans, the bombing of Cambodia and Watergate adding to President Richard Nixon's problems. Fulton was in his mid-20s, remembers his mission's helicopter being raked by bullets, and meeting his wife, a nurse from Cheltenham who helped develop a lifelong interest in horse racing.

What about East Berlin? City on the edge of the Cold War. Late 1970s, lots of posturing from both sides. How much more exciting does life get? He shrugs in the way a pop star might wonder at the fuss being made over playing to full houses every night.

"You did feel that this was where everything came together," he says in classic understatement. He witnessed the escapes and failed escapes over and under the wall, the East-West rhetoric and taunting, the ever-present armies of the four occupying nations. He brought up a young family in this schizophrenic city.

His daughters had to pass through Checkpoint Charlie - the infamous city crossing point - on their way to school each morning, flashing their passports at the grizzled border guards "who hated the way we just came and went".

He hesitates while he contemplates a period in history now gone. "They should have left Checkpoint Charlie as it was when the wall came down. As a memorial," he says.

He was a First Secretary, a middle-ranking embassy official, but he won't talk about what went on behind concealed windows in Unter den Linden. Official Secrets Act and all that.

So how much of his career was spent on actual espionage? He offers a long eyebrow-raised stare that says quite clearly: "Don't go there."

We move on. Last week he was appointed chairman of GPW, a small London-based firm of corporate investigators. So it's quickly back to spying. Does this involve snooping around company dustbins, intercepting illicit cargoes in high-speed chases?

He pauses for thought and appears to deflate. "More like enhanced due diligence," he replies, almost apologetically.

He detects a look of disappointment and offers a more tantalising prospect..." and advising companies about how to handle difficult regimes, how to protect their people and property in dangerous locations..."

Well, that sounds more like it.

"Actually, I won't be hands-on."

So there will be no leaping out of helicopters or dodging bullets in pursuit of counterfeiting gangs?

He smiles. "I'm too old for all that."

But surely you were hired for your sleuthing experiences? "I am doing the strategic guidance and opening doors. In fact, I'd say I was hired a lot less likely because of any spying experience, and more for my network of business contacts."

Drat! So who exactly is GPW?

"Three guys who worked for Kroll [a big investigations firm] who decided to set up a boutique looking at business intelligence."

It is a growing industry which blossomed in the 1970s and 1980s when kidnapping and ransoms of foreign workers and their families emerged as a threat to companies doing business overseas. Since the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, demand for improved safeguards for personnel, property and other assets has risen up boardroom agendas. It has infected the insurance industry, prompting tighter terms and conditions and impacting on premiums. Battles are also being fought in cyberspace as criminals attack companies electronically. The banks and the big four accountancy firms are working more closely with both the insurers and the security sector.

Fulton is already in the thick of this. Since leaving diplomacy for a career in business he has been Scottish head of Control Risks Group, one of the biggest investigations firms, until stepping down earlier this year to take up his new responsibilities. He was approached by GPW and was attracted to working with a small firm with big ambitions.

However, at 62 he is reducing his overall workload. The job will occupy him no more than two or three days a month, which fits in with his other roles as chairman of the Glasgow advertising agency Nation1, the management consultancy Proudfoot, and networking group the Scottish North American Business Council.

He still regards the SNABC as his "baby".

It is an affiliate to the British American Business Council, on whose board he also sits.

"After having one career, I am enjoying a second and I particularly like working with small companies," he says. SNABC is a private sector, not-for-profit body with no purpose other than to foster better trade relations and make introductions for those involved.

It is difficult, he admits, to assess its success or failure because it has no formal targets or objectives, but anecdotally he knows that its members derive enormous benefit from their participation.

It brings us inevitably to his views on the value of the recent Tartan Week jamboree in New York. The event prompted some strong words of condemnation from former Labour trade minister Brian Wilson, who called for it to be scrapped.

"I thought he went too far, though he makes some good points. It is about American Scots celebrating their connections, but each year more of the running seems to be made by the Scots going over there. I don't know where it goes from here. If VisitScotland thought it was worthwhile, then great. But if there is a lot of taxpayers' money spent then it has to be looked at rigorously. I think it is too long. Maybe it should be Tartan Long Weekend.

"I know they have tried to give it more of a business focus, but I have never heard any business people saying the focus of their marketing year will be Tartan Week. It has not captured the imagination of the business community to use it as a tool for marketing. I have not heard of anyone getting any success from it."

SNABC, on the other hand, is expanding its activities beyond the American east coast into Chicago, Florida and California's Silicon Valley.

Nor is this a British invasion into the US. Most of the British American Business Council's 3,500 member firms are American, which saves quite a sum on welcome packs.

Fulton says the organisation is fast gaining a reputation for lobbying in both Washington and London, though it has resisted employing high-profile protagonists in the form of, say, the CBI's director-general.

Fulton says he enjoys his "portfolio life" but cannot say how long he will continue working. "I would not blow the whistle the minute I am 65, but I will not go on any longer than I am useful to any of the companies I work with," he says.

So just like the mysteries of his days with MI6, it looks like he'll keep us guessing.