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## Sir John Coles

This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Sir John Coles on Tuesday, 2 November 1999.

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**MMcB:** “Could we start, Sir John, by talking about your entry into the Diplomatic Service after Oxford and national service, and so on. You went first of all to MECAS (Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies). How did that come about?”

**Sir John:** “Well, in the usual way, I was asked to choose a hard language when I went into the Foreign Office. I was already pretty interested in the Middle East when I was at Oxford, where I went in 1957. The place was still humming with the reverberations of Suez. There was a great deal of interest in the Middle East, and that’s an interest I pursued in the margins of studies at Oxford. But really, when I was asked to choose one of the “hard languages”, as defined by the Foreign Office, Arabic seemed a fairly natural choice. So that’s what got me to MECAS.”

**MMcB:** “Going back to Suez, what was your view about that?”

**Sir John:** “I don’t know how politically aware I really was. It actually happened when I was doing my national service and was at officer cadet school. The main thing I recall is that on the morning British troops went into Suez, the commanding officer at MONS assembled us all on the parade ground and told us that from that morning we ceased to be national servicemen, the war that had just begun would go on for ten years and we’d better get used to it. And, of course, a week later it was all over. I think that, really, from my vantage point within the Army I’m not sure, to be honest, that I had any clear views about Suez at that time.”

**MMcB:** “I think few of us did at that time. So you decided to choose Arabic as a result of that.”

**Sir John:** “Yes, but by the time I got to Oxford, I was becoming more conscious of the Middle East. I then certainly regarded Suez as a mistaken adventure. My interest in the Middle East developed, and so, as I say, I rather naturally chose Arabic.”

**MMcB:** “Did you feel that maybe we had been unfair to the Arabs?”

**Sir John:** “I thought that from the point of view of British interests in the Middle East, it was a foolish step to take. We alienated the Arab world in a way we had managed not to do for quite a long time. I think it was all based on a false appreciation of what Nasser really was and exaggerated comparisons between him and fascist dictators, etc. I think we just failed to understand what Arab nationalism was about at that moment.”

**MMcB:** “Did you cover Egyptian civilisation at MECAS?”

**Sir John:** “It wasn’t that sort of course. It was a language course, an extremely practical language course, and any study of Arab culture, civilisation, history had to be done in one’s spare time.”

**MMcB:** “I see. Did you do any of that?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, then and later as I lived in the Middle East quite a long time when you add it all up. I became quite interested in all aspects of the Middle East.”

**MMcB:** “And then you went on to Khartoum as a Third Secretary, so the language was put to some use.”

**Sir John:** “Then and later, yes. Khartoum at the time . . . . Sudan had long been independent and the Sudanese establishment was largely English-speaking, so it was one of those places where you had to struggle a bit to use your Arabic, certainly within the capital, but outside you could probably use it. But in other posts later, I used Arabic much more.”

**MMcB:** “When you were in Khartoum did you discover, or notice, any signs of unrest among the Sudanese, or of any sort of anti-Christian feelings among the Muslim elite?”

**Sir John:** “Well, it so happened, that when I went there in 1962, things were fairly quiet in the south. I mean it was still a disturbed area, but you could actually travel to the south in those days. I did a bit of that. But one was very conscious of the extremely deep divide between the northern Arab Muslim Sudanese and the southerners. It was very rare to meet a northerner who really had any understanding of the south or any feelings of tolerance. The divide was really very deep. But you talk about unrest. It was, if you look at Sudanese history, an unusually stable period. There was a military government, quite an efficient military government, benign to an extent. The Sudan was doing quite well in my years there, certainly in contrast with what has happened since.”

**MMcB:** “Yes. They still export. It’s still basically a rich agricultural country.”

**Sir John:** “Rich would be going a bit too far, but they did have a successful cotton exporting industry at the time.”

**MMcB:** “That was a nice introduction to Foreign Office business in the Middle East. You came back to the Foreign Office, later the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in 1964, and you were there for four years. So what were you doing at that stage?”

**Sir John:** “That was all in one of the two United Nations departments. There were two in those days, and this was the so-called United Nations Economic and Social

Department. I had a desk which looked after a number of, on the face of it, rather disparate subjects, namely human rights, women's affairs, statistics, social development, population, and I think there was one other. The reason why these apparently disparate subjects were all added together was because the United Nations Economic and Social Council had six functional commissions dealing with those subjects, and it was thought convenient for one desk officer to deal with the lot. The one I missed out was narcotics. And so I dealt with all those subjects for getting on for four years."

**MMcB:** "So it was a good grounding in politics and human rights, etc."

**Sir John:** "It was, but, looking back, it's really rather remarkable. I was really the only person in the Foreign Office dealing with human rights, and I can't say anybody else was very interested in it. We had a Labour government at the time, who initially declined to sign the UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which is an indication of how little priority was given to human rights. Contrast it with today, with a whole department dealing with it. It's very much in people's consciousness."

**MMcB:** "Yes indeed. It's a strange contrast. What did your work actually consist of?"

**Sir John:** "Each of these functional commissions dealing with all those subjects, had regular annual meetings, and sometimes other meetings in between, and my basic job was to prepare instructions for the British delegations to those meetings, and between meetings to work out policy on all the issues that arose. I used to go to the annual meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights, occasionally to one or two of the other meetings, but they were, on the whole, attended by experts. The basic work was really looking after British policy towards the functional commissions and instructing the Delegation."

**MMcB:** "Instructing the Delegation. Did you originate the instructions?"

**Sir John:** “I always originated them. Even in those days we were a briefing machine, and in a typical week I would write several briefs. They’d usually then be approved by the Assistant Head of Department, or the most important ones by the Head of Department. But actually, a lot of the work was done by me.”

**MMcB:** “And did you do it off your own bat, so to speak?”

**Sir John:** “I didn’t consult many others, except the delegations concerned because they often had the expertise. Typically, the United Kingdom missions in New York and Geneva. I would usually get their views in advance, and then build the brief on their views, where I agreed with them.”

**MMcB:** “Or argued them where you didn’t?”

**Sir John:** “That’s right.”

**MMcB:** “That’s excellent. And must be a first class introduction to the work of the Foreign Office.”

**Sir John:** “I think it was good training, yes.”

**MMcB:** “And then in 1968 you went, as Assistant Political Agent, to the Trucial Oman States in Dubai. What did you do there?”

**Sir John:** “Well, that was pretty atypical of Foreign Office work. You have to begin by noting the fact that, at that time in the Gulf, we had a series of special functions laid down by treaty or by custom, in that we looked after the foreign affairs and defence of those States. We also played quite a big role in the internal security. We had our own army, the Trucial Oman Scouts, which came under the political control of the Political Agency, where I worked, and we administered a number of things which the Rulers themselves didn’t want to administer, like the liquor licensing system, the arms licensing system, etc. It had a flavour of the end of empire about it, and I say ‘end’ because while I

was there, it became British policy to withdraw troops from the area by 1971. Our task, essentially, was to prepare the Trucial States for that transition as best we could by putting into place a political organisation, the Union of Arab Emirates, and handing over to local authorities the functions we had been carrying out. Now the Head of the Agency was the Political Agent, I was his Assistant, we worked together, I mean everything I have described I played some role in.”

**MMcB:** “Who did you hand over to? I mean, was it democratic or semi-democratic?”

**Sir John:** “No, nobody would claim it was democratic. We essentially handed over to the Rulers, who formed a sort of governing council of what became, in 1971, and what we still have, the Union of Arab Emirates. We were handing over, essentially, to that structure.”

**MMcB:** “Were they happy to have power handed over to them?”

**Sir John:** “Well, in a sense they were ambivalent. It was very difficult for any Arab to say, ‘No, we don’t want British troops to go’, because the presence of British troops was a sign of imperialism, and all the rest. Actually, most of those Rulers were very apprehensive at the thought that British troops would go, so I think their feelings were mixed, and I don’t think they were altogether happy to take over these powers. Certainly, they were very unready, unprepared, to do it. They had their own expertise in the trading relationships of the Trucial States: they ran all that with considerable skill. But they liked the British to do all the other things, and when it came to handing over the immigration system, I mean not only did we have to devise the law, but I actually remember making the rubber stamps, so that there was some means of putting visas into people’s passports. So you did everything from top to bottom.

There was also some big politics around. Everybody was very concerned about the future stability of the area when British troops had left. There were various subversive threats that had to be dealt with.”

**MMcB:** “From Persia?”

**Sir John:** “Well, no, I was thinking at that point more of what people called ‘radical Arabs’, or ‘northern Arabs’, as they were often called in the Lower Gulf. These were Egyptians, Iraqis, Syrians who were much more evolved politically than the people of the Trucial States. And there was a fear, and I don’t know how well-based, that there might be an attempt by radicals to change the system of government down there. I think it was often exaggerated. Of course, it hasn’t happened yet. We are nearly 30 years on.

But Iran was certainly very big in our calculations, and in particular, there arose during my time, the issue of the disputed islands, the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, which the Arabs claimed were theirs and the Shah of Iran claimed as his. And this was all exacerbated by, or intimately connected with, the discovery of oil. When I went to Dubai, oil had not been discovered. It was discovered while I was there, and one of the big issues that arose was off-shore oil concessions, because that immediately brought into question, boundaries, and this is where the two disputed islands come in. The prospect that there might be oil in or around those islands greatly exacerbated the claims and counter-claims of the Iranians and the Arabs.

I was involved in a complicated and quite dramatic episode when the Ruler of Sharjah, who claimed Abu Musa, unilaterally extended his territorial waters in order to lay claim to any oil that might be discovered in that area. Now this is technically quite complicated. This immediately provoked a very considerable crisis with Iran, and there was a severe danger that if companies working for Sharjah began to drill for oil in Abu Musa, the Iranians would take military action against them, and at a certain moment we actually had to deploy Royal Naval ships to prevent the Occidental Oil Company, who had a concession from Sharjah, drilling off Abu Musa. I was sent out with the ships as a



political adviser to prevent this happening. We had an extremely tense night when it wasn't at all clear that Occidental, owned by the formidable Dr Armand Hammer, was going to back down or not. In the end they did, and they moved their huge barge away, and a very considerable potential crisis was averted."

**MMcB:** "So this brought in the Americans?"

**Sir John:** "Well, it was an American oil company, but the American government was not really involved. I think at that time they still regarded the Lower Gulf as a matter they would like Britain to handle."

**MMcB:** "So that was four very interesting years."

**Sir John:** "Three really, three interesting and memorable years. I've always thought that not enough tribute has been paid to the creation of the United Arab Emirates, indeed, the general state in which Britain left the Gulf when our troops withdrew and our traditional treaty obligations were wound up. At the time, all the experts, whether in government or outside government, pretty well all of them were predicting a rapid decline in stability and subversion. And here we are, nearly thirty years later. Some of the Rulers are still there. All the same ruling families are there. It's been an era of very considerable prosperity and stability for the Lower Gulf."

**MMcB:** "A bit like Malaysia, isn't it? Another great success. Well, thank you. That was most interesting. I'm glad to have got in that point about the UAE. After Dubai, you came back to the Foreign Office, FCO rather, in 1971, and you were there for four years. What sort of job did you do on that occasion?"

**Sir John:** "Well, I didn't initially, if my memory is right, go to the Foreign Office, but to the Cabinet Office, where I worked on the Assessments Staff, where I was responsible for the Middle East. That was a new function. The Assessments Staff itself was pretty new. There had been a feeling that we needed central government machinery

that would produce co-ordinated inter-departmental assessments of international issues and the Assessment Staff was set up to do that. That was a useful experience. It brought me into very close contact with the MOD, and less contact with some other government departments, and I suppose that was my first experience of trying to produce well co-ordinated inter-departmental thinking. We weren't allowed to touch policy. The whole idea of the Assessment Staff was that its task was to assess and, to some extent, predict events and trends. But the policy response was still left to the individual departments. It reported, or rather worked for and serviced the Joint Intelligence Committee which met weekly and then produced a Red Book of assessments for the Prime Minister and Cabinet ministers."

**MMcB:** "So the Assessments Staff weigh up issues, produce an agreed line on something or other, but the policy remains with, say, the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office?"

**Sir John:** "Depending on the issue, yes. I mean, it's easier if you take a case. We wrote endlessly about the Arab-Israeli question. Were events leading towards another war, what were the implications of that for British interests, etc? That was our task. Having written our piece, it was for the Foreign Office and other departments to look at this assessment and decide what policy action needed to be taken. So that divorce was always maintained."

**MMcB:** "Whereabouts do the Assessment Staff sit?"

**Sir John:** "In the Cabinet Office."

**MMcB:** "And that's in Downing Street, in that complex which is not really all that visible."

**Sir John:** “It’s the bit that is hardest to see, that’s right. It’s in the right angle between Whitehall and Downing Street, and it’s behind the No.10 façade, so you’re quite right, there’s a sort of rabbit warren of offices back there.”

**MMcB:** “Are many people on the Assessment Staff?”

**Sir John:** “I don’t know what the present figures are. In my time, I can’t think what they were then, but I should think we had eight to ten desk officers doing assessments, and there was a Deputy Head and a Head of the Assessment Staff, who, in my time, was Sir Percy Cradock.”

**MMcB:** “Did they come in from other departments, besides the Foreign Office?”

**Sir John:** “Oh, yes.”

**MMcB:** “So you had Ministry of Defence people?”

**Sir John:** “Yes. The FCO and the MOD were most prominent in it, but occasionally there were people from other departments, and indeed, it was supposed to have a role in dealing with international economic issues as well, though I don’t think the Assessment staff was ever quite so prominent in that area as with the classical political field.”

**MMcB:** “Did you ever have serving officers of the Army or Navy or Air Force?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, we did. I had, working to me, a Wing Commander I remember when I was doing the Middle East.”

**MMcB:** “So you must have felt that you were really at the heart of things.”

**Sir John:** “Well, yes and no. You were certainly sitting in the centre and seeing a bit of the centre, but of course, you weren’t involved in policy, so that was the difference.

But I didn't stay there very long. The dates aren't very clear in my head, but there was a change of government."

**MMcB:** "In 1970, wasn't there? But you went there in '71. There was a change of government in '74. Mr Wilson came in."

**Sir John:** "Well, then I think what must have happened was that an extra minister was created in the Foreign Office, because in, I think it was, '73 - but I'll have to check the CV - I was suddenly whisked away from the Assessment Staff and began my first job as a private secretary. That was private secretary to a minister of state called Lord Balniel, who came from the Ministry of Defence. I then was a private secretary until I left London in '75. I worked first for Balniel and then, when the Wilson government came in, I worked for David Ennals, who was a Labour minister of state."

**MMcB:** "So you went out of Assessments into being private secretary and that's really more connected with the policy side of affairs, and the decision-making apparatus. Did you find that your background was helpful in that regard or were you simply a channel for decisions?"

**Sir John:** "Well, I was still fairly junior. One's main function as a private secretary was to make sure the minister got the best advice he could and saw the right officials at the right time, that kind of thing. I don't really think I intervened in policy advice very much. My background was of some use because both those ministers dealt with the Middle East about which I, by then, knew something. But they also dealt with areas about which I was very unfamiliar, like Latin America. I think, from the point of view of career development, it was helpful because it broadened my outlook beyond the Middle East."

**MMcB:** "And of course it also opened you up to the political world."

**Sir John:** “That’s right, but only at junior minister level. But you began to get a sense of what foreign policy meant to British politicians.”

**MMcB:** “And you’d see papers and things like that. So I’d have thought very important, really. Anyhow, from there you went to Cairo as Head of Chancery. What was the position in Cairo at that stage?”

**Sir John:** “I think the main thing was that President Sadat was firmly established and was beginning to implement his so-called ‘open door’ policy, opening Egypt up to Western influences, opening the country up to a greater degree of liberalism. People could travel. They’d been restricted earlier. So that was going on. I think it was already clear that the Egyptians had had enough of war and they had very little interest in taking on the Israelis again, and they were trying to look for a future where Egypt could develop and become rather more prosperous than it was.”

**MMcB:** “Did you find their attitude to Britain friendly?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, friendly enough. I mean, Sadat’s regime was pro-Western, which mostly meant pro-United States, who were their main benefactors. I didn’t really experience great friendliness in Egypt. I think, however, I was struck for the first time by the decline of British power in the Middle East. I had previously been in the Gulf where we were right up front, and actually, greatly influencing policy and development. In Egypt that really wasn’t so. It was no longer the case that the British Ambassador was frequently asked to see the President, etc, etc. That was a role that had certainly gone to the American Ambassador, and I found myself, really for the first time, much more in a reporting role than in an active, policy-making role. But it had its own fascination. I mean, Egypt was an important country, well worth studying, and it was important that London knew what Egyptian policy thinking was. So there was an important reporting role, but it was, in a sense, much more limited than the activities I’d been used to earlier.”

**MMcB:** “Did we have a large Mission there?”

**Sir John:** “It was pretty large. I don’t remember the numbers but we certainly had a full complement of Service attaches. All three Services were represented. Chancery was quite a good size, the Commercial Section was a reasonable size. We even had an Information Section in those days, which you hardly ever get nowadays. Yes, it added up to quite a big Mission.”

**MMcB:** “Was it your impression that the Service attaches had an important function to fulfil?”

**Sir John:** “I think they probably did. The Armed Forces are very important in Egypt, and although I have just said that I think it was pretty clear the Egyptian people were fed up with war, two years previously there had been an Arab-Israeli war and there was no certainty that there couldn’t be another one, so it was quite important that the feelings and mood of the Armed Forces were constantly assessed. And, as Egypt opened up to the West, important possibilities of defence equipment sales came to the fore, so those had to be pursued.”

**MMcB:** “Were they interested in buying British military equipment?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, a certain interest. I think they were beginning to look to America as their main Western supplier, but there was a certain interest.”

**MMcB:** “Did you get around to see the treasures of ancient Egyptian civilisation?”

**Sir John:** “Oh, an enormous amount, yes. To begin with, it’s a thing we liked doing. As I say, the country was opening up, it was getting more and more possible to travel quite widely, not just to Luxor, but way beyond. Also, one found that important British visitors who came to Egypt wanted to spend a day in Luxor. We used to go to Luxor quite a lot, certainly to the classical sights around Cairo, but we also travelled much

further afield, to desert oases, and that sort of thing. We enjoyed our travelling in Egypt very much. It was endlessly interesting.”

**MMcB:** “So you enjoyed that. Were you a counsellor at that stage as Head of Chancery?”

**Sir John:** “No, I think I was a first secretary Head of Chancery.”

**MMcB:** “But then you went straight from there to be a counsellor at the UK Permanent Representation in Brussels, then the EEC, specialising in developing countries, so I suppose there was a certain logic to that progression.”

**Sir John:** “I think there was insofar as my overseas work certainly had been connected with the Middle East, with developing countries of a kind. It was an interesting job. It was basically concerned with looking after the so-called Lome relationship, which was the relationship between the then European Community and the fifty or more states of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific which had a special treaty relationship with the Community. Every five years, the Lome Convention, the regulator of this relationship, had to be renegotiated, and I took part in one of those renegotiations. Between the renegotiations, the treaty had to be administered and there were important decisions to be taken each year on the prices of products from the ACP countries as they were called, the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, - in some cases, the amount they were allowed to import, continuing aid schemes, etc. So that was quite a lively part of the work of the Mission in Brussels, and also, the nice thing was that I was, with an assistant, the only person doing it, so you really did become *the* expert quite quickly and were given plenty of freedom just to get on with it.”

**MMcB:** “Did you find at that stage that there was any kind of conflict between, say, the former British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, and those that had got into the Convention beforehand, such as the French territories?”

**Sir John:** “I’m not sure about conflict, but certainly it was openly acknowledged that the French were doing their best to look after their ex-territories, and we were doing the best to look after ours. The thing worked best when the French and British worked together. If we got into dispute, then it was possible for the Lome activity to become rather paralysed. Actually, I think, certainly my own French colleague and I considered that we had a joint interest in making that convention work, and we needed to work together if the other members of the Community, who had a much lesser interest in it, could be persuaded to come along with us. So I and my French colleague worked together as much as we could, but sometimes our material interests would just clash.”

**MMcB:** “And then what happened?”

**Sir John:** “In the usual, time honoured Brussels way, you tried to do a deal, and if he and I could reach a deal, that tended to be the solution and the others would fall in, usually gratefully.”

**MMcB:** “So it would be quite wrong to suggest that we were bettered by the French in these affairs?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, I think it would. I think we usually negotiated a pretty good deal for our people, though I suppose there were two areas where we weren’t altogether happy. The French were more inclined than we were to increase the amount of money being paid annually into the system. We were always rather restrictive. We preferred, on the whole, to maintain our bilateral aid programme. We had a preference for that as against aid given through the Community.

The other area where we were not so happy, concerned those countries who had previously been governed by Britain, but were not included in the Lome arrangements. That meant, preeminently, the Indian sub-continent. The countries of the Indian sub-continent were always regarded as simply too big to bring into this convention, and you can see why. In a sense, they were very different in character from most of the other



states who made it up, who tended to be, on the whole, quite small states, though not exclusively. Nigeria was in, but India was out, Pakistan was out, Bangladesh was out. And they had a separate arrangement with the Community which was never so generous, never so effective, and we would make efforts to try to strengthen that relationship. The French, and indeed most other members of the Community, didn't want that to happen, and on the whole, I think they succeeded in blocking it."

**MMcB:** "I can appreciate that. After all, the Indians were the first major bloc to become independent after the end of the War, and they somewhat rejoiced in the fact that they had kicked out the British, so it must have been a slight by-product of that attitude which . . ."

**Sir John:** "I don't think that was the driving force. I think, really, the French, and to some extent the Italians and the Belgians, wanted to preserve the character of the Lome relationship as originally devised. They didn't want it to be swamped by big, ex-British territories which would certainly have changed its character. It was, to some extent, a French/Mediterranean preserve, the Lome relationship, and we had to fight quite hard to represent and to advance the interests of 'our countries'."

**MMcB:** "Even so, our countries included most of the big ones, in Africa, large in population, such as Nigeria, so we probably didn't do too badly out of that. Is there anything else you would like to say about your time in Brussels?"

**Sir John:** "Well, I suppose I ought to note it as my first direct contact with the European organisation. I went to Brussels interested to find out what all this was about. In a sense, my mind was a blank page. I didn't have doubts about British membership of the European communities, but what I think I wanted to see was actually what advantages we were getting from this relationship. Those years were a good point to start asking those questions and trying to find the answers, and I suppose, by the time I left, in 1980, my overriding feeling was that in contrast to pretty well all the other member states, it was hard to see that Britain had gained strong, concrete advantages from its membership.

In the case of every other country, you could, in two or three sentences, describe how they had benefited. It was not easy to do so in the case of Britain, so I was already conscious of this thing which really sort of worried me all along throughout the rest of my career, that the British relationship with Europe was not as relaxed and comfortable and confident as it ought to have been. I think, underlying that was the fact that the British people couldn't see where these great benefits they'd been promised were."

**MMcB:** "Nevertheless, we had been trying to get into the EEC for many years, and there was a distinct desire on the part of successive governments to overcome the de Gaulle veto and get in."

**Sir John:** "Oh, no doubt, no doubt at all. No, that decision had been taken. I wasn't in any sense questioning that. But I think you could already sense the problem that we still have, which we will no doubt come to, that it isn't a comfortable relationship, and that is a sorry state of affairs which I think we need to do something about."

**MMcB:** "Before we do, do you think it's because people in Britain, especially in those days, thought that everything had gone very well for Britain since the end of the Second World War and that we didn't need to change anything?"

**Sir John:** "No, I don't think so. I don't believe there was a feeling that things had gone well for Britain since the end of the Second World War. I think there was much more a sense of decline, continuing decline and uncertainty about our position in the world, and we were looking for a redefinition of our role, and nobody seemed able to provide it. We hoped that the European communities would be the answer."

**MMcB:** "Lets move on from that, back to your position in London as head of South Asian Department in the FCO from 1980-81. That was a big switch once again, wasn't it from Brussels and the mainly African, Caribbean and Pacific region to south Asia, but had been left out of the Lome Convention."

**Sir John:** “Yes, though that actually wasn’t the focus of my work, although I can see that it looks like that on paper. You will recall that at the end of 1979, Russia had invaded Afghanistan. I was brought back essentially to handle the Afghanistan question. I mean, I was supposed to run South Asia Department, and like to think I did, but the idea was that we needed to give special focus to our policy on Afghanistan, and that’s what I spent most of my time doing.”

**MMcB:** “That’s a pretty interesting matter on its own, isn’t it. What was our attitude to that invasion? We objected to it, but what could we do about it?”

**Sir John:** “Well, we objected most strongly to it, but there we were. The Russians were there and I think, before I got back to London, sanctions had been applied to Russia of one kind or another. All that was in place. The focus was shifting to the question of how we could bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan, and that’s what I spent most of my time thinking about. In due course, I worked up a proposal for an international conference on Afghanistan that would, if you like, provide the Russians with a face-saving device for getting out of the mess they were in and bring the conflict to an end. I worked out the structure of this conference. It wasn’t straightforward, there were all sorts of difficulties about who should participate and whether this would mean recognition for this Afghan group or that Afghan group. All that had to be worked out, we don’t need to go into the detail. In due course I recommended that the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, should actually go to Moscow to present this plan to the Russians, and it was decided that he should do so. That wasn’t a simple decision. At that time, the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was very much against contact with Moscow, and believed that little would come out of such a mission. We saw some merit in it. We thought that, at the very least, it would add to the pressures on the Russians to begin thinking about withdrawing from Afghanistan. It was, after all, a positive international proposal for a negotiated settlement. It also had the weight of the European communities behind it because we had negotiated their agreement to this proposal, and so, although it’s very common nowadays, this was actually going to be the first time when the Russians had ever received a sort of official representative of the EEC, bringing a European

Community proposal. At that stage they had still not officially recognised the European Community, so there was that sort of added interest to it. Anyway, we went off with Peter Carrington to Moscow and talked to Gromyko all day long about this proposal. He made it quite clear from the beginning that he was not going to go along with it, that he was not going to have any interference in Moscow's relationship with Afghanistan, but we nevertheless thought it had been useful. It had put pressure on him and it had given Europe a clear and respectable position on Afghanistan. It was worth doing, I think."

**MMcB:** "Was it already clear, by 1980, that the Russians were in a mess in Afghanistan?"

**Sir John:** "I think it was becoming clear that they were in great difficulties, and those difficulties were likely to get worse, and they would need a way out. And, of course, they were in great international difficulties because they were condemned across the world for their intervention."

**MMcB:** "That's very interesting indeed. So that didn't really result in anything, but it registered the EEC on the international stage. You then move from that to become Private Secretary to Mrs Thatcher."

**Sir John:** "That's right. I spent very little time in South Asia Department. It might be worth making one point here, just before we start talking about Mrs Thatcher and No.10. I think I've had a very unusual career. I've never been an assistant secretary at the Foreign Office (I was a Deputy Under-Secretary). Apart from that one spell, lasting only a year, as Head of South Asia Department, and that for a rather particular purpose. I've never been a head of department, I've never been an assistant head of department, I didn't have the classical route up. I did some private secretarial work, but I really didn't have that orthodox progression through the departments, through what is now known as the commands. I spent a lot of my career away from mainstream Foreign Office work. I think it's just worth noting that, because it becomes very clear later on. Anyway, you're right, towards the end of 1981, November '81, I went to Downing Street."

**MMcB:** “It might not have been a sort of regular progression through the Foreign Office, but it doesn’t seem to have been too bad a one, does it?”

**Sir John:** “No, it worked out all right, but certainly, when I became Permanent Under-Secretary, I owed to a slight lack of experience of the departmental structure, because, unlike nearly everybody else at that level, or just below, I’d simply not been through it.”

**MMcB:** “How did you get selected to do this job?”

**Sir John:** “Well, the usual system applied. No.10 said that the time was coming when my predecessor would need to be replaced, and they asked for candidates from the Foreign Office. The Personnel Department prepared the names of three candidates which were sent to Downing Street. Eventually I was interviewed by Mrs Thatcher and her Principal Private Secretary. I can’t, at this moment, recall whether the other two were interviewed or not. But I well remember going across one evening to meet the Prime Minister, whom I had met when I was in Cairo but certainly didn’t know at all well, and talked for, I guess, about an hour, at the end of which she said, I think her words were, ‘I suppose you’d better come’. I said to her Principal Private Secretary on the way out, ‘Is that a decision?’ and he said ‘That is a decision.’ And so those were the words with which I began my relationship with Margaret Thatcher.”

**MMcB:** “Hardly ringing.”

**Sir John:** “No, one wondered what that meant. Later on when I knew her well, I knew exactly what it meant. She was, actually, extraordinarily reluctant to take decisions about personnel. This was a marked feature of her, she really hated making changes, hated deciding on new people. I don’t think that remark was personally directed against me, but at the time it wasn’t exactly the resounding, morale-boosting comment that you would hope for.”

**MMcB:** “No, but it’s quite fascinating to hear that she did have that strange reluctance to make choices about people. What was she actually like to work for once you did get to know her?”

**Sir John:** “Extremely stimulating. She was, as everybody knows, a person of tremendous energy, she radiated energy. She was extraordinarily interested in ideas, new ideas. Well, it proved to be a particularly fascinating period, but we can come onto that. It was that period when I was there, not because I was there, but when I was there, that went from a Margaret Thatcher who was extremely low down in the opinion polls, very unpopular, through the triumph of the Falklands War, through her defeat of trade union radicalism, to the great success of the 1983 elections and extraordinary international recognition, and her best period in office in my view. We went through all that, so that was fascinating. She was extremely considerate, almost to a fault, with regards to her personal staff. You always felt that, however she behaved towards anybody else, she was going to support you. That was quite important. And she could carry this to really quite absurd lengths for a Prime Minister. It was a great mistake to tell the Prime Minister that one of your children had got measles or something, because she’d go on talking about it for some days afterwards. All her private staff, I think, felt the same way, that she was extremely good and considerate towards them. The atmosphere was often highly charged. You had to cope with strong emotions, strong statements, strong sentiment, you could often work ridiculous hours, but I always look back on it with immense pleasure, which isn’t to say that every day was enjoyable. It was never boring, you really were at the centre, you saw things changing for the better, not just in foreign policy, though there was that as well, but domestically, and it was a very, very good time to be working in Downing Street.”

**MMcB:** “How did you manage to escape after only three years?”

**Sir John:** “Well, that was a typical period. Now, it’s perfectly true that my successor stayed on for much longer, but if you look at the previous three or four or five

private secretaries, you'll find that three years was about the standard period. There was a problem about it, because it brings us back to her reluctance to take decisions about people, and she just didn't want that sort of change, and she began by saying that I couldn't go (I don't think that was seriously meant), and then she said, 'It is your job to choose your successor', to which I always said, and this remark was made several times, 'I can't choose him for you, you're going to have to work with him, the decision has to be yours.' This went on for a long, long time, and the Foreign Office was getting fed up, and I was fairly fed up myself, but in the end, I must say, I did make a very firm recommendation, but only because I'd been pushed into it. And then she gave a marvellous farewell dinner party for me. She was extremely kind and we maintained contact for years."

**MMcB:** "Clearly a very remarkable lady. Of course you were there during the Falklands War, and I think you said in that article in 'The Sunday Telegraph' that you didn't see any lack of American backing for Mrs Thatcher during that time, but the backing of the Americans for the Falklands adventure was hardly immediate, was it? And were you conscious in 10 Downing Street that maybe the Americans were a bit reluctant to begin with?"

**Sir John:** "I can't remember what I said in the 'Telegraph' article. I certainly didn't mean to imply that American support was immediate and full. It wasn't, though there were two separate, but inter-connected strands I suppose: one, that there was, if you like, the media battle with the United States where, initially, the Argentines were getting rather good media space, and this was beginning to affect the Administration. We, therefore, had to step up our campaign, and the Ambassador in Washington, Nicholas Henderson, and Tony Parsons, the Ambassador in New York, became familiar figures on the American screen, and that was very important because, with those and other efforts, the attitude of the American media changed. The Administration noted that change, and could see that by, if you like, backing Britain more clearly, they would in fact be endorsing what the majority of American public opinion wanted. But the second awkwardness was the American determination to try to negotiate a settlement with the

Argentines, and that took the form of Al Haig, the then Secretary of State, paying several visits to Downing Street for discussions with Margaret Thatcher and attempts to produce a negotiated solution. None of those attempts was ever likely to work, because the hard fact was that the Argentine military were on the island, and any negotiation with them in that position would have left some kind of administration over the Falkland Islands that had a large Argentinean element in it which would have been intolerable for the Falkland islanders. But, it has to be said that even at the beginning there were important people in the United States who were entirely pro-British and very keen to help. So it wasn't too long before we got over that initial phase and felt confident of American support."

**MMcB:** "A slightly different point. Do you think military figures in Britain have got the same sort of input behind the scenes as Alexander Haig demonstrated in American politics, and of course there was Eisenhower before him. Any number of American military seem to rise very near the top of politics in the United States."

**Sir John:** "We have an entirely different tradition. Our servicemen don't go into politics, so they don't end up as Secretary of State for Defence, Secretary in the State Department."

**MMcB:** "It's a rather vital difference really. At the time when we were trying to persuade the Americans of the justice of our cause, did the EEC have any bearing on the case?"

**Sir John:** "No, that was entirely bilateral. We were very struck by Francois Mitterand's immediate support. I remember being in Downing Street the Saturday afternoon after the Argentinean invasion, and he was actually the first foreign statesman to ring up and say, I don't remember his exact words, but the message was 'You have my support. This is important.' That was significant. There were problems later over the sale of super Etendards and that sort of thing, but that was important political support. It took time for the European Community to develop a position of support. Some of its



members were always ambivalent. No, the activities with the United States were entirely bilateral.”

**MMcB:** “I thought, in the end, even the Italians, with a large population in Argentina, came round to express support for Britain.”

**Sir John:** “Well, you could probably find some words that they used, but I think there was always a feeling that their emotional sympathies were with Latin America.”

**MMcB:** “Of course, we ourselves have quite a large population in Argentina, which I suppose complicates matters a bit. Is there anything else you would like to say on the subject of your time in Downing Street?”

**Sir John:** “Well, we probably shouldn’t leave the Falklands too quickly. It was a quite extraordinary experience which, I think most people in the Foreign Office were not prepared for. I think we all got into a frame of mind which didn’t actually believe there could be war again involving our country. We got into a frame of mind which suggested that negotiation was the answer to everything, and I think, psychologically, we found it very hard to cope with the fact that British troops were actually crossing the world to go into military action. It was a very novel experience for those involved in Downing Street too. It was very hard to find senior figures who had experience of fighting a war, and there was a great deal of improvisation. The Prime Minister certainly knew nothing about it, and she had to learn from Day One. It was absolutely all-consuming. From the time the Argentines invaded till the time they surrendered, very little else was done in Downing Street. We were at it all day, every day, so my experience was quite unlike that of any other Foreign Office private secretary, before or after, in that this international issue took the Prime Minister’s time all the time. It’s remarkable how the rest of the government went on perfectly successfully without endless meetings and Cabinet committees.”

**MMcB:** “It’s a repeat of the 1930s, isn’t it. I mean, nobody really contemplated war in that time until it was virtually on the doorstep.”

**Sir John:** “That’s right. But many other things happened during my time there, and I suppose, although we can’t spend too long on it, it’s hard to recall now for many people, especially the young, what the state of Britain was in 1979. But it was, in my memory, a very demoralising place, with hardly anything going right, and with Britain’s international prestige extraordinarily low. By the time I left Downing Street in 1984, a great deal of that had changed. Reform progress had begun internally, foreigners were flooding in to see how we were doing it and our international prestige had been transformed, largely as a result of the Falklands war, because a lot of people, a lot of other countries, thought that the significance of that went way beyond these islands in the South Atlantic, but said a great deal about Western resolve and determination, etc. And suddenly, the British Prime Minister was the most courted person on the international scene. Every country wanted her to visit, and British foreign policy became alive again, and successful again, and large new opportunities were presented to us, so there was a great deal of work in really travelling the world and making use of this new international prestige. We did a great deal of that.”

**MMcB:** “And of course there was also the, almost equally, important matter of defeating Mr Scargill and the miners. That was 1984 as well, wasn’t it?”

**Sir John:** “It was during my period. But of course I wasn’t directly involved in it. That was the business of other private secretaries in Downing Street.”

**MMcB:** “But it did have repercussions on our standing overseas, especially in America.”

**Sir John:** “Yes, that whole programme of domestic reform, reform of the trade unions, changes in economic policy, defeating inflation, all those things, privatisation, all came together to give Britain a completely different image internationally. History will

one day put the record right, but nowadays, disparagement of Margaret Thatcher is conventional. I don't share it at all, but those who engage in it are, I think, almost always failing to remember the state our country had got into and what she did to alter it."

**MMcB:** "Yes, I think that's true, but, on the other hand, she left behind a bad taste over her reaction to the reunification of Germany."

**Sir John:** "I agree. But I'm talking about my years in Downing Street and that all happened after my time."

**MMcB:** "Indeed, so perhaps we should move on to Jordan, where you were an Ambassador for the first time, and back to the Arab world. You must have gone there at a time when Britain's standing in the world was greatly improved. How did that manifest itself when you got to Jordan?"

**Sir John:** "I think the principal interest that I had for King Hussein, was that I had come from working for Margaret Thatcher, and he said to me three times in my first three months in Jordan, 'I want Margaret Thatcher to visit this country', which she did in 1985. He wanted to engage her in the peace process. He was really keen to develop a strong relationship with Margaret Thatcher and the then British government, and thought that I could play a role. So that was the immediate impact I had in Jordan."

**MMcB:** "Did he succeed?"

**Sir John:** "Yes. The last conversation I had with King Hussein, and I was very close to him, was in 1996 when I was Permanent Under-Secretary. I happened to be in Jordan and the King sent for me for lunch, this was a private lunch, and he said to me then, 'Those years when you were Ambassador here, were the best period of all for the relationship with Britain.' He wasn't saying 'because you were here'. Looking back, I can see that that is true. There's been quite a chequered relationship between Britain and Jordan over the years, but those years were when we got the relationship right. He was

contrasting it with the years after the Iraq invasion of Kuwait when all that seemed to him to go wrong. So it was an extremely good period for British/Jordanian relations.”

**MMcB:** “Did he ever make any reference to Glubb Pasha?”

**Sir John:** “Oh yes. When I was there in 1986, Glubb Pasha died, and a memorial service was arranged in London, and the King said that he would go to it, which is not surprising. All right, he had controversially dismissed Glubb Pasha in 1956, but one of Hussein’s great qualities was his willingness to forgive and forget and to mend fences, and it was typical of him that he decided to go. However, on the morning of that service, when I was due to go to the airport to see the King off to London, or probably the day before, I can’t remember, I woke up to hear that American aircraft had bombed Libyan bases, living targets, using British bases. The first thought that came to me was, well the King can’t go to London now: the whole Arab world was seething with anger about this. However, I’d been asked to go to the airport, so I went to the airport, and he turned up, and I said, ‘Well, I’m very glad that you’re going in the circumstances,’ and he said, ‘Not only am I going, I now wish to speak at the service. Would you kindly get in touch with the organisers while I’m in the air and say I wish to speak.’ Now this, I think, is an extraordinarily revealing episode. Hussein, he was a man of principle, this was his way of saying ‘I’m with Britain and against Qadhafi.’ Of course, he wasn’t going to say that, but he was going to London to speak at the memorial service of one of the great imperial hate figures of the Arab world, Glubb Pasha. I thought that showed remarkable loyalty.”

**MMcB:** “It’s astonishing really the affection with which Hussein was regarded in this country, I think.”

**Sir John:** “It’s quite astonishing. Last week I did a lecture in Oxford on the whole subject. I was struck, I went to his memorial service in St Paul’s Cathedral in July this year, and I remember sitting in that cathedral, the place was absolutely packed, and asking myself what exactly was going on here. Here was a foreign, Muslim, head of state, in an Anglican cathedral in London, miles from his home, being commemorated.

But then I asked myself, well say there hadn't been a memorial service for this king in Britain, he was easily the best known of all foreign heads of state, and what's more, he had been known in this country for some 40 years, and I think, I mean I've thought about it, I can't think of any other foreign head of state who commanded the same degree of affection and respect that he did. I mean, your mind goes back to somebody like Eisenhower, that was a much more a temporary phenomenon, but this had been going on for three or four decades. So, in a sense, it was the most natural thing in the world that there should have been a memorial service in Britain. He was a very remarkable man. I, for whatever reason, developed quite an exceptionally close relationship with him, to such an extent that I had better put this on record, I think. It's not the sort of story you can tell publicly, but there was an amusing and interesting episode; when I left Jordan, I got a communication from the Foreign Office saying the time had come for me to go and would I kindly inform the Jordanian government. So I put in one of those Notes to the Foreign Ministry, and the next day I met the Jordanian Prime Minister who said, 'Your note is unacceptable.' I said, 'I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying.' He said, 'We do not accept your Note.' I said, 'Oh, I see, it's very charming of you to say this, I also enjoyed my tour.' He said, 'I'm so sorry, you're not taking this seriously. This isn't a joke, I'm not trying to charm you, we are not prepared for you to leave Jordan.' I said, 'Well, if you're putting it that formally, I have to say to you, with all my respect and affection for Jordan, it's got nothing to do with you. If my government decides it's time I go, then I must go.' He was rather a sophisticated man, and he said, 'Well, I quite understand all that, but actually the King is writing to your Prime Minister about it, and what I have said, I have said.' At this point, I began to feel rather awkward. I talked to Downing Street and suggested how they should handle it, and of course in the end I left. But it was a very good note to go on, this feeling. The King and the Prime Minister turned up at endless, or gave, farewell parties for me. Future British ambassadors are going to find it very hard to get into a situation like that, because there are very few places left where we have that direct relationship with the head of state, and direct influence. In fact, I don't think it applies in Jordan any more."

**MMcB:** “No, well, Hussein’s gone of course, which is sad, but inevitable. Well, a lovely note to go out on, but a bit embarrassing at the same time. I suppose Hussein had exactly the same problem about choosing people as Mrs Thatcher.”

**Sir John:** “Well, he was more decisive. He was always changing prime ministers. I think he liked it.”

**MMcB:** “So, after Jordan, you then went straight off to be High Commissioner in Australia. You were there for three years. What did you find in Australia was the attitude of the Australians to Britain?”

**Sir John:** “I could write a book about it, I suppose. To begin with, no hostility, or virtually none. From what I knew about Australia, I expected to run into quite frequent pommie bashing. That didn’t happen, it wasn’t like that. I think there was still a very considerable amount of affection for Britain, a recognition that Britain was very important as a trading partner, quite important as a partner in various international areas. There was quite a lot of interest in Britain because of our reform process under Margaret Thatcher, a lot of the reforms were quite relevant to Australia. There was, of course, also irritation with British attitudes, and the monarchy versus republic issue was always there. But, broadly speaking, it was a fairly happy relationship and one that needed working at and needed modernising, and that’s what I spent my time trying to do while I was there.”

**MMcB:** “How could you modernise it?”

**Sir John:** “Well, I thought the important thing was that we should try to get Britain thinking clearly about Australia. There was still a tendency to treat Australia disparagingly, to treat Australia as a bit of a joke, but worst of all, to treat Australia, in some curious way, as a sort of part of Britain lost in the southern hemisphere. What we were failing to do was to recognise that here was a people with a very strong sense of Australian nationhood. When I went there, this hit me between the eyes. I wasn’t expecting it, I’d never been to Australia before. There was almost a sort of third world

nationalism about it, which came out in many ways, but, you know, Australia had to be the greatest and best and biggest, all sorts of things. Australian sporting victories were national occasions, much more than they are here, and Australia was successful, it was plainly developing a multicultural society, the land of the free. There was an extraordinary sense of pride in Australian nationhood, although very few Australians would have used those terms. And we were getting it wrong, we weren't recognising this. Never, in history, had an Australian prime minister been invited to Britain officially, never, because the thinking was, if he wants to come he can come. That attitude was out of date. I, actually, after a few months in Australia, came back to see Margaret Thatcher and told her all this. She said, 'What do you want me to do about it?' So I said, 'I want you to come to Australia and when you are there I want you to make some speeches in which you make it plain that you do recognise Australia for what it is, a nation in its own right, totally independent of Britain. Once you've got that right, then you can talk about a modern relationship which we could concentrate on, things we do well together, trade, investment, which was huge, working together on international issues, etc, etc.' And she came, she made those speeches, she invited the Prime Minister of Australia to visit Britain officially. It had never happened before, and he almost fell off his chair. We were in the Australian Cabinet room. He'd got half his Cabinet there, or all of it, for the talks with Margaret Thatcher, and I wondered how Bob Hawke would react to this invitation. He simply said, 'Yes, and can I bring half the Cabinet with me?' He came the next year, and that got the British/Australian relationship onto the right footing."

**MMcB:** "That's an astonishing revelation. Had we never done that before?"

**Sir John:** "No, we used to assume he'd come over in June for the Test Match, which is what he did, and in Menzies' day that was fine."

**MMcB:** "Were there any problems between ourselves and the Australians?"

**Sir John:** “A few. There was a big issue which goes under the headline ‘Maralinga’. Maralinga was the nuclear testing site inside Australia which we had used with Australian military scientists in the fifties to develop nuclear weapons. The issue was cleaning up the site and making it fit for habitation again. That rumbled on while I was there. Actually, when I got back to the Foreign Office, I negotiated a solution to it. During my time in Australia there was an issue over who should pay the pensions of British pensioners resident in Australia, a few things like that. They didn’t add up to a huge amount, but there were some problems.”

**MMcB:** “There’s an amazing amount of common interest between us and the Australians, I think. Do you think that the Australians resent any possibility of a change in our currency at a time when they are contemplating rejecting the Queen, and have they got any standing in matters of that sort. I recall seeing somewhere that you had said that some Australian had said to you that the day Britain joins the common currency, he would lose all interest in Britain.”

**Sir John:** “Yes. That was said to me by a very senior Australian politician. He wasn’t trying to interfere in the decision about our currency, he was only making the point that if we ceased to have sterling as our own currency, and merged in with the euro, we would be less interesting to Australia because this would be a sure sign that power, real power, had shifted from London to Brussels, or Frankfurt, or wherever you like, and that Britain’s power of independent decision-making was disappearing.”

**MMcB:** “It’s a fairly negative view, isn’t it?”

**Sir John:** “I think it’s a correct view. This is how many countries around the world would react if we abandoned sterling.”

**MMcB:** “And what about their attitude to the Queen?”



**Sir John:** “Well, when I was in Australia, I always kept out of that issue. I actually went to talk to the Foreign Secretary before I went to Australia for the first time about the handling of this question. I remember saying to Geoffrey Howe, my view is that the British have got nothing to do with this issue. It’s a matter for the Australian people, the Australian government and the Queen of Australia. He said, ‘That’s right.’ So that is the policy I always followed. I’m sure it was right. Constitutionally, it had nothing to do with Britain, and if by any chance you wish to preserve the monarchy in Australia, then the best thing for Britain to do is to keep out of the debate, because one thing that is absolutely sure is that if Britain intervenes on the side of the monarchy it won’t help. I kept out of it during my time there. I always thought the day would come when Australia would become a republic, and I always felt that if I had been an Australian, I would have voted for that, which is not to say that, from the point of view of the monarchy, I won’t regret it when the day comes, I shall, and I think it will affect relations between Britain and Australia, but, nevertheless, they are my views.”

**MMcB:** “Of course, as British High Commissioner there you were a representative of the British government and not of the Crown. And that is a fairly vital distinction, isn’t it?”

**Sir John:** “It is, and not one we would have always recognised in the past. British High Commissioners in the past did, from time to time, do things which suggested they were still representing the Crown, and that greatly annoyed the Australians.”

**MMcB:** “Yes, they would be aware of that distinction.”

**Sir John:** “Very aware of it, absolutely. Typically, when the Queen came to Australia in the old days, the British High Commissioner used to agitate to be at the airport to receive her. The Australians weren’t at all sure that was right, she was coming as the Queen of Australia, and the British High Commissioner had no particular standing.”

**MMcB:** “No, but he would at least be put on an equal basis with other foreign representatives.”

**Sir John:** “You might decide to have all the Commonwealth representatives there, or something. That was all right, but there was no special position for the British High Commissioner. The Queen came during my time and it would never have occurred to me to suggest I should be singled out, and I wasn’t.”

**MMcB:** “That’s good. I’m sure that is absolutely right. I recall visits by the Queen to India where, of course, all the Commonwealth High Commissioners were present when she arrived at the airport, but all the honours were done by the Indians. Are there any other points you would like to talk about in connection with Australia?”

**Sir John:** “No, I think that covers the Australian ground.”

**MMcB:** “So we then come back to your long period in the Foreign Office, first of all as Deputy Under-Secretary of State and then finally as Permanent Under-Secretary. When you were Deputy Under-Secretary were you in charge of specific departments, such as the economic departments?”

**Sir John:** “I was in charge of Asia and the Americas, that’s how it was put. Those were my geographical responsibilities, then, of course, I was a member of the various corporate boards, I played a role in those.”

**MMcB:** “Corporate boards?”

**Sir John:** “Well, the No.1 board, the selection board, the board of management, and the policy advisory board.”

**MMcB:** “Right. So you got a good overview, and were you able to step straight from that into being Permanent Under-Secretary?”

**Sir John:** “That was very valuable to know how all that machinery worked.”

**MMcB:** “As Permanent Under-Secretary, what was life like, apart from being desperately busy. What stands out in your memory from those years?”

**Sir John:** “A rich time. To talk about it, you’d probably have to separate policy and management. To begin with, I always struggled to try to keep a balance between the two, as indeed my predecessors had done. We all felt that we ought to be spending a great deal of time on policy, we all felt that the pressures were there for us to get more and more involved in management. It was quite difficult to play a policy role while meeting all those management demands. On the management side, one often had the feeling one was fighting a long, defensive battle, I think. It’s a commonplace, but all the time when I was Permanent Under-Secretary, the Foreign Office was under review. We carried out, not only a fundamental expenditure review, not only a senior management review, but we began a comprehensive spending review. All these things had different titles, but they were all in response to the demand to save money and cut posts, really. All that was going on all the time, and, while I was in no sense ultra conservative about the Foreign Office (there were many things that needed to change), I was always doubtful about the motivation of these reviews. It didn’t seem to me that their real objective was to create a modern organisation which was best able to promote or defend British interests abroad. They really were cost-cutting exercises, though it was always suggested that they weren’t. So, I did see it as my role to avoid those reviews having harmful consequences for the Service while using them to bring about such modernisations as I thought desirable. I thought quite a lot of it was desirable. It all involved a great deal of work, briefing ministers, negotiating with the Treasury, though I’m quite pleased in the end we came through it all as well as we did.

All that does sound very defensive, but I was trying to do other things on the management side. I was very much in favour of devolution. I am quite sure that during my career power had shifted up, with consequent frustration in the lower ranks, people

not getting their responsibility and decision-making power early enough. So we embarked on a big programme of devolution, devolution to commands, devolution to posts abroad. I was also trying to make the Foreign Office a much more open organisation, open with each other and open to the outside world. I tried to encourage informality in the Office. I used, every three or four weeks for example, to have a working lunch in my office with representatives from all grades in the structure, below grade 4, grade 4 and below, so that a good sprinkling of the Office could get at the Permanent Under-Secretary and discuss whatever issues were on their mind. Certainly, whenever I went abroad, I would always have a staff meeting, about an hour long, when people were free to discuss problems in an open way. And then I was interested in our openness to the outside world.”

**MMcB:** “Are we talking about openness with regard to policy matters?”

**Sir John:** “Yes. I still thought we didn’t have sufficient outside input. We weren’t making sufficient use of all the expertise outside government. So I tried to do various things about that. In particular, I instituted, about every month, or perhaps every two months, we had a working lunch with chosen businessmen, journalists, academics, etc. to discuss a particular policy area. I would have our policy team there and we would spend quarter of an hour saying what policy was, and then the outsiders would tell us what it ought to be. After a couple of hours we’d see where we’d got to. I thought that that sort of thing was quite refreshing. So, openness, devolution, were, I suppose, the two management things in which I was most interested.”

**MMcB:** “Do you think that traditional ways of discussing policy in parliament or in parliamentary committees is inadequate?”

**Sir John:** “I really don’t think parliament plays much of a role in foreign policy formulation. I spent quite a lot of time with the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, and I think they were frustrated about this. They did a lot of work but their impact on foreign policy was very small.”

**MMcB:** “Is that because they were working in a vacuum and not communicating sufficiently with Foreign Office departments?”

**Sir John:** “I think, frankly, that governments do not attach much importance to the views of select committees. There are exceptions. The Public Accounts Committee is an exception, but I’m afraid we haven’t reached the point where people look to something like the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs for real wisdom about foreign policy.”

**MMcB:** “Of course, the trouble about foreign policy is that it’s so complicated and moves so fast and there’s so much detail in it, that it must be extraordinarily difficult for people not actually participating in it to understand it.”

**Sir John:** “It’s true day to day, but it’s not so true in sort of general trends of foreign policy. Select committees could play a bigger role there, I think. But that’s the sort of management side. On the policy side, as you say, there’s a lot of it and it’s quite complex, but the big issues were Bosnia, endlessly Bosnia, relations with the European Union, obviously relations with the United States, trying to develop a stronger role in Asia, and maintaining a global policy interest. I’m pleased that we managed to do that, because there are always attempts to try to reduce British foreign policy to either just to Europe or to specific areas of the world. I always thought that that was quite contrary to our interests because our assets are spread all round the world, and our opportunities are spread all around the world. I think we did preserve a global foreign policy during my time.”

**MMcB:** “Do you think the outside bodies exposed to openness appreciate how important it is to have officials, diplomats stationed in such a wide range of countries as we have?”

**Sir John:** “I think where you’re talking to businessmen or academics who know particular countries and are interested in them for whatever reason, they will see the need

for good British representation in those countries. So I think those who are close to the scene do see the need for a global network. Indeed the vast majority of outsiders who I cultivated when I was in the Foreign Office, thought it was a great pity that our network had been degraded as much as it has been.”

**MMcB:** “That’s encouraging. Do you think the Foreign Office ought to do more to publicise the importance of the work it does?”

**Sir John:** “It does a huge amount. I think that public attitudes to the Foreign Office have changed very much for the better over the last fifteen years or so. Certainly the attitude of British business towards the Foreign Office has been transformed. During my time in the Foreign Office I actually did something which was probably rather rash, I sent a questionnaire to the heads of, I forget now, 240 British firms asking them what they thought of the Foreign Office. I sent them a list of questions, and that produced a really quite positive return. I think that parliamentary attitudes to the Foreign Office have changed. The media, well that’s more difficult, but I think it’s more balanced than it was. I think we’ve had more successes, or as many successes as failures, but our media nowadays is in the disparagement industry, and we can’t take away too much of their fun by getting them to write articles too favourable to the Foreign Office.”

**MMcB:** “Maybe that’s right. Could I go on to ask you some euro related questions which I suppose really arise out of the fact that you were head of the Foreign Office for such a long and important period, and of course there has recently been this exchange of views in the press about the attitude of diplomats to the single currency. We talk about the importance of London as a financial centre, and some euro-sceptics, to my knowledge, say London is so important we hardly need to bother about Europe because there are no important European financial centres. Do you think the emergence of the euro reduces London’s role as a money market? Perhaps that’s fairly technical.”

**Sir John:** “I must say it is not an area where I would claim great expertise. As with so many of these questions, my attitude is, well we’re in a very good position, we don’t

need to speculate about this, we can wait and see what happens. In two or three years' time, perhaps a little longer, we will be able to say what has actually happened to the City of London as a result of our decision to stay out. So much of the talk at the moment is pure speculation for which there is no need. I don't see any evidence so far that our decision of not being in the euro has adversely affected the City of London, adversely affected inward investment, has adversely affected British influence, either in the Union or in the world. I see no evidence of this. We are in this happy position whereby we can wait and see if there is any evidence."

**MMcB:** "Well, the Irish claim that their current, pretty astonishing, prosperity is due to their success in attracting inward investment, mainly from the United States, both in the field of electronics and software associated with it. One of Mrs Thatcher's excellent ideas in the 1980s was to attract inward investment to this country from the United States and Japan as a way of cutting down on the adverse effects of our narrowing manufacturing base. One of the top incentives that we cited when trying to attract inward investment was access to the European market, and it worked. Now, our failure to join the euro at this stage, I think worries a lot of inward investors who are already here, Ford and Vauxhall for example. Do you think our stand on the euro, waiting to see, will encourage or discourage further inward investment?"

**Sir John:** "Well, again, you can actually watch it happening, rather than speculate. The figures so far this year, suggest that the previous trend continues, that the bulk of international investment in Europe comes to Britain, more of it comes to Britain than to any other member state of the European Community. There's no evidence of American investment flagging, Japanese investment flagging or any other important external sources of investment flagging. Of course you can point to individual cases of a company deciding to reduce its investment here, shift its investment from here, but there are more cases of investors who are already here who are expanding their investment. I don't believe that the currency issue plays a very large role in the decisions of external investors in Britain. This is a subject that has been looked at over the years. I have listened to our best economists about it. What really influences decisions to invest in

Britain is the nature of the investment regime in Britain, the ability to remit profits, skills of the workforce, the membership of the single market. This marginal advantage, the amount of money you save on having the same currency, I simply don't think is an important factor. I think this will be clear if we just wait two or three years."

**MMcB:** "I understand that Chancellor Kohl saw his decision to abolish the deutschmark as a means of reassuring the French and the British, and some others, that that was a price that had to be paid by the Germans to reassure the others that he wasn't out to dominate Europe. This followed reunification when there was a lot of apprehension, not least in Mrs Thatcher's mind, about the consequences of a strong reunified German state. He gave up his currency, which was very dear to the Germans, as a way of telling everyone it's all right, we're all in this together. That suggests that the euro is a fairly potent symbol of a unified Europe."

**Sir John:** "Oh, it is, the strongest possible symbol of political union, this is what Helmut Kohl always used to say, and I've heard him say it many times, that we must press on towards political union. There's something wrong with that phrase. It sounds harmless, doesn't it? I think it means we must press on to a central government in Europe, and that's the trouble. Most people in Britain, I think, do not want to be governed by a central government of Europe. The trouble with the euro is that it's the device that is most likely to lead to a central government of Europe, because we know, if we were to join, on that day we would lose control of interest rates, exchange rates. They would go to Frankfurt on that day. Most economists, most historians, think that, as the weeks and months and the years go on, other economic power would have to be transferred to Brussels or Frankfurt. Taxation would have to be done centrally, budgets would have to be controlled centrally in order to make the single currency area work. You then get to the situation where everything's transformed. The British government will no longer be what we thought it was, responsible to us for the state of the economy. That would have gone somewhere else. Parliament will no longer have its role in taxation, that will have gone somewhere else. The Bank of England, I don't know what it's going to do, its functions will have disappeared. Would there be any point in writing



to your MP about anything anymore? You see, what we're talking about here, is not just a matter of saving a bit of money when you cross a frontier, we're actually talking about a fundamental change in the way Britain's governed. That's why I think the issue is so important."

**MMcB:** "Why can't it be argued that instead of emphasising the loss and the negative side, emphasise the gain, you would then gain influence over the affairs of this larger polity, and we could help to steer it in the directions that we want?!"

**Sir John:** "Well, I think if you look at the question of influence, it doesn't come out quite so simply as that. Most people who focus on the question of whether by joining the euro we lose or gain influence, talk about it entirely in terms of our influence with the European Union. I think there are three areas you have to look at, the EU, the world and Britain. Now, if you start with the EU, it's quite complicated, I think. Certainly, if we joined the euro, we'd then become a member of what is now called the Euro Eleven, finance ministers of the eleven countries who've joined. That would give us a say in their deliberations over the economies of those twelve countries. At the same time, of course, you would give those eleven a say over our economy. Now, you can take a view on whether that trade is worthwhile. Certainly, if we stay out, on issues connected with the single currency, clearly we lose influence, but throughout the rest of European Union business, I don't think we do lose influence. We will still be needed as much as we're needed now, in the foreign policy area, in the defence area, etc. I think that real influence in the European Union comes, not from whether you're a good boy, a member of the club, and that sort of thing, but from what assets you bring to the table, and we should bring the same assets.

Globally, I'm clear that if you go into the euro, you lose influence. We talked earlier about the attitude of other countries who see us giving up sterling and become less interested in us. Well, it seems to me, the more independent our policies are, especially in foreign affairs and defence, the more interest other countries will have in us, and therefore the more influence we will have on them. Throughout most of the world,

British influence is not regarded as coming from membership of the European Union. It's regarded as coming from the fact that we've got the best armed forces in the world, or nearly, that we have great experience in foreign policy, that we have one of the most successful economies, we've got some of the best institutions in the world. That's what British influence comes from. When you go to the Far East and you start talking about British foreign policy, they don't ever discuss it in terms of whether we're a member of the single currency.

Thirdly, you really do have to look at this domestic angle, where it is clear that if you go in you lose influence. Taking it all together, there is, it seems to me, clearly a net loss of British influence if we join the euro."

**MMcB:** "Thank you for that. I would just like to follow it up though with a little observation based on Professor Cameron Watt. He says that the biggest pressure in the past for Britain to merge with Europe has come from the Americans, unhappy with the idea of the special relationship. Raymond Seitz certainly said this much, and that Britain's influence with Washington is directly proportional to our influence with Brussels. I think more or less the same sort of thing is said by one or two of our ambassadors who have served in Washington. Do you accept that the Americans have been pressing us to engage with Europe?"

**Sir John:** "The record simply doesn't support these assertions. I think that anybody who went, as I did, many times with Margaret Thatcher to Washington and heard her conversations with the President of the United States and others, would find laughable the idea that her influence depended on her support for political integration in Europe, that's how it's usually put. She didn't support political integration in Europe. I never heard the connection made, and that's what matters in the British/American relationship, the relationship at the top, between Prime Minister and President. I don't believe the records will show that they ever discussed the European Union. There may have been glancing references, half-forgotten. The very idea that it's a sort of cardinal point of American policy, I just don't see. I do not believe that Tony Blair and President Clinton

talk in those terms either. I think that British influence, which I think is very considerable, stemming from the Blair/Clinton relationship has nothing to do with our position in the European Union. I've forgotten how many times I've been to Washington and held discussions with the State Department and others, and I simply, honestly, don't recall that point being made to me once in my whole career. To be fair, if asked, the State Department would say that they encourage the process of integration in Europe, and would like to see Britain playing its part in it. The State Department, like the Foreign Office, has to have a position on things, but, in real life, I don't believe that plays."

**MMcB:** "That's very interesting, and revealing. I think I've probably run out of questions."

**Sir John:** "There's just one thing I'd like to put on record because although, on the whole, I find that my views on the single currency command a very encouraging measure of support around the country, I can well imagine that there are some ex-colleagues, and perhaps even serving members of the Foreign Office, who are a little surprised that somebody who was once Permanent Under-Secretary has sort of publicly come out in this way. I would just like to say one or two things about that. First of all, as I shall be making clear in a book I am publishing in March, I have a very strong view on the role of the public servant. I'm absolutely clear that it's the job of the public servant to advise politicians on policy and to implement their decisions on policy, and I would like to think that whoever looked into my record when I was a public servant would find that I had always done that. There have been cases, cases of people who have not done that. That is to say, people who, as public servants, have pursued goals, ambitions, policies of their own, in contra-distinction to government policies of the day. But I think that once you stop being a public servant, you should be completely free to join in public debate about issues of importance. You are still bound by the Radcliffe rules, so long as they go on existing, but certainly, and you don't give away any government secrets. But I think not only should you be free to do this, you almost have a duty to do so, because at least you have a background of some knowledge. That ought to be contributed to the public debate. In other countries, it's so common and natural that nobody ever comments on it.

There's still some inhibition about it in Britain. I think that a great pity. I would hope that, as people retire from the Foreign Office, they will feel more and more, a disposition to get involved in public debate, though I hope it never impacts on that very important role of the public servant to work for ministers and the British interest."

**MMcB:** "Thank you very much indeed."