

BDOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details

Sir John Holmes, GCVO 2004 (CVO 1998); KBE 1999; CMG 1997

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RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR JOHN HOLMES GCVO, KBE, CMG

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CATHERINE MANNING

Today is 11 January 2018. This is the first interview for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme with Sir John Holmes, Catherine Manning recording. John, I am going to ask the question that we always start off with, which is: what was it that led you to join the Foreign Office in December 1973.

JH: I had been studying Classics in Oxford, and suddenly as I got well into my fourth year, the realisation dawned on me, as it did on most of my fellow students: Good Lord, we're going to finish quite soon; we'll have to get a job. My parents had made clear that they had been happy to support me hitherto, but that was it, so I needed to find something that paid money. My initial idea of becoming a barrister couldn't work because in those days you didn't get paid much, if at all, for a year or two. I applied for all sorts of things, in the way that students did then, for example for various company graduate trainee schemes. And I also applied for the Foreign Office. That was not because I was particularly interested in international affairs at the time, at least more than most students were, or because I spoke foreign languages – I'd learned Greek and Latin, so I could do languages, but I certainly wasn't a modern linguist. I applied because I thought the FCO would be interesting. I had some awareness of it because my brother had applied and failed to get in, as it happens. In any case I went through the rather lengthy entry process of exams, and then the two-day recruitment session when they tested you for all sorts of things, and then a terrifying final interview, I remember, with me facing half a dozen people behind a polished table somewhere in Whitehall, asking me really difficult questions. Finally they offered me a job before anyone else did, which must have been in early 1973, and as I knew it was difficult to get into, I took it. It was as simple as that really – more of an accidental process than a long-standing ambition. But I've never regretted it.

I actually joined a little bit late, in December 1973, rather than the usual September, because I went off on a travel scholarship from my college. They paid me \$1000 to go around America and do what I liked for three months. I had a Greyhound bus ticket and saw more of America than most Americans have ever seen, including a lot of dull periods crossing the Mid West, which certainly teaches you just how big America is. When I got back to

Washington at the end of our trip, I went to one of the Watergate hearings, which was fascinating. It was also the time of the Arab-Israeli 1973 war and I remember watching very dramatic TV pictures of that in the house where I and a friend were staying. So at least there were a couple of examples of historic foreign policy events being enacted in front of my eyes.

CM: You said you weren't especially interested in foreign affairs. Were you interested in politics?

JH: Yes, but only as an outside observer. I wasn't part of any of the Oxford political party organizations or a member of the Oxford Union. Being at Balliol, which was the revolutionary college at the time, where all demonstrations started and finished, I was close to that sort of student politics, for example the protests about files supposedly held on students, and demonstrations against Edward Heath, who was a Balliol alumnus. Not that I was particularly involved myself, but it was there, happening all around me, because Balliol was such a political place. Even the master, Christopher Hill, was a communist. I'm a political junkie these days, but I wasn't then.

CM: When you arrived in the Foreign Office you were sent off to be Assistant Desk Officer for Malawi in Central and Southern Africa Department. Was there any preliminary to this? How did you come to the department?

JH: I think I went straight there, to be honest. Because I started a bit late I had missed the introductory week, or perhaps two weeks, that the other fast stream entrants had had - there were about twenty people who joined the fast stream, as it was called then, at the same time each year. But I hadn't missed very much, because the induction was pretty minimal in those days. They told you a little bit about what the Foreign Office was, how the departments worked and the structure and so on. And that was about it. There were occasional courses that they allowed you to do during your first year. I think I went to one about international law; and something about international economics and trade. At some point I also went off for a week-long course in Brussels to learn about the European Community, as it then was, which we had just joined. But overall the induction and training were minimal. It was very much learning on the job, sink or swim.

The first job I had was not much of one really. The department didn't need me; I couldn't contribute very much; I didn't know anything about anything international, and I certainly didn't know much about Malawi - I was never allowed to go there. I was sitting in a room

with an experienced Grade 6 officer, David Small, I think his name was. He was in charge not only of Malawi but also Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland and maybe somewhere else as well. He made sure that I didn't do anything particularly stupid – not that I had much chance. But it was a way of learning how it all worked, and for example how you wrote in the FCO. You would draft something to the High Commission, or a note to go up the chain in the office, and David Small would tear it to pieces, in the nicest possible way, because it was complete rubbish to start with. You learned by doing; that was how it worked.

At a certain point, relatively early on, maybe early in 1974, all the new entrants were given a language aptitude test – it was called MLAT, though I can't remember what the M stood for - where you were tested for your ability to learn a hard foreign language. The language they used was Kurdish, because they reckoned, quite rightly, that no one would know any Kurdish. They were interested in your ability to learn, for example, how to count from one to ten in Kurdish and then retain it long enough to regurgitate it later in the test. If you passed that - not everybody did, but most people had enough ability to learn at least some hard language - they assigned you a language depending on what they calculated the needs of the service were going to be. They knew they needed every year two or three Russian speakers, a couple of Chinese speakers, a Japanese speaker, four or five Arabic speakers, and, from time to time, someone who spoke Finnish or Burmese or whatever it was. That was of course on the assumption that all the fast stream would stay in the FCO, which was not an unreasonable assumption as most people did stay in those days, at least for quite a number of years. If you passed, you were allowed to say what language you wanted to learn. I opted for Modern Greek, because I knew Ancient Greek and I thought going to Athens would be not a bad posting. But that was disregarded for whatever reason and they assigned me to Russian. As soon as they assigned you to Russian, you knew – anecdotes to the contrary notwithstanding – that you'd be going to Moscow when you'd finished. You didn't know exactly when or to do what, but your first overseas posting was going to be Moscow.

CM: If you were interested in learning Modern Greek, you were clearly still partly in a Classical world; you weren't making a careerist choice. Did it even occur to you: My next thirty years are going to be spent in this organization and it might be better for me if I chose Arabic or Russian. You just chose what you thought was interesting.

JH: Looking back, I don't know how well thought out my interest was. The anecdotal way of looking at this was that you didn't want to learn Arabic, because you got stuck in the Arab

world. There were twenty two Arabic-speaking countries you could go to, about twenty one of which were pretty unpleasant. In any case you learned a version of Arabic – classical Arabic – which virtually nobody actually spoke. I didn't particularly want to learn Chinese either. China was not then the country it is now. It was a disagreeably backward Communist regime and not a place you really wanted to go much in personal terms. Neither was Russia particularly attractive as a place to live for that matter. That's why I thought learning Greek and going to Greece would be a good thing to do as well as making sense, given my classical background. But in the end I wasn't upset when they assigned me Russian. I was at least going to be involved in something central to all our foreign policy concerns. It's difficult to remember now how much the Cold War, and therefore the Soviet Union, dominated everything we did. Everything was looked at through that prism, so at least you were going to the place which mattered if you learned Russian.

CM: How did they teach you Russian?

JH: In those days future Russian speakers were usually sent off to Beaconsfield to the Army Language School, where they had a very regimented approach. The armed forces were teaching Russian to a lot of people at the time, not least because they were needed to go to places such as Berlin to listen in to what Soviet officials were saying to each other. I didn't want to go to Beaconsfield because I had heard about their very military way of teaching. You learned thirty words a day and of course the vocabulary was naturally rather militarily oriented. I reckoned that I wouldn't really need much the word for, say, tank trap. So I said that I would rather do it another way. In those days there was an FCO language school in a rather rickety place called Palace Chambers, near Westminster Bridge, where Portcullis House is now. A woman called Anna Shuvalova taught Russian there. She was a astonishing character, the classic White Russian countess who'd left Russia in 1917 or shortly afterwards, and whose first language had been French. She was a difficult and formidable lady, who a lot of people couldn't get on with or had fallen out with, so I was a bit wary. But I said I would rather learn with her, and I did. I had something like a year and a half with her. The big advantage was that, once I got beyond the initial stages, I was able to spend my time just talking to her - or rather she just talked to me about her life, her experiences and her views. She was connected to the Russian emigré circles in London and Paris, and for example made me read *Russkaya Mysl*, I think it was, meaning *Russian Thought*, which was the emigré magazine. So she talked to me in her good old St Petersburg Russian. I also spent a lot of time, once I became good enough, reading Russian literature,

mainly Tolstoy. I actually read *War and Peace* in Russian. It took a long time, obviously, but Tolstoy's Russian is quite simple, if old-fashioned, and quite easy to understand. I read other authors as well, even Dostoyevsky, who is difficult to understand in Russian as in English, because the words are long and the sentence structure is complicated. In any case that was how I learned, by reading and by talking to her, rather than being in a classroom, and I thought that was great. I would do an hour or two a day with her, sometimes a bit longer, and then I worked at home, with tapes and all the usual stuff. The result was that, when I got to Moscow, I think I spoke Russian better than many of my contemporaries because I was used to talking it in a reasonably natural way. I also spoke, apparently, with an imperialist St Petersburg accent, which I thought might be a problem, but in fact some people in Moscow quite liked it, because they recognised that their own language had been bastardised during the Soviet period by all sorts of horrible new words and pronunciation.

CM: Did people comment on it?

JH: They did occasionally. They could tell that I had learned Russian from someone not in the Soviet Union. The other interesting thing I did was that, because you couldn't spend time with a family in the Soviet Union because the security risks were rightly considered to be too great, I went off for a total immersion period in Paris, with another White Russian family. I think I spent six weeks there in 1975. It was a fascinating experience. I lived in their tiny Paris flat. My hostess was another former countess who'd arrived in Paris after leaving Russia during the revolution, and stayed there, as many such emigrés did, not least because their first language was often French. She had had to make a living by becoming a seamstress. Her partner, who I don't think was actually her husband - I never quite got to the bottom of this - was a Ukrainian peasant, with a completely different background from hers. He'd fought for the Whites until the last possible moment in 1921, when he'd had to leave, and had then made his way to Paris. He was extraordinary in the sense that he hardly spoke French, even though he'd been in France by then for almost sixty years, and was still completely absorbed in the past. They used to invite their White Russian friends round to meet me. We also used to go to the White Russian naval club in Paris and meet all these extraordinary characters, most of whom were by then seventy, or in some cases eighty. I was a bit of a trophy for my hosts, but it was certainly good for my Russian as a total immersion, and also an extraordinary social experience. These people were still dreaming of going back to Russia, even though it seemed completely impossible at the time, because the Soviet Union was so well entrenched, or appeared to be. Some of their children were so

fed up with hearing about Russia, and how wonderful it had been in the old days, that they rather reacted against it, wanted to become as French as possible, and didn't want to speak Russian. They didn't want to wallow in nostalgia for the past and indulge in impossible dreams for the future. But the generation below that, who were naturally much more French, were at the same time very interested in their Russian roots and therefore in learning Russian, even though they didn't speak it at home.

After all this, for some reason which I can't now remember, my posting to Moscow was delayed. I started language training in the summer of 74 and would normally have gone a year later, but in fact it was delayed until the spring of 76. That meant I spent longer than I would have otherwise done learning Russian.

It also meant that I went back into the Office for a while, because they didn't want to leave me for two years learning Russian and doing nothing else. So I worked for a short time in United Nations Department and then went off to the UN General Assembly in New York as a Reporting Officer, from September to December 1975, working, slightly bizarrely, on the Fifth Committee, which was about UN finance and administration. It was a completely different sort of experience, but I rather enjoyed it. I was always interested after that in working in multi-lateral diplomacy, but in fact I never did, at least until I went to the UN after I left the FCO more than 30 years later. There were some big set piece debates going on at the time, for example about the Middle East, which were really interesting to watch.. I also remember an intensive Korean debate. At the time, the General Assembly had a set-piece item every year about which country, if any, between the North and South, should be recognized. Every year both countries turned up in massive force for the debate. I remember the North Korean delegation in particular would stride as one down the UN corridors, more or less knocking people out of the way as they went.

3rd Secretary, then 2nd Secretary, Moscow, 1976–78

CM: Early in 76 you went off to Moscow as Third Secretary.

JH: Yes, Third Secretary Chancery, as it was called then. I was also promoted to Second Secretary while I was there, a function simply of turning 26 in those days. We got there in May 76, two weeks after Penny and I got married, so that was quite a lot to take on – much more difficult for Penny than for me, even though it was quite a good time to arrive, because the summer was coming, so we had time to adjust before the ghastliness of the winter.

There was a big Chancery room in the Embassy, in those days in an old palace just over the river from the Kremlin. My responsibilities, in so far as I really had any, were relations with Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe, a slightly bizarre mixture.

It was an odd existence for a foreign diplomat in the Soviet Union in those days, because it was almost impossible to meet and interact with anybody from the country itself, either Russians in an ordinary social way, or even official Russians. Occasionally you would go to the Foreign Ministry and talk to somebody, but an awful lot of the time was spent reading Soviet official material. Every day we read *Pravda* and *Izvestia*; and we would read other publications which had something about foreign affairs in, looking for something interesting about Soviet foreign policy, and usually not finding it. We would also read more detailed publications coming out from the academic think tanks, such as IMEMO, the main foreign relations institute, which produced long articles every month, and try to divine from the propaganda barrage what was going on behind the scenes, and draw some conclusions about how thinking was evolving. But the material to work on was very limited, because it was extremely heavily controlled, as you can imagine. One other thing we used to do was to attend sessions at a place in Moscow where the public used to go to listen to talks by officials, and were then allowed to ask questions. You could sometimes divine from the exchanges what was worrying ordinary people, and where they were frustrated by the lack of real information in the official media.

It was mid to late Brezhnev era. He was in charge throughout my two and a half years there. It was a stagnant period from most points of view. He'd been in power for quite a long time already. He was old; and already ill. When he appeared in public, he was puffy, because he had something which meant they were pumping him full of steroids. When he appeared on the balcony of the Lenin Mausoleum for the major annual events, he looked as if he was being propped up some of the time. The country was already becoming a gerontocracy, though it got much worse later. If there was a minor change in the Politburo there was mega-excitement among the Kremlinologists, but really nothing much seemed to be happening. We knew extremely little about what was really going on inside the Politburo, or inside the mind of people like Brezhnev. Kosygin, the Prime Minister, had also been there for years; Gromyko, the foreign minister, likewise. Ageing ideologues like Mikhail Suslov had been there as long as anyone could remember. They were in their seventies or even eighties by then. There was not much new thinking. There was no reform and no sign of any reform. Gorbachev was no doubt there somewhere, first secretary of something,

somewhere in the provinces, but no one had ever heard of him at that point, or, if they had, they wouldn't have thought he was any different from any of the other grey apparachiks of the time. The Kremlinologists had to spend their time analysing who stood where on the Mausoleum for the October celebrations and the military parades, and looking at the fine print of articles to try to work out who thought what. There was always a lot of speculation about doves and hawks inside the Politburo, especially from the Americans, who loved this stuff, but it is not clear to me that there was really much substance to this. The truth was we didn't really know. Of course, we had some intelligence information as well, but it did not really give us much insight into key people's minds. All in all it was a rather dull period from that internal point of view.

On the other hand, it's interesting, looking back on it, to remember how much the Cold War dominated all of our thinking about everything, including all aspects of foreign policy. We felt in Moscow that we were on the front line of an existential struggle between two systems. It's easy to forget, knowing what happened later, that we certainly did not seem to be winning the foreign policy struggle at that particular moment. This was the time of a lot of change in Africa and Asia; the liberation and decolonisation movements of the late 60s and 70s were coming to an end, but were still influencing thinking and events. In one of my areas of interest, Africa, this period was the aftermath of the Portuguese revolution when Angola and Mozambique became independent and then became battle grounds between East and West. For example, in Angola, there was a struggle going on between the MPLA which was the Left-aligned, Communist-aligned liberation movement, and UNITA, which was the West-aligned liberation movement. We somehow thought that UNITA were good guys. Jonas Savimbi was the leader and he was our bastard, as it were. The Russians and particularly the Cubans, who intervened militarily in Angola at a certain point when I was in Moscow, were obviously supporting the bad guys. In reality both lots were no doubt equally awful; ideology meant virtually nothing to them. In a way we knew that, but everything at the time was viewed through the prism of the east-west struggle that was going on in lots of different African countries, and in Asia as well. The Americans had of course just lost the Vietnam War.

So it felt like a time when the West was under pressure, not economically from the Russians, but in terms of global influence. The wind was in their sails in much of the third world, because they were supporting the liberation movements and we were behind the old dictatorships, or that is how it could be caricatured. That was what dominated the context of

the work I was doing, trying to look at what was going on in Africa and trying to trace how Soviet thought was evolving and how far these countries were actually becoming Communist, or whether this was just a nonsensical way of looking at things. You couldn't get much sense out of the Russian Foreign Ministry: they wouldn't tell you anything and they probably didn't know much anyway because all the real issues were being handled by the Party. We didn't really have any access to the Party at all for these purposes. We could and did talk to academics, but again they had very little possibility to talk to you in anything but the most basic Soviet propaganda terms. Still you could see that things were happening in the real world. And the way that official sources wrote about how things were happening in Angola or in Mozambique could tell you something about the way the Russians were thinking about it, for example whether they were worried about how deeply they were becoming involved; or whether they thought they were winning. There were occasionally quite dramatic developments. While I was there, the Russians changed sides in the Horn of Africa. They had been for some years the great supporters of Somalia and a dictator called Siad Barré. They'd poured money and weapons into Somalia, because they'd thought they were the pioneers of helpful change from their point of view, and anti-western. Then, after the revolution in Ethiopia, the Russians calculated, correctly, that Ethiopia was much bigger than Somalia, and was therefore a better long-term bet. Siad Barré was just another dictator; and not any kind of Communist really, whereas the Derg in Ethiopia, after the overthrow of Haile Selassie, could be seen as more genuinely ideologically aligned with Moscow. So the Russians simply changed alliances overnight, and started to devote all their money and weapons to help the Ethiopians defeat the Somalis. This was quite a big deal in the context of the time.

One thing I spent a lot of time on was Soviet relations with China. It is hard to remember now how deep the hostility was between the Soviet Union and China at that particular moment. They really hated each other, even though they should objectively have been Communist allies against the west. They just about spoke to each other, but it was a very antagonistic and suspicious relationship in most respects. One of the amusing things – amusing in some ways and unamusing in others – was the way the Chinese Embassy in Moscow behaved. The building was enormous and had a huge plot of land surrounding it on Ulitsa Druzhbi, Friendship Street, which was somewhat ironic at the time. The Embassy had been designed for 800 people, or whatever it was, and there were only about 100 of them left, so they were rattling around in this huge embassy, all living on the premises and growing

a lot of their own food, because they didn't trust Soviet supplies. One result was that they cultivated diplomats from the countries which they thought were the most anti-Soviet. We were definitely on that list, as were the Americans; and the Japanese were always high on the list too, because at that stage they were very hostile to the Russians, because of the Kurile Islands dispute. The Egyptians were considered to be anti-Soviet at the time; probably the Pakistanis, because India was in bed with the Soviet Union in various ways. The Chinese would gather these groups of what they thought of as anti-Soviet diplomats for dinners at the Embassy, which were ghastly occasions in most respects. The food was all right but they plied you with drink of various kinds, including Maotai, which is in my view one of the more disgusting spirits in the world. I recall the Japanese were always able to drink more than anybody else. It was segregated before and after dinner; the wives were separated from the husbands, and the Chinese wives – such wives as there were, because the diplomats weren't allowed to have their wives with them unless they also worked at the Embassy - always had sad tales to tell. They were not allowed to have their children with them, and ended up not seeing their children for years at a time. In any case we would have these dinners and rather stilted conversations, and then the Chinese would show us a propaganda film, and we would go home, rather drunk. It was an odd illustration of the way things were at the time.

When we were in Moscow wasn't the worst time in Anglo-Soviet relations; it had been worse before and got worse again afterwards. Before, you'd had the expulsion of the 105 Soviet spies in 1971, which had obviously made relations extremely difficult. By 1976, we were in a slightly thawing period, but this was a relative term. You were definitely on enemy territory. You were regarded as imperialist spies and any kind of contact with the ordinary population was not only difficult for you, but also very difficult for them, because you were putting them in danger by doing it.

We lived in a complex of apartment blocks in Ulitsa Vavilova, off Leninskiy Prospekt. There were four or five apartment blocks, all for foreigners, with a wall round them, guarded by militia men at the gate. So, of course, ordinary people couldn't get in and out. You could take them in in your car or walk through with them, but they were being watched and filmed, and so it was obviously dangerous for them, unless they were licensed to have contact with foreigners, as some Soviet diplomats and academics, and occasionally others, were. This meant it was extremely challenging to have any sort of normal relationship with the ordinary people of the country. It's difficult to exaggerate how odd that was as a sensation. There was also the feeling that we were being listened to and followed all the time. In reality, we

probably weren't, because even the KGB didn't have that amount of resources. But they did have microphones in every flat, which they could turn on. There was a floor on the top of the building which had no number but was where the listeners and tape recorders were supposed to be. There were lots of anecdotal stories at the time about people talking to the light fitting about what they needed and why doesn't somebody fix this or that thing, and it would be miraculously fixed the next day. Sometimes people would go home and find a Russian hat on the table because somebody had been in there. Or a cigarette still alight. You never quite knew whether this was done accidentally or deliberately. Occasionally people's tyres would be let down or slashed in the car park. These things were presumably a tactic to keep foreign diplomats on edge. It was certainly a difficult atmosphere in which to live. You were conscious of this state apparatus surrounding you, regarding you with extreme suspicion and following you everywhere you went. You couldn't really go very far anyway, because there were tight travel restrictions. You could move around inside Moscow and we could travel freely to the British Embassy dacha, in the woods outside Moscow. There was also a diplomatic complex outside Moscow to which the road was open. To go virtually everywhere else you had to apply in advance for permission to travel, through an exchange of diplomatic notes, and you often didn't know until the day before whether you were going to get permission. If you heard nothing, you couldn't go. So it was a very constrained life. All the foreigners were in the same boat, not just the westerners. The East Europeans, and the Third World diplomats, who were supposedly the friends of the Soviet Union, lived in the same complexes, as did virtually all businessmen and journalists. Foreigners who lived outside these complexes were very few and usually odd special cases.

The fact that everybody was in the same boat created a kind of esprit de corps and an active social life between different kinds of foreigners. For example we mixed a lot with the British journalists and businessmen who were there, and those of other nationalities as well. There wasn't much to do in the evening otherwise, apart from going to the Bolshoi or going to watch Soviet films, which wasn't that much fun. The entertainment scene at least enabled you to pick up some information, and get a feel for how life was for, for example, African diplomats living there, whether they had different experiences and how they were feeling about the Russians themselves.

CM: You mention in your notes that part of your job was being private secretary to the Ambassador.

JH: Yes. In fact I had three Ambassadors during my short time. It was Terence Garvey when I first arrived, then Howard Smith for most of my time, and Curtis Keeble briefly at the end. In previous times they'd had a full-time private secretary, but I had a chancery job as well, so this was an add-on to my responsibilities.

CM: Did you ever meet the foreign minister while accompanying your ambassador? Was there access at that level?

JH: I did go with him to the foreign ministry when he went to see senior officials or junior ministers, of whom there were quite a number. Access to the foreign minister himself was limited, unless your foreign minister was in town. I can't remember if I was actually at the meeting between David Owen, when he came as Foreign Secretary, and Gromyko. Probably not, I imagine, but I was certainly at the briefings and wash-ups. It was an interesting contrast between a very young, keen Foreign Secretary and Gromyko, this incredibly experienced, grim-faced Monsieur Niet figure. It was also characteristic of the exchanges of the time in that as I recall it was mostly a point-scoring argument, with little discussion of anything real. I suppose in many ways we had little to talk about bilaterally, except probably visas, because there were always endless visa problems.

Being private secretary was good, because it enabled me to go with the Ambassador not only to the Foreign Ministry, but also when he was travelling outside Moscow. Howard Smith didn't speak any Russian, unusually, because almost all British Ambassadors before and since did speak Russian. He usually travelled with his wife, and Penny came with me. These trips put quite a lot of strain on me, in the sense that I was often the main means of communication. I wasn't trained to be an interpreter, and sometimes the Soviet side would provide interpreters, but otherwise I had to do it, in so far as I was able to do so. I suppose I was good enough to do it in a crude sort of way. We went to a lot of what are now independent countries, but which were in those days provinces of the Soviet Union: Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Ukraine for example. We also went to Azerbaijan and Armenia and Georgia in one trip. They were fascinating visits in many ways, but also often very stilted, as you can imagine. We would go to a collective farm and to a factory; we would meet the local mayor. There were always official dinners, which were awful affairs: long-winded, heavy, poor food, and lots of vodka. Howard Smith didn't like drinking, but one of the characteristics of this period, because relations were so difficult in lots of ways, was that the only thing we had in common was our experience in the Second World War. So

at these occasions, people would always go back to the good old days when we were fighting the Germans together, and Anglo-Soviet friendship in the War would be endlessly toasted with vodka. And of course you had to drink the whole glass, not just sip it. The Ambassador didn't want to do that, so I had to do it on his behalf. When we went to factories or collective farms and were given, as we often were, a slice of utterly inedible pink and green cake, I had to eat it to show willing. I probably also had to drink something at 11 o'clock in the morning as well, as another excuse for our hosts to drink vodka. So by the end of the day I had already had rather a lot. Then there would inevitably be speeches at the end of dinner. The Russian ones would mostly be about Anglo-Soviet friendship, and why couldn't we go back to the good old days of the Second World War. Then the Ambassador would have to give a return speech, which I would have to translate, by which stage I was probably a bit woozy. In any case he wasn't good at making concise, clear speeches. He tended to trail off a bit – he was quite a low key character – and tell shaggy dog stories, which were impossible to translate, certainly with my level of Russian. So I did resort on various occasions to saying, 'The Ambassador just made a joke, and it would be polite if you laughed.' They thought that was funny and they did laugh. All in all, I think I probably saw more of the Soviet Union than most people in the Embassy. The only snag was having to travel by Aeroflot planes, which had a pretty terrible safety record. I remember one journey from Tadzhikistan over the Pamir mountains in a rickety old crate, when we were all fairly convinced we were not going to make it – it didn't help that there were terrified old ladies getting up from their seats around us, still clutching their bags of chickens or whatever, in order to pray in the aisle. But we got there somehow.

CM: On these visits, were you struck by how people lived in these places?

JH: You were struck above all by the poverty and drabness. There wasn't much prosperity or liveliness around. Even from the rather odd perspective of a foreign ambassadorial visit, you could see these were grim places to live. In places like Tashkent, apart from the historical sites - which were not what they are now, because their religious aspects were disapproved of, though you could still visit them - there was street after street and quarter after quarter of hideous Soviet-style blocks of flats. They were badly built, uninspiring places to live, completely inhuman-seeming, as indeed were the outskirts of Moscow where we lived. Apart from the ambassadorial visits, we were also encouraged to travel a bit on our own. In our first year, Penny and I went on a visit to a place called Kazan. Kazan is these days a rather attractive city, because its old kremlin has been restored, as have some

nice old churches. But it was different then. We went in October-November, not a great time to go - before the proper winter and just miserable and cold and damp. They were close to the most depressing two days of our lives. We had a meeting with the mayor and with one or two other officials, although we were terribly young. The rest of the time we spent wandering around the town, and there was nothing to see of interest. People looked miserable; there was no entertainment; there were no restaurants or even cafes. Well, there was one so-called cafe which was awful beyond belief. There was literally nothing in the shops. It was extraordinary. One of the things we were tasked to do by the Embassy on such trips was to look at the food supplies in the shops and do reports when we came back. In places like that there was almost nothing, and nothing fresh at all. There was tinned fish from Bulgaria and pickled cabbage and potatoes. There might be a market but again with very little in it. If you were lucky you might see a fly-blown piece of meat – at a price that most of the people couldn't afford. It was hard to imagine what most people existed on. They weren't starving, but the diet was terrible, because it was potatoes and cabbage and bread and tinned fish and nothing else. People looked pasty and unhealthy, although not necessarily very thin. It has always incidentally been one of the mysteries to me where all these tall slim girls come from in the post-Soviet period, because there weren't any then, or at least if there were, they were well hidden. The most attractive girl I ever saw in Moscow at the time was one of the Embassy cleaners, which was of course not a coincidence, as she no doubt doubled as a KGB agent.

The Baltic States were interesting to visit. The Ambassador wasn't allowed to go there, because that would have amounted to recognition of Soviet control of the Baltic States, which we didn't accept, because of the way in which they had been taken over by force. There were still former Baltic state embassies in London at that time, with a few remaining old diplomats. We were allowed to go because we were so junior that it didn't matter for recognition purposes. Penny and I went to Latvia and Estonia one Easter - it must have been the Easter of 77, I think. They were recognizably different and a bit better in some ways than a lot of the rest of the Soviet Union, because they were a bit further west and they had a bit more of recent relatively prosperous history to them. At the same time they were very gloomy because people felt that they were never going to escape from the Soviet Union. You couldn't be there in 1977 and imagine they ever would escape, because the Soviet grip was so apparently total. When it did happen, only fifteen years later, it was almost literally unbelievable. No one in 1977 could express political views of any kind, certainly not to us,

except very privately. You couldn't meet people in any kind of normal way. There was no visible resistance, whatever people thought privately. I am sure there were dissidents hidden somewhere, but at that time the dissidents in Moscow and elsewhere were seen as a somewhat dodgy commodity, because they were heavily infiltrated by the KGB, and because they often only seemed interested in getting hold of material goods from the West such as pairs of jeans, through diplomats like us, rather than being genuine free thinkers. In any case, it was depressing from a freedom point of view to go to these places around that time, and think that they would never emerge from the Soviet yoke. And yet they did. One of the weird things about the Soviet Union, when we were there, was the contrast between the internal Soviet reality and this country that was being successful in a global political sense, attracting support from Third World countries and the so-called Non-Aligned Movement, which was then much more pro-Soviet than it was pro-American. So you had a contradiction between this hugely powerful military structure, with enough nuclear weapons to destroy everything and everyone many times over, and huge numbers of forces - how good they really were, who knows? But they could certainly do the basic things like crush Czechoslovakia or Hungary if they needed to - and this successful diplomacy round the world on the one hand; and a country that manifestly didn't work in so many ways on the other. Not only was there no food in the shops, but people were miserable and repressed, and there was absolutely no freedom of movement. Some churches still existed, but religion was heavily sat on. The only people in the churches were little old ladies; no one else went. Agriculture was awful; because it was collectivised, there was no incentive to be productive. On the industrial side, central planning meant massive inefficiencies. It really was a place in those days where the people pretended to work and the government pretended to pay them. Everybody found a way of surviving somehow, through barter or corruption, but as an economy and society, it was simply unsuccessful. A Soviet workman could not put a window in properly: it would always be bodged. That applied throughout the economy: it just didn't work well. Of course, they were putting all their money and their brains into the Armed Forces, and into the nuclear effort and the space programme, and whatever helped their international prestige. But the underlying economy and the politics didn't work properly at all. Still, sitting there in 1976,77,78, you just couldn't see how the system would break, because the grip of the KGB was so total. People just didn't step out of line. If you wanted to be anything, and be promoted in whatever line of work you were in, you had to become a Party member, or certainly keep your mouth shut about anything remotely political. I suppose the other side of it was that, if you did keep your mouth shut and got on with it, by

this stage of Soviet development, the regime didn't interfere much with your personal life, unlike in China at the time, where the government and party wanted to control everything, including personal life. In the Soviet Union, there was no restriction on how many children you could have, except for the fact that you had a tiny flat and you probably couldn't afford to have more than one. Nevertheless you could see that people were drinking vodka too much and the health of the population was poor – I think even then life expectancy was declining because people were so unhealthy. The health service was pretty terrible. Even though the doctors and nurses seemed well trained, in the hospitals, there were third world standards really. That was certainly my impression when I once had to help a British tourist who fell ill in Moscow when I was on duty once – the hospital we went to was not a place you would want to have to rely on – and that was Moscow!

CM: In your notes you mention visiting Poland and East Germany in 1977 and the different perspective you had of Moscow looking back at it from further west.

JH: I dealt with Eastern Europe at the time, and we spent a lot of time trying to find out what the East Europeans really thought about what was going on, particularly on the economic side, inside their collective organisation known as COMECON. You knew that in general they hated Soviet domination, but it was hard to find practical evidence of what was really happening. I remember at the time, there were protests in Poland about how people used to be able to eat 2kg of meat a week each, and now they could only find or afford one kilo, and how terrible this was. At the same time in Moscow, there was no meat to be seen in the shops, and not much of anything else either, even though it was a bit better than Kazan. There were so-called peasant markets where you could occasionally find fresh vegetables, but they were very expensive and most of what was on sale was just more pickled cabbage. So when Penny and I took the train to Warsaw and then to East Berlin, these cities appeared really good compared to Moscow, at least in terms of the daily life of the people. Of course, they were politically controlled and repressed by the Russians and they hated that, but there were cafes, there was food in the shops, there was a much better standard of living. They had a bit more freedom, not much, but at least a little more freedom to live normal lives. Warsaw and East Berlin just felt much more like cities where you might be able to live some kind of life. If you went from London to Warsaw, you thought Warsaw was terrible. If you went from Moscow to Warsaw, you thought Warsaw was pretty good. If you were complaining in Warsaw about only getting a kilo of meat a week, in Moscow you didn't get a kilo of meat a year. That was the odd thing about the Soviet Empire. The middle was poorer

than the outer bits. The Poles and other East Europeans complained endlessly that all their best produce was being syphoned off to Moscow, but there was not much evidence of that for the Russian population. The Party maybe was benefitting in some ways, but it certainly wasn't helping the population. East Berlin was a step up from Warsaw - the East Germans were the people who came closest to making communism work, so there were cafes and restaurants that were perfectly respectable. They weren't up to western standards, perhaps, but for someone coming from Moscow it seemed pretty good.

CM: One last thing about where you lived and how you lived. You were in Leninskiy Prospekt ...

JH: The flat was uninspiring, but comfortable. We were on the eleventh floor; we had a balcony. It was an endless sea of blocks of flats everywhere. Our flat was furnished by the Embassy and their idea of taste was not necessarily our idea of taste, but it was fine. We drove into the Embassy every day and there was no traffic in those days, so you could drive easily and park anywhere, except when it snowed heavily.

CM: And you subsisted on the Embassy shop, Stockmann and the Diplomatic Gastronom.

JH: Yes, exactly. From the Diplomatic Gastronom, in exchange for hard currency coupons, you could get a lot of produce that you certainly couldn't get in the local shops, for example meat. You had to buy five kilos probably, because that was the only quantity they sold it in, but you could also get fresh vegetables and mushrooms and such like. Then you could order supplies for other things from Stockmann's in Helsinki, and the Embassy shop had a limited supply of Western products: baked beans and chocolate and marmite and porridge. We weren't living a particularly spartan life, because of the access to those things. It was an odd experience to go to the Diplomatic Gastronom, which was quite discreetly labelled and to come out on to the street with your trolley full of food, and see the passers by looking at you. In a way they were used to it, because the Party also had shops like that where the Party members bought their food. But still it was uncomfortable. It was an odd society where money didn't count in some ways. Money couldn't buy what you needed without some other means of access. It was your influence in your workplace, or the government, or best of all the Party, or maybe even simple barter. You could for example swap goods you could buy in the city with your family in the country, and then you could actually get a rabbit or a chicken.

CM: Did you or Penny feel oppressed by what you have described?

JH: We survived reasonably well. We weren't there that long, only two and a half years. But we were glad to get out, frankly, when it finished. It was fascinating, but it wasn't much fun a lot of the time, except for the parties and good friendships we made. One anecdote which illustrates the pressure we felt under. You learned very quickly that you were not supposed to talk about other people, or other people's problems, or indeed about your own problems, in any place where you could be overheard, because that would be revealing vulnerability which could be used against whoever it was. The KGB were obviously expert at picking up sensitive information and blackmailing people. After our first year we had a period of leave in the UK, and I remember very vividly being at a dinner party with some friends in London when someone started talking about some other friends of ours who were having marital problems and I said, 'Shhh, you can't talk about that.' Everyone looked at me as if I was mad, and I suddenly realised, I'm in London not Moscow. It was hardwired into your brain after a year in Moscow that you really couldn't talk freely. So it was oppressive in that sense. You had to escape regularly. We used to go to Helsinki for the weekend from time to time, because of that oppressiveness, and it was such a relief.

One of the most peculiar aspects of the experience was being in a place surrounded by millions of people with whom you had almost no contact. You could walk around among them, go to the market, go to a football match, but you couldn't have any meaningful interaction, which was uncomfortable, and artificial, and unpleasant. It wasn't a fun place to be. Businessmen used to come and spend a week there and hate it. If you happened to be on the Friday night plane out of Moscow with all the businessmen, when it took off everybody cheered because they were so pleased to get out in one piece.

Near East and North Africa Department, FCO, 1978–82

CM: With relief, John, you left Moscow in 1978 and you came back to London as desk officer for Lebanon in Near East and North Africa Department and two years later you went on to become the desk officer for Arab-Israel in the same department. Did you visit the Middle East?

JH: I did, several times, particularly when I took over the Arab-Israel portfolio. I went to Lebanon early on because it was important to understand something about what the country was going through at the time. A complicated civil war was under way, and getting worse all

the time. Bits of Beirut were being shelled and there were terrible things happening between different religious and political communities. One of the odd things I remember was the contrast between the rather glitzy, glamorous life-style still going on in Beirut and even more in a port north of Beirut called Jounieh, and the horrors of the war, where people were being blown up and shelled, and children were being orphaned. Somehow these things co-existed for a while; they still do in a funny sort of way. One of the most important local publications was a weekly magazine called *Monday Morning*. Half of it was ghastly pictures of the war and half of it was pictures of the social glitterati, sunning themselves on their yachts in Jounieh and skiing in the mountains, without any apparent discomfort at the contradiction. One other thing I remember, which seemed symbolic at the time. There was a British couple there who ran an orphanage, and a lot of orphans were being created, so they were overwhelmed by demand for places. They managed somehow to get a slot on prime-time Lebanese television to make an appeal, which they did with heart-rending pictures of children, as you can imagine. But they got absolutely no money from anybody. That somehow symbolised the way in which people were very self-absorbed, selfish, and didn't care. It was odd sitting in an office in London with three or four people in it, and receiving quite senior Lebanese politicians, who had come to see me. I didn't know or control much really, but people in the Middle East often had an exaggerated impression of the influence of the British.

Beirut was quite dangerous at the time, but you could still go there, which I did. There was a front line and bits of it were off-limits. Yet people in Damascus still used to go to Beirut for the weekend at the time, because Damascus was so awful, like a Soviet empire city, while you could have fun in Beirut. The complexities of Lebanese politics were huge, then as now, with rapidly changing alliances which were hard to follow. We weren't a big player in politics in Lebanon; it was much more of a French thing.

In contrast, in the Arab-Israel dispute we were a relatively big player. Because of the past - the Palestine Mandate and our role in the creation of Israel and the Balfour Declaration - our attitudes were seen as deeply important and symbolic by both sides. The struggle for our weight on one side or the other was therefore pretty constant. Many people no doubt overestimated our influence because of that history, and because they thought we were the best way of getting at the US. In a way we were, of course, but often our ability to influence American policy on the Middle East was overestimated. People assumed that we could do more than we could, faced with the reality of American policy with all its problems of the

Jewish lobby and the special relationship with Israel. Nevertheless we were a reasonably big player. It was also a time when European policy was beginning to develop as a separate item, and we were an important part of developing European policy on Arab-Israel. That was partly because our views were diverging from those of the Americans more than they had perhaps in the past. To caricature, we and other Europeans had more sympathy for the Palestinians than Americans did, officially anyway, and a bit less sympathy for Israel than the Americans did, officially anyway. And we didn't think that the policies of the US at that time were going to lead to a lasting peace. As Europeans we were therefore trying to carve out for ourselves a separate position, to have some influence, not just for its own sake, though to some extent it was also a way of Europe showing it existed in a significant foreign policy area, but also to steer things in the direction we thought they should go. A lot of time was spent trying to work out a unified European position, because individual countries had different starting points. We the British were always more inclined to be understanding of, if not always sympathetic to, the US position. The French obviously wanted a more independent European view as a matter of principle, and were also more sympathetic to the Palestinians. That had become their default position to cultivate the Arabs and the Palestinians, having been very close to Israel at an earlier stage. So they were outliers on that side. The Germans didn't have much of a foreign policy at the time, and were completely tied anyway in this area because of the Holocaust and what they could say about anything to do with Israel, so they kept pretty quiet. The Italians tended to be much more sympathetic to the Palestinians; the Dutch were more on the Israeli side. There was a constellation of views inside the European Union. We had significant posts in the region, and a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge, so we played a big part in trying to find the right balance. The culmination of this was the Venice Declaration in 1980, I think it was, which was more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause than we had been hitherto, in the sense of accepting more readily self-determination for the Palestinians and a Palestinian homeland and the essential need to involve the Palestinians themselves in the settlement. This was code for talking to the PLO, which was not official policy at that stage. We were heading in that direction, not as fast as the French would have wanted us to go, not as far as they had gone, but that was the way we were going. That was quite an important moment. We also, as Europeans, subsequently worked hard to develop our own comprehensive peace plan, including detailed ideas for the solution of problems such as Jerusalem and the future of the Palestinian refugees. The Israelis hated all this, obviously; the Americans were also unhappy with our trend of thinking, but I suppose they calculated it didn't matter in the end, because

we couldn't do much about it. The idea that the Europeans could play a separate role wasn't ultimately realistic, because the Israelis wouldn't accept us as a mediator. It was always a problem, that they would only accept the Americans in this role - it still is, by the way - while the Arabs thought the US disqualified themselves by being too close to Israel. So while it was slightly unrealistic to have our own peace plan, it was a way of balancing Western policy, which had become rather unbalanced in the direction of Israel.

Events at the time were dominated by what Sadat had done and the agreement between Israel and Egypt. I didn't meet Begin and Sadat personally. I was too junior. But I did brief Mrs Thatcher after she came into power in 1979. She had her own very clear views on the Middle East, not necessarily very well informed ones, but she was the MP for Finchley, a very Jewish area, and she was clearly identified in many ways with Israel. We, the Foreign Office, were seen by many as the Camel Corps and sold out to the Arab cause, so it was a tricky assignment, a few months after she became Prime Minister, to give her a briefing. I must have gone over to No. 10 to do it. I went with a man called Donald Maitland, who was the Deputy Secretary at the time, known as the 'mighty mouse' because of his physical size and excellent brain. In a way it was a bit weird for me to do this, because I was junior and there were lots of people in between me and Donald Maitland - an assistant, a head of department and an assistant undersecretary - but anyway it was decided that I had sufficient expertise. Maybe no-one else fancied it. It was pretty terrifying as a prospect, but in the end it did not go too badly. She was clearly sceptical about everything we were saying. We were putting forward the case for a balanced policy between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the need to recognise the Palestinians as a separate nation with their own rights. It couldn't just be about Israel and their security fears. She listened politely, and the questions she asked made clear that she didn't really believe in what we were saying, but she didn't actually tear us to pieces in the process, so we got out of the room feeling that we'd escaped lightly, compared with what might have been. She probably listened to us, a bit.

Just one more thing to say about the Arab-Israeli role. I was the first British diplomat to have that role who wasn't an Arabic-speaker. I think that the Israelis, when they heard this, were cockahoop that finally they were going to get a non-camel corps view of the dispute. But I fear that they were sadly disappointed in me, because I may have been more over the other way, as it were, because I didn't feel the need to be defensive about the fact that I was an Arabist, who knew the Arab world well. I was freer to take a balanced view. Not that I was anti-Israeli, I wasn't at all, but I wasn't pro-Israeli in the way that the Israelis would have

liked me to be. It was a time when, as I have said, we were developing a more nuanced position on the Palestinians, and I and John Moberley, who was the Assistant Under Secretary at the time, started the first British dialogue with the PLO. At the beginning it was confidential; it became public later. We'd had some contacts with the PLO in Beirut, and in Tunis, when they went to Tunisia when they were expelled from Lebanon. But this was the first time we were talking to them in such an official way, in London, not as the sole legitimate representatives of the Palestinians, but because we thought that they were players that needed to be talked to. The talks didn't amount to much at the time, but symbolically it was quite a big step. The Israelis hated this. Their attitude was simply that the PLO were just a bunch of terrorists. So why are you talking to them?

CM: There wasn't anybody else that you could have had contact with that could have represented the Palestinians?

JH: No, except a bunch of groups, the PFLP and various others, who were much more extreme than the PLO about Israel and much more violent than even the PLO were, so yes, they were the only ones. That was the conclusion we had reached, that whether or not you accepted them as the sole, legitimate representatives of the Palestinians, they were the best representatives of the Palestinians, for better or for worse. Therefore if you wanted a solution you needed to talk to them.

Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1982–84

CM: After four years on the Middle East and all its intractable problems, you moved to be Assistant Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary and your responsibilities were the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Latin America was new, but the other areas you had done before. This was a very important move and the Private Secretary's role inside the Foreign Office is famous. Lord Carrington was Foreign Secretary at the time. What would you like to tell us about being APS?

JH: Being at the centre of things is always fascinating and, as is always the way in these things, proximity is everything. If you're with the Foreign Secretary constantly during the day, and in touch with him through the system of boxes and files that you're putting through every night, you have a significant degree of influence, even if you don't want to abuse this. Because it's also true, and I'm not sure that everyone always got this right, you have to be a channel in both directions. You're not just the means for telling everyone what the Foreign

Secretary wants them to do, and shouting at them for not doing it properly. While you need to do some of that, you're also the channel for the Foreign Office, the departments and the senior officials, to make sure they have the chance to get their views to the Foreign Secretary. Nevertheless, you do have a position of influence out of proportion to what your age, experience and rank is, when you are doing one of these jobs. I was Assistant Private Secretary; the Private Secretary was George Walden when I started and then it became Brian Fall later. You have influence because on the files, called submissions, that go into the Foreign Secretary you put your little hand-written notes, private secretary slips on which you wrote your views. These were ephemeral, because when the files came back out again you took the slips off and threw them away, so no one was ever going to know what you had said. You might say, *This is the usual garbage from this department, so I wouldn't take this advice*; or *I think this is absolutely right, Foreign Secretary. If I were you, I'd say yes*. Or you might say nothing. You didn't have to make a comment, but usually you'd say something. You might say, *What the department is forgetting is that ... Or the politics of this is more complicated than the department are suggesting*. Whatever it might be. You also had quite a lot of influence through how you then sent the instructions back to the department, either reflecting what the Foreign Secretary had said to you in person, or what he'd written, either on your note, or sometimes on the submission itself. It was all paper-based, obviously, in those days. That was the only thing there was. So every night a whole lot of files and papers would come up for the Foreign Secretary to see, documents for him to sign and telegrams for him to read. You had to select the telegrams he read, so again you had quite a lot of influence in deciding which telegrams he should see and not see out of the great mountain which had come in. You couldn't put too many in, because he couldn't read too many. So all in all, it was and is a significant position. You travel with the Foreign Secretary. You're in all the meetings about your subjects. We had a daily meeting with him when he was around, and when he had time, to talk about travel or the political issues of the day. You also saw a lot of Cabinet stuff coming through, which was mostly nothing to do with us, on domestic policies of the day, but the Foreign Secretary was part of a number of Cabinet committees so we had to put in those bits of paper in case he wanted to express a view about any of them. It was all fascinating, but obviously long hours and hard work.

CM: What about the personalities? You had Lord Carrington, Francis Pym and Geoffrey Howe as your Foreign Secretary.

JH: Lord Carrington was everybody's favourite. He was a lovely man, is a lovely man, still alive as we speak, because he was an old-fashioned sort of politician. He was extremely charming, disarmingly so; he cultivated a deliberately non-intellectual approach to people and to subjects, but this was misleading because he was extremely sharp and was quite capable of the devastating question in the middle of an apparently innocent and rather social sort of conversation. The knife would go in at a certain point if he wanted to do that. All his staff loved him; I was only with him for three months, so it was a very short time really, but I also loved him. The Foreign Office as a whole loved him. When he had to resign because of the Falklands, the farewell party was a wake. There was not a dry eye in the house. He was a very dignified man, and he was also a big political beast. His main advantage in some ways was his relationship with Mrs Thatcher, not an easy person to deal with. She had strong views about most things, including about foreign policy issues, even if she was not necessarily the best informed person about foreign policy. In one obvious sense Lord Carrington didn't care whether or not he upset her. It didn't matter to him if he got fired, because he wasn't on that political trajectory. He was never going to be prime minister because he was a lord. He wasn't old, but he wasn't young either, and he probably thought this was going to be the pinnacle of his career. So he could within reason say what he liked to her and if she had said, 'I don't agree, you're fired,' he could say, 'OK, fine,' which gave him a lot of freedom which his successors did not have. He was able to take her on intellectually and politically, and he had that self-confidence that comes with his sort of background. He'd resigned honorably once before, when he was a junior minister of agriculture, in the Crichel Down affair, so he had a reputation. He was also great to work for in my short experience, very nice in every way, and I've remained in touch with him and remained friends.

Francis Pym was very different, brought in at a crisis moment because of the Falklands. He had been Chief Whip at one point. He was a funny character. A nice man, he wasn't intelligent in the intellectual sense, not as quick or bright as many who had been in that role. And he didn't know much about foreign policy at that stage at all. He was plunged into the crisis of the Falklands head on and that wasn't very easy. But he had a political nose, that's what he had. He could see where he wanted to get to with something and had a sort of dogged persistence about getting there if he thought it was important. But it was pretty miserable for him mostly, because Mrs Thatcher thought he was weak and not very bright, and so she could bully him, which she could and indeed did. So it wasn't a happy time for

him or for us. On the Falklands, he had minimal influence; it was very much run by her. I remember a couple of phone calls between them - we used to listen in to them to take notes - where he was just effectively sat on. She could be very brutal. He lasted a year or not much more before he was moved on, and then Geoffrey Howe came in. Geoffrey Howe was obviously a big political beast. He'd been Chancellor; he was a very bright man, though he didn't know much about foreign policy, just what he had picked up from a long political career.

His first few weeks were interesting because when he got the papers from the boxes in the evening, he'd read every word of them, because he was a voracious reader. He'd even read all the annexes, which was always difficult, because sometimes civil servants bury bad things in the annexes. And on every piece of paper he'd ask three questions. He wouldn't say yes or no, he'd just ask three questions. He was a lawyer, and that's how he dealt with things. After a few weeks, this was becoming an exponential problem, because each piece of paper generated three more, so at a certain point we had to form up and say, 'Foreign Secretary, this can't go on. When we put something in to you, it's for you to say yes or no. Of course, if you have questions, ask questions, but you can't just ask more questions and not answer any of the existing ones, or this is just not going to work.' Gradually he settled down to a more normal rhythm, but his capacity for paper was still much greater than many Foreign Secretaries before or since. He liked to be sure he had all the information in front of him, and had marshalled all the facts before he made up his mind. He became a rather good Foreign Secretary in the end, because when you are there for five or six years, just by virtue of being there, and being sensible and intelligent and forming relationships, and taking the right decisions, you tend to become a good Foreign Secretary. But in the early days, it was a different time and a bit difficult. Of course he had many difficulties with Mrs Thatcher too. He had to endure many humiliations before the worm finally turned, much later on. I wasn't there very long with him, six or nine months, perhaps. But I enjoyed working for him; he was nice, bright and good to work with. Again I stayed in touch with him from time to time afterwards

Those were the foreign secretaries. As for senior officials, I can't remember all the personalities now, but one of the things about being in the private office is that you quickly develop a view, which is a collective view, but also your personal view, about who is any good and who isn't, and which departments are effective and which are not. You know which departments, when you get something from them, you can just say, Fine, here it is,

Foreign Secretary, do you agree or not? Or I think this is right. And there are others where you say, Oh, no, not the same old stuff, badly written, not well directed, no idea of the politics. You know which are the good undersecretaries and which are not, and the ones which are trying to hide and not take decisions, or not be responsible for anything, and will pass on a difficult submission (a submission being the thing that came up from the department) saying, I haven't had time to read this properly but I'm sure it's fine. You knew which people you should put in front of the Foreign Secretary and which ones you shouldn't. There were some subjects where you'd want the head of department, some where you'd want the assistant undersecretary, and some where only the deputy undersecretary would do. Sometimes you'd really want the desk officer, because he was the one who knew what he was talking about, would not be frightened by the Foreign Secretary and would speak out for what he wanted; while in other cases, there was no way the desk officer would work; you had to have someone more senior. In general, you needed to know how the system worked and where the strengths and weaknesses of it were, including for example when you might want to bring in to a policy discussion the permanent secretary, who is a very important player in the FCO world, but not necessarily always central to policy - how far did you want to involve him and how far you didn't.

Then there is a whole other world of junior ministers to be factored in: which ones of those matter and which don't; which ones do you want to have their view, and which ones it doesn't really matter what their view is. You know which ones your boss appreciates and which ones he doesn't. There is a whole micro-climate there. It's dangerous because you don't want to abuse your position as part of the private office and the influence you have, just by proximity. Some of the subjects you may know very well, because you've done them. Arab-Israel I knew very well. Others such as South America – well what did I know about South America? Virtually nothing. So you had to be careful not to become a brutal executor of your master's will, rather than a two-way channel of communication.

CM: John, let's come now to the big event of your time in the Private Office, and of British foreign policy in the last thirty years, the Falklands War. You were in Israel with the Foreign Secretary when you had news of the Argentine invasion. Was it a horrible shock or was it something you were half-expecting?

JH: I think we had got the impression by then that something might be about to happen, but we were still completely shocked when it did happen. If we'd known it was going to

happen, obviously, we wouldn't have gone to Israel. But it wasn't a complete surprise. There had been a build up, and notably the incident of the Argentinian scrap metal merchants in South Georgia. I remember this began to happen just as I started in this job. It was hard for me to know what significance it might have, but others with more knowledge and experience no doubt should have done better. I recognised something worrying was happening, but perhaps in retrospect, not as much as I could have done. Not that there was much we could have done about it by then. In any case it was a shock. I had to wake up the Foreign Secretary in the middle of the night to tell him what was happening. We finished our business in Israel and got back to London as soon as we possibly could. It was obviously a very difficult moment.

One of the most interesting things was the way that Mrs Thatcher reacted to all this, and indeed Lord Carrington too. They were very clear: this is unacceptable; we have to reverse it. I think if I'm honest my own instinct would have been that this is really bad, but I'm not sure what we can do to reverse it militarily. We need to try to find a way of negotiating some mutually acceptable way out. There was of course a whole history of prior negotiations about the Falklands. The Foreign Office was almost always coming from the position that we must surely be able to find a way out of this conundrum. Do we really need these islands? What are they for, from our national interest point of view? Aren't they just ruining our relationships in the region to no good purpose, and costing us a lot of money too, given the tiny number of inhabitants? That was a view despised in much of the House of Commons, for obvious reasons. In any case, the natural instincts of the Foreign Office after the invasion would have been to say that we have got to find support for our position and start a negotiation about how we get the Argentines out, and how we find a solution for the future, which could perhaps be a condominium or whatever. Whereas the instinct of the politicians, including Lord Carrington, who was not a belligerent person by nature, was: we are going to go and get those islands back by force and we are going to do it now. I can remember getting back to the Foreign Office and having a meeting with Lord Carrington and others there, and that's what he said. I remember being slightly open-mouthed at the idea of sending a military expedition off in a few days' time. You have to remember that the Task Force left only a very few days after the invasion. It was a bit of a fiction actually, because while some ships sailed from Portsmouth with great flag-waving, they then had to collect all the rest of the ships, find the soldiers and weapons to go on them, and assemble the real force at sea later, as it were. But it was still a very powerful signal of intent. My recollection is

just of being amazed that that's what we were really going to do. And there were lots of obvious questions. Could we actually do that? The risks were huge. Was it really worth doing that? The decision was taken so quickly that we were going to go and get them back by force if they didn't leave beforehand that contrary opinions weren't really allowed to develop. You might have thought that Lord Carrington would have been saying, Well, I don't know, are you really sure. Aren't there any real alternatives? But no: he was absolutely clear that that's what we had to do. In any case there wasn't much room for debate. The Prime Minister was completely clear that we were going to go and get the islands back. I might have had my private doubts about the good sense of this, but it was the audacity that was so striking.

The first few days were mainly composed of trying to establish a coherent position on what we were trying to do, but also to answer questions about whose fault this was, because the Commons was baying for blood. Somebody had to take the blame for this catastrophe that had happened to us. Lord Carrington was perfectly clear that it wasn't his fault. One of the key elements in this was that HMS Endurance, the ice-breaking warship that we'd always had stationed there, as a symbol of our willingness to defend the Falkland Islands, was going to be withdrawn, at the insistence of the MOD and the Treasury. The decision had been taken to withdraw it, over the dead bodies of the FCO, because we had argued that this was exactly the wrong signal to send. But money and the need for defence cuts talked and the FCO view wasn't accepted. So Lord Carrington didn't feel that, whether or not we could have handled the issues better in the immediate run up to the invasion, he was the one who had taken the wrong decision. He believed that John Nott, the then Defence Secretary, and the MOD, with the Treasury, had taken the wrong decision, against our advice, so if anyone was resigning it should be John Nott. But John Nott made very clear very quickly that he wasn't going anywhere. And Mrs Thatcher wasn't going to sack him. As I recall, one of the key questions was how were the press going to react to this. How were the Sunday papers going to react – I think the invasion happened on Thursday. There had been statements in Parliament during the week which had gone reasonably well, even though we had to draft them at terribly short notice. But most of the Sunday papers were very hostile to the government, to Lord Carrington, saying somebody's got to go and maybe it should be him. Although he didn't want to resign, and didn't feel he deserved to resign, there were two things which weighed very heavily. He did think somebody had to resign. There had to be some sort of sacrifice, to acknowledge there had been a mistake. But more importantly in

some ways, he realised that his ability to speak only in the Lords meant that his position would ultimately be indefensible. He couldn't defend himself in the House of Commons, not only in that immediate moment of trying to defend the FCO against the accusations that our failures or omissions had caused the invasion, which he could have dealt with, but later too. The House of Commons was going to be an extremely important bear pit for everything that was going to happen in the next few weeks, including fighting a war, and he couldn't deal with this properly sitting in the Lords. Actually, I think he was right about that. There was a lot of debate about whether he should have resigned or not, but that is what he felt and that is why he went. It was a huge shame in every possible way because he had a position with Mrs Thatcher: he'd successfully persuaded her to accept the Rhodesia settlement, which she was extremely unhappy about in lots of ways; he had that prestige, that easy way with people. He was a huge loss. But that's politics; he had to go. At least he was seen to have done the honorable thing. He had that in his mind as well, of course. I recall that there was a further hostile editorial in, I think, *the Times* on the Monday morning, and he just said, I can't do this. So he resigned and was gone the same day, on that Monday. Then Francis Pym arrived and we had to try to brief him up straightaway. It was extremely intense.

CM: How did the work of the Foreign Office and of the Private Office in particular link in with the MOD and Mrs Thatcher and the whole conduct of the war?

JH: There was a War Committee which the Prime Minister chaired. The Foreign Secretary was obviously on it and I think we may have had the Permanent Secretary or some other senior official on it as well, perhaps Sidney Giffard, who was the responsible Deputy Secretary at the time. The policy was being driven above all by Mrs Thatcher, obviously, so she was the key player. A lot of our diplomatic effort was devoted first of all to the UN and getting support for our position and against the invasion in New York, which we did remarkably successfully. We also had to keep the Americans on board, and to keep the Europeans on our side. We particularly had to make sure the French were as helpful as possible, because of the French Super Etendard jets which the Argentines had, and the Exocet missiles they used once hostilities started. It was vital that the French gave us the technical details so we could try to combat them. The Chileans also suddenly became extremely important as a platform for military action. We had to try to keep the South Americans in general from being too hostile – there was a whole lot of basic diplomatic activity we had to do. But the main thing was the negotiations about the future of the islands, because all the time the Task Force was sailing there, there was more or less continuous negotiation to try to

find a non-military way out. There were mediation initiatives from the Americans, from Perez de Cuellar who was the UN Secretary General at the time, and from others too. The Americans were in a difficult position because they liked Argentina; they liked the dictatorship in Argentina. Jeane Kirkpatrick was the US UN representative and she was a great Latin America supporter. The Americans couldn't understand what we were doing. Why on earth were we going to war about what Reagan called a bunch of frozen rocks in the middle of nowhere? The Americans wanted to find a solution that didn't involve choosing between us and Argentina. Of course, we were a much stronger, more important ally than Argentina, but still they didn't want to break with them and needed to take account of the fact that the bulk of South American opinion was with Argentina, with the exception of Chile. The US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, engaged in extraordinary shuttle diplomacy, flying backwards and forwards from Buenos Aires to London several times, which was something like an eighteen hour flight, in an attempt to negotiate a way forward. Mrs Thatcher herself was pretty clear that the Argentinians wouldn't withdraw voluntarily, and she was right about that. She wanted to invade, I think. The Foreign Office had to be busy trying to look at ingenious half-way houses and diplomatic solutions, but I don't think any of the ideas put forward ever had much chance of success. Mrs Thatcher talked, she listened, but I don't think there was ever a realistic chance of a settlement of the kind that the Americans were promoting. Nevertheless a lot of effort had to go into the negotiations and into writing position papers to react to these various initiatives and proposals that were coming from lots of quarters during that period of several weeks before the Task Force actually got there. That was the extraordinary thing. You'd sent off this Task Force but it took them a long time to get there and to be in a position to do anything militarily. We had to assemble our land force, get them on the ships, or fly out crucial capabilities to Ascension Island. In fact, even before the Task Force actually got there, very difficult things started to happen, like the sinking of the Argentine cruiser, the Belgrano, by a British submarine, with great loss of Argentine life, and all the questions about whether it was sailing into the naval exclusion zone, or was on its way out.

A short pause.

We were talking of the Haig shuttle and the Perez de Cuellar initiatives. There was a huge amount of diplomatic activity, all of which would amount to nothing in the end, we were pretty sure, but of course you couldn't be absolutely confident of that. People forget now what a huge risk it was, sending that Task Force. We now know what happened: they were

successful; the Argentinian troops were mostly young recruits and hopeless militarily; our casualties were significant but not enormous. But the risks were huge and unpredictable at the time, for example of the the QE2 being sunk, or some major battleship being sunk, or having a major military defeat eight thousand miles from home when it was only four hundred miles from Argentina. That would have been the end of the government and Mrs Thatcher, and they knew it. So it was an immensely bold and risky thing to do.

CM: Did the politicians and the civil servants sit down and weigh up the risks and whether it was worth it?

JH: In this particular case Mrs Thatcher was perfectly clear what she wanted to do and what was going to have to happen, not least politically. People forget that she wasn't in a strong political position when this started: she was deeply unpopular; the government was divided about economic policy; the polls were not good. Being decisive in this moment was what made her reputation and her premiership in retrospect, but it wasn't so obvious at the time. She was taking a huge risk, but she was very clear about it and about the need for it, even if even she may have had her private moments of doubt. I think the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary at the time, Francis Pym, not the strongest personality you can imagine, and probably the Ministry of Defence, though they felt the need to redeem themselves in a way, were all thinking to themselves: good heavens, this is really risky. But we were going to do it anyway, because she was absolutely determined. The extent of the risks was why, although the diplomatic efforts were almost certainly doomed to fail, we did take them seriously, just in case we might have found a solution which would have enabled us to avoid them. But I don't think those negotiations were ever close to succeeding, although some ingenious ideas were produced and a lot of discussion was had. There was a lot of very good diplomacy at the time, for example by Tony Parsons, who was in New York and managed to assemble an astonishing amount of opinion behind us and get UN backing for what we were about to do, despite a lot of scepticism about the real strength of our case and our claim to the islands. I'm not sure we could do that now. That was one of the justifications for our then diplomatic effort, that it had over time created a lot of good will to call on round the world, which we drew on heavily to get that support. Nico Henderson in America was also doing an amazing job on the sofas of the TV studios, with his tie round the back of his neck, explaining why we had to do what we had to do. In fact the Americans were militarily extremely helpful, despite their diplomatic doubts. Cap Weinberger in particular gave us a lot of military assistance, for which he received a knighthood later, an honorary knighthood,

even though this military help was not necessarily quite in accord with the balanced policy that the Americans were diplomatically pursuing at the time.

It was a very difficult period. The Foreign Office was not centrally involved in the military side of it; that was being done by the MOD; but it was an all-government effort for a while until the quick and successful result came at the end. I remember well those moments, which could have been much worse, when HMS Sheffield was sunk by Exocet missiles, when the Sir Galahad and other troop ships were attacked, and people were burned, with many casualties. And I remember those terrible MOD press conferences, with a spokesman – Ian Macdonald was his name, I think - who had this funereal voice. Whenever he came on, everybody thought, Oh no, what bad news is coming now? When he announced that HMS Sheffield had been attacked and was sunk, it was a huge shock to everyone. We simply didn't know then how many more of those deadly attacks there were going to be. In the end there were rather less than we might have feared. People tended to forget those moments once the actual invasion had been successful and the Argentines had surrendered. It was clear afterwards that their military effort had been very poor - they hadn't supported the poor bloody infantry on the ground and Galtieri and his military colleagues had no real idea what they were doing, luckily for us, even though defending the islands should have been much easier than attacking them from such a distance. In the end it was a much quicker and easier operation than we could possibly have dreamed at the beginning. There were certainly blips on the way, and casualties, as the troops moved towards Port Stanley, but the war was over by June. The land campaign didn't take more than a few weeks once we'd landed and established ourselves. The landing itself was dramatic, as narrated to everyone back home by the BBC. I also remember dramatic moments like when we bombed Stanley airfield for the first time, with Vulcan bombers flying endless refuelling trips all the way from the UK and back again. In retrospect the raid on the airfield didn't do much damage, but symbolically it was hugely important at the time.

Looking back on the whole operation, there was a sense that those who had been focussing on this issue in the Foreign Office, and our Embassy in Buenos Aires, had failed to spot what was coming, and should have drawn more attention to the risks. It was a secret operation by the Argentinians, but the question was whether we should have known more in advance, and taken the Argentine rhetoric more seriously. Different people reacted in different ways. John Ure, who was the Assistant Under Secretary at the time and had been very much an advocate of diplomacy with Argentina, was clearly under enormous pressure and really was

not able to play much of a role in what followed. The Head of Department, Robin Fearn, was an absolute star. He had to take his share of the blame, but he was the one who kept a lot of the diplomacy going, and provided the real expertise we so badly needed, about the islands and the South American scene as a whole. He did not have as much support from above as he should have had. Michael Jay, who I think was the Private Secretary to the PUS at the time, had to make a lot of effort to fill in some of those gaps, producing and organising papers. It's important to remember that as a country we were not close to Latin America. When I was in the Private Office, the Foreign Secretary of the time, it was probably Francis Pym, but it might have been Geoffrey Howe, made one of those periodic speeches that Foreign Secretaries make about the need to relaunch our relationship with Latin America. I think he made the speech at Canning House, which leads on our relationship with that part of the world. It was one of those things that you knew that foreign secretaries had said every five years and yet virtually nothing had happened. The business community were not interested; it was just too far and too difficult. We're still doing it now.

CM: Other big issues of your time in the Private Office: the Hong Kong negotiations.

JH: Yes, I think the agreement was signed in 1984, when I was there. There was a lot of preparation for those discussions. Mrs Thatcher's instincts were all against making such an agreement. She didn't like the Chinese; she didn't like Communists; she didn't like giving up territory. So there had to be a huge effort to persuade her that actually we had no choice, because the New Territories had to be given up under the lease we had signed, and the rest of it was completely unsustainable, for example without guaranteed water supplies from China; the lease was up; the game was up and we had no choice but to negotiate the best terms for the hand over that we could. She took a lot of convincing, so the Foreign Office and Percy Cradock had a big job on their hands. That was one of the things on my desk – not that I myself had much particular expertise to offer in this area.

I also remember a lot of worrying about Belize. We had been trying to get out finally from Belize for a long time. Every time we tried to withdraw the garrison, the argument came back that, if we left, the Guatemalans would invade, so we can't leave. We kept going round that circle. Of course it wasn't the biggest issue on the government's agenda at the time, but it was one of those things that sticks in my mind. The Middle East was always a big issue in many ways, because those were terrible times in Lebanon, and the Middle East Peace Process was in one of those phases when it was going nowhere. The Israelis had invaded Lebanon in

1982 and then there had been the Shatila and Sabra camp massacres; we had seen the attacks on the American and French barracks in Beirut, which killed hundreds of people.

Persuading the Israelis to withdraw from Lebanon and establishing UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon) were big questions that were very preoccupying at the time.

The UK was not necessarily central to all of that, but we were a significant player in the Security Council and elsewhere. We had good information, good intelligence and we had views. We expected to be involved, more than I think would be the case now.

It wasn't good having three Foreign Secretaries while I was in the Private Office. I suppose I was unlucky or careless in losing two in such a relatively short period of time. But it was fascinating to see the different personalities. It was also a difficult time for any Foreign Secretary because the dominance of Mrs Thatcher was increasing, including in foreign affairs. The Foreign Secretary had to struggle to find space to exist with an independent view. Charles Powell, Mrs Thatcher's foreign affairs Private Secretary, who joined her while I was in the Private Office, taking over from John Coles, was already beginning to exercise a lot of influence, though not as much as he did later. I got on well with Charles, having worked with him before in NENAD, but he was clever and a strong personality. So it wasn't the easiest time in some ways for the Office, but it was still fascinating to be there and watch it all from a box seat.

INTERVIEW 2 WITH SIR JOHN HOLMES 25 JANUARY 2018

Today is 25 January 2018. This is the second interview for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme with Sir John Holmes, Catherine Manning recording. John, at our last interview we were talking about your time in the Private Office, when you were Assistant Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary. When that came to an end in 1984, you went to Paris as First Secretary Economic. What would you like to say about Paris?

1st Secretary (Economic), Paris, 1984–87

JH: I didn't know at that stage that Paris was going to figure quite as much as it did in my life later, when I became Ambassador, but it was obviously a wonderful place to be going. It was an interesting time in France in that the Socialist President, Mitterrand, who had started off in 1981 in a very radical way by taking France in a different economic direction, a much more Socialist direction, was by this time going in a different direction again. By the time we got there, which was early '84, he had already famously reversed course, and was now on a

more conventional economic trajectory, which was symbolized by his choice of Prime Ministers. Not long after we arrived, he appointed Laurent Fabius, a very young Prime Minister, more of a moderniser and much less of an old-fashioned, red-blooded Socialist than his predecessor, Pierre Mauroy. We lived in a nice house we rented in the suburbs, in Levallois-Perret - which is very smart now, but was then a very mixed *quartier* – with small children and it was an enjoyable period personally, apart from anything else.

CM: Did you already speak good French when you went there?

JH: Not really, at least until immediately before we went. I had done some French in the Foreign Office. The Office wanted everyone to speak French, but you weren't given time off to learn it; you were just supposed to know it or learn it in your spare time. I had already done one short French immersion course and then, just before Paris, I went off to do another one at Leeds University for two weeks. It was exhausting because the rule was that you spoke French every minute of the day, even when speaking to your wife in the evening, though I am not sure everybody obeyed that entirely. But that was the idea: all the meals, all the classes, everything was in French, which is excellent for your French, but also very draining. In any case, by the time I got to Paris, my French was certainly good enough to be readily useable.

CM: Because in Paris it is no holds barred: you are operating in French all the time.

JH: Yes. Some of the people we interacted with spoke English, but most average civil servants, and certainly most politicians, did not speak English, or not well enough to communicate properly. English was much more widely spoken by the time I went back twenty years later. But even then, most politicians didn't speak good English, although some spoke some English. In the 1980s civil servants in the outward-facing ministries would certainly tend to speak English - in the Quai d'Orsay obviously, and in some of the others - but if you got into the more obscure bits of the administration, certainly if you went outside Paris and were in a remote prefecture, you couldn't communicate well in English. So French was absolutely indispensable. In any case, as usual, perhaps more so in France than anywhere else, people liked the fact that you spoke their language, and would speak much more freely in response. They could express themselves with much more nuance, and were much more likely to tell you things, even things they didn't mean to tell you, if they were speaking in their own language. For yourself, if you are speaking a foreign language, you

speak it more slowly, you have more time to think, which can be helpful. In other words, operating in French made a lot of positive difference, and we spoke French all the time.

It was an interesting time because the new Socialist wave of administrators hadn't been in power for a very long time and they were determined to be much less old-fashioned in their attitude to everything. So they were more open than some of their predecessors would have been. They had this habit, which has probably gone again now, but which was prevalent then, of addressing everybody as *tu*, in the familiar form, even if they'd never met you before. Traditionally in France you used *vous* until you were asked to use *tu*. It was quite disconcerting in a way, but it meant they were a bit more relaxed, more open, more friendly. I was working on the economic and European Union side of things, so I wasn't involved in classic political diplomacy. One of my jobs was to stay in touch with the key technical ministries around industrial policy, which was a big issue in those days, and follow relevant European policy in areas such as energy, steel and car making. So I spent a lot of time with civil servants in those ministries, particularly with those people who were the close advisers to the ministers, in the *cabinets*, private offices as we would call them. French ministers had large *cabinets* in those days, so as well as the people in the line departments, they had probably fifteen, twenty or even thirty *cabinet* advisers, who were much more influential than the people in the line departments, and usually political appointees – the equivalent of Special Advisers in the British system these days. They were usually young, very bright, had come out of ENA or another of the really good colleges, and quite liked being taken seriously and given lunch by people like me. I'd take them to a good restaurant, and talk about whatever I wanted to find out about. I had my agenda and no doubt they had theirs, but it was an opportunity to get to know what was really going on inside the French administration. One of the features of life in France in those days, and I think it's still true, was that people, even if they were incredibly busy, would take time for a proper lunch. If you were paying for it, and gave them a decent glass of wine at the same time, they were happy to come and talk to you. That was the deal, which worked extremely well. So I got to know well some of these key, smart people in the Ministry of Industry and in organizations like *Électricité de France*, and *Charbonnages de France*, as well as Renault and Peugeot and companies like that, to find out how they were operating. The point is that we were quite interested – people in London were quite interested, not in the Foreign Office so much but in the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) - about how the French government worked with key industries and companies, and in particular - this was what I was doing to a large extent – about how much

they were cheating on the EU state aid rules, because there were very strict rules about what the government was allowed to do to help its own industry, because otherwise you were undermining the Single Market. The British Government had this default belief that the British were whiter than white themselves, and didn't do any of this stuff, while everybody else did, particularly the French, so they wanted to know exactly what was going on. You could bring a case against the French, or against any country, if you thought they were breaking the rules, or you could get the Commission to bring a case, more likely, and even get national policy overturned. So one of my jobs was to try and find out how much the French were breaking the rules in some of these key areas, particularly the car industry, the steel industry, shipbuilding, and some of the big engineering companies.

CM: Did you find that the British suspicion was true and the French were significantly breaching the rules, or was this an urban myth of the British?

JH: No, it wasn't an urban myth. They certainly were breaking or bending the rules in some areas. They had a whole raft of ways in which they helped not only big companies but also small companies, which we tried to track. Some of these were legitimate and some were on the edge of EU rules, or beyond it. They had ways of making sure that big companies were somehow kept afloat; these were companies in areas which were under strain everywhere in the European Union, such as ship building, or coal mining, or steel. For example, there was an excess capacity of steel making. Everybody was having to cut, so there was a big emphasis on trying to have a level playing field rather than allowing countries to subsidize their own companies to keep them afloat longer than their rivals in some other country, like the UK, for example. It was part of the French economic approach in general to favour incumbents. If a company or industry, or even an individual type of job, was already there, you did everything you could to keep them afloat to allow them to survive, rather than thinking, as was then the Thatcherite philosophy in the UK, that if their time had come, their time had come and they needed to go - let them go quickly and something else more profitable and more future-related will come along to replace them. The French approach was heavily influenced by the trades unions, of course, which were very left wing at that stage, and still powerful, at least in the public sector: their view in sum was that we must preserve existing jobs at all costs; the only real jobs are industrial jobs; other jobs are just frippery while this is the real thing; the proper hard-core of a country's economy is to produce things, physically. So the French did tend to put a lot of money into preserving industries, and keeping them afloat longer than we would have done. Our industrial base

was declining much faster than theirs was, although theirs was also declining, but they put more effort into trying to keep it intact. We simply didn't want to put a lot of public money into doing that.

I had a lot of interesting experiences talking to people about these issues, and I also used to go to see things for myself. I went to visit car factories, at Citroen, Peugeot and Renault. I went down a coal mine in Lorraine, which was one of the few coal mines still going in France at the time, which was a pretty extraordinary experience. It was the kind of coal mine that probably wouldn't have been open anywhere else, because the conditions were absolutely terrible and the financial losses huge too. I went to a steelworks and watched how they were mass-producing steel at the time. Always with this underlying idea: what was their industrial policy? Was it working? And how much were they cheating? I fed this information back to London and to our people in Brussels so we could try to keep the playing field level.

The British position was always a little bit hypocritical because we did some of this state aid as well. We didn't do as much as the French, but we weren't whiter than white. We also had our own political or other reasons for keeping some companies or industries going longer than would have been absolutely guaranteed by the market, shall we say. Other countries were also doing the same thing, so that was why there was a lot of emphasis across Europe on this state aid policy.

I also spent quite a lot of time following energy policy. This was a time when we were making a link between the UK and France with an electricity connector, so you could export power, or indeed could move it in both directions, which was good for both sides. We were interested in what French policy was, including on the oil side, because this was not long after the oil crises of the end of the 1970s.

I was also part of wider reporting on the French economy, though that wasn't my primary responsibility. The French economy was of special interest in London at the time, in the Treasury and elsewhere, because, although the French weren't pursuing the full-blooded Mitterrandiste, more or less Communist, policies of 1981, they were still on a very different path from the British government. We spent a lot of time promoting in France some of the ideas we then had about how you should run economies. We made a big effort to tell the French about privatization, for example, and to promote ideas like PFI (Private Finance Initiative), where you used private money to build public buildings - much discredited now by the way, but very much in vogue then. The Economic Counsellor in the Embassy at the

time, Roger Garside, was a great believer in these Thatcherite policies and therefore worked to push a lot of these ideas on the French. It was a time of a lot of change in the British economy: for example the Big Bang in the City, which was destroying some old British banks, but allowing London to become a major financial centre in a way that it hadn't quite been before. This was watched in horror by the French, who didn't go for that kind of approach. So there was plenty of contrast and a lot of mutual interest in what we were each doing. Even if the French didn't want to follow us, they wanted to see how it worked. We held numerous seminars in the Embassy or in the Residence where we invited French businessmen, bankers, journalists, officials, ministers, to come and listen to this new philosophy from across the Channel.

This was all against the background of our position in the European Union. It was a classic time for our policy in Europe. We were in the thick of it, but usually the slowest train in the convoy, trying to hold back the processes of unnecessary integration, as we saw it. The particular issue that was most divisive at the time was our contribution to the European budget and Mrs Thatcher's famous handbag-waving: 'We want our money back', 'It's not fair' and so on. Not long after I got there, in 1984 I think it was, there was a European Summit in Fontainebleau where the first deal was done, whereby we got a rebate on our net contribution. The French had fought against this from the beginning, on principle, because they said that we were looking at this entirely from the wrong perspective, and also of course for less principled reasons. Our contribution, they said, was a purely automatic thing, just a reflection of how the system worked in terms of tariffs and fees and levies that were collected on trade and the size of our economy. And anyway, if the UK kept saying how successful their economy was, that naturally meant we had to pay a bigger fee. These were of course self-serving arguments, because the French were big net beneficiaries at that stage, particularly on the agricultural side, and the less we paid, the more they would have to pay themselves. So there was a lot of tension about all this, and quite a lot of disdain in the French system for the British behaving typically as a nation of shopkeepers, ignoring the nobler arguments about the European project. There was a famous phrase of Mitterrand's, which he used at the Fontainebleau Summit talking to the press, saying the British '*mégotaient*'. We all had to go and look up its meaning. *Mégot* is a cigarette butt, and his point was that we the British were scrabbling around after pathetic bits of money, as opposed to Mitterrand who was thinking great thoughts about the future of Europe. But in the end the French had to accept that we had a point and we got enough support from elsewhere to enable

a deal to be done. It was still an issue twenty years later, but that was the first time there was a practical achievement, a recognition that we had a case and that the rest of the EU needed to do something. The more fundamental problem was that this sort of argument constantly poisoned our relationship with the European Union in general, but with the French in particular, because they felt themselves to be the originators and main defenders of the European Union. They saw the European Union as their multiplier abroad. In those days - they wouldn't now - they really saw the European Union as a bigger France. It was their construction and they didn't like the British coming along and changing the rules and wanting exceptions, as we always did, and rallying people against them, and using the small member states against them. All of this made for quite a difficult relationship on the European Union side.

The other big argument when we were there, from '84-'87, but also long before and after that, was about the Common Agricultural Policy, where we simply had a completely different view of what it should do, and thought it was too wasteful and expensive, as well as protectionist. The French on the other hand regarded it as fundamental to their view of their economy and their lifestyle, that they had to support the countryside and agriculture and try to keep small farmers going, rather than allowing them to go to the wall and be rationalized into bigger ones. They came at it from a different standpoint. They had parts of the countryside of France - a much bigger country than Britain - which were being depopulated and they wanted to keep people on the land, which has never been really an issue in Britain. We tend to regard ourselves as too full, as it were, as opposed to too empty. In any case the argument about the Common Agricultural Policy was pursued at every level. Gradually, we chipped away at it and made it more sensible. Probably even the French would think we did, now, although they wouldn't accept it at the time. But, again, it was something that made life difficult; it poisoned the relationship. It meant we couldn't really discuss easily and positively the bigger issues of where the European Union should be going. Rather we were just regarded as a nuisance, as opposed to the dominant and supposedly always positive relationship with the Germans. This was the time of the Elysée Treaty between France and Germany - I think it was signed in 1984 - in which the two governments agreed to consult systematically about everything and decreed that all ministers should meet regularly, individually and collectively. At the same time, it was interesting to notice that the French were often uncomfortable with the Germans, for obvious historical reasons, and also because they didn't think the Germans really shared their views on some crucial issues. We were a

much more important partner on foreign policy; the Germans didn't really have a foreign policy in those days, beyond Europe. So we worked with the French in terms of foreign policy and security in a way that the Germans never could. We didn't always agree with the French about every international issue, of course, but we had a relationship there which was important. In some ways and in some areas the French found us easier to talk to than the Germans, just as the Germans found it easier to talk to us in some ways than to the French. That was why there was always this idea even then - and it was much more evident later - that somehow we ought to be able to make this a triangle of three equal major powers with different points of view and different historical traditions, but working together to make a success of the EU. We always wanted to break into the Franco-German motor, as it was known, and make it a triangular motor, but we were never successful, and in fact were never likely to be. Even though the Franco-German relationship was never as good as it was claimed, and there were always problems, and they often disagreed strongly about some things, they would always find a fudge, a way forward, a compromise, because ultimately they both knew they had to do that to keep the whole European project moving. Whereas we were always an outsider, knocking at the door, but never quite sure whether we wanted to be in the centre of Europe or not, or wanted the European project to go any further, and often seeking opt-outs.

This was also the time when there was an agreement to build the Channel Tunnel, a project with a long history - and a long history of failure. One of my particular memories in this context was of an Anglo-French summit, I think it was in late '84. We had these set piece bilateral summits, usually once a year, when the Prime Minister came to Paris or the President went to London and brought a whole lot of ministers with them. Everyone had their own bi-laterals, and then there were plenaries and conclusions and communiquees and so on, all over a couple of days. Mrs Thatcher came with a whole bunch of ministers for one of these summits, and the big issue on the agenda, apart from all the European arguments about budgets and whatever else was going on in the world at the time, was this: was there going to be an intergovernmental agreement to build a Channel Tunnel or not? I think at that stage the various projects which had been around - there were four main contenders, two of which were bridges and two of which were tunnels - had been narrowed down to the most realistic one, which was a rail tunnel. People would have liked a road link, but it was going to be too difficult and too expensive, and bridges - interesting that Boris Johnson has raised this question again recently - were also thought of as posing too many practical problems, for

example for sea traffic and protection from bad weather, as well as being expensive. So there was a viable rail project there to be picked up, but it was also clear that, while the French would have been prepared to spend public money on it, we were not. So if it was going to be built, it had to be built by private funding. Nevertheless, the governments would have to support it, and put something into it, for example underwriting the project in various ways. As I recall, the summit was happening with it being quite unclear beforehand whether Mrs Thatcher was going to agree to this or not. Her instincts from her grocer's daughter, ideological point of view were against these big projects, because they were always white elephants; they always cost more taxpayers' money than you thought; they always took much longer than you thought; was this really a priority? Did it really matter? There were plenty of ferries going backwards and forwards. What was the point? As against these arguments was the notion that this would be a very symbolic sign of the link between Britain and France, and indeed between Britain and the continent - the old mantra of 'Fog in the Channel, continent isolated' would be over. It would also be a legacy issue for any Prime Minister; finally implementing a huge project which had been talked about for hundreds of years. In any case it seemed clear that she hadn't made her mind up whether she wanted to go for this or not.

Late on the first evening, when the delegation had just arrived - I think there had been some initial meetings but the proper bilaterals were the following day - there was a gathering of the key British ministers and officials in the Residence, and I somehow managed to sneak myself in and hide behind a sofa. There was a DTI minister there, so I was accompanying him; I was his minder, as it were. As I recall, the meeting was upstairs in the *Salon Vert*, with everybody sitting around on sofas and chairs in a rather haphazard fashion; it wasn't a round-the-table discussion at all. It was very informal, but fascinating. The ministers had a debate about what they were going to discuss the following day, but the main point was about the Channel Tunnel. Geoffrey Howe was there as the Foreign Secretary, sitting on the fence. Nigel Lawson as Chancellor was instinctively not a fan. Michael Heseltine, at MOD at the time and a great European, was obviously in favour. Peter Walker, I think he was Minister of Energy at the time, another great European, was also in favour. The Transport Secretary was Nicholas Ridley, who was a Thatcherite ideologue and didn't believe in this project at all. I think everybody thought, including Nicholas Ridley, that he'd basically won this argument; Mrs Thatcher was not going to buy this. It just wasn't the kind of thing she did. But there was a long debate with a lot of impassioned weighing in from Heseltine and others, and eventually it became clear that she was going to go with it. She'd been persuaded somehow

that this was the right thing to do, and maybe influenced by the legacy point. As I recall, Nicholas Ridley was discomfited by the way the discussion went in the end. The next day she did do the deal and the rest is history. The company that built the tunnel went bust later, but at least we have the tunnel and it still works extremely well. So I saw a little piece of history there.

CM: You mention in your notes the *Rainbow Warrior*. Were you involved in that in any way?

JH: I wasn't involved directly, but it was such a fascinating saga. This was a Greenpeace ship which was sunk in a harbour in New Zealand, with one crew member killed, though this hadn't been intended by those responsible. The point about it, as we now know, was that this was a secret operation carried out by French intelligence operatives, even though they denied it for a long time. It had almost certainly been approved at the highest level, perhaps by Mitterand himself, although he denied it, and had certainly been approved by the Defence Minister. The reason for the operation was to try to silence Greenpeace protests against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. What was interesting about it was the different way this sort of scandal - and it was a scandal, both because of the original operation and because of the subsequent denial and attempted cover up - progressed and was handled in France from what would have happened in the UK. It was a scandal which would certainly have brought down a British government. If they had done something like this, then tried to cover it up, and then been caught out, and been gradually forced into more and more admissions about who'd actually approved it, and who'd done what and why they'd done it and so on, forced by outside investigations, not by themselves, no UK government could possibly have survived. And yet, somehow in France the scandal never quite took off. Even when the truth came out, the people who had done it were protected, got out of prison very quickly and were looked after in various ways.

There were other scandals of a similar kind, which grew and mushroomed and became issues in the press, and just when you thought that something dramatic had to happen - how can the government or whoever survive this? - they gradually deflated again and eventually disappeared. The ultimate sanctions were never there, because there was a culture of cover up; or perhaps more fairly there was a culture of mutual solidarity of not pushing these things too far. Everybody in politics had bodies buried somewhere and if you pushed too hard, as

the opposition, the other side knew where your own scandal was, so you had to be a bit careful.

Some of the press ran hard with the *Rainbow Warrior* saga. Indeed *Le Monde* ran with it every day for weeks. But it never quite came to a proper conclusion, and people lost interest in the end. It is difficult to know whether it was in the end elite self-censorship; that journalists didn't want to push it that far, or whether they met resistance, which they certainly did, so that the trail never quite reached the President. Various people were sacrificed along the way, including the Defence Minister Charles Hernu, but didn't really spill the beans fully. In this case there seemed to be little public outrage, because it was connected with French prestige and French nuclear policy - the glory of France, the *rayonnement de la France*. Some people were outraged, obviously, that this clandestine operation which had killed someone had happened in their name, but I think a lot of other people in France thought that NGOs like Greenpeace had it coming to them. This was the bigger interest of the state, so it was OK. France's nuclear weapon was in their terms a more important expression of their sovereignty and their power in the world than ours was. Because of the Second World War and their humiliation in that War they were more sensitive about their position in the world, and therefore more aggressive about it than we felt the need to be. Although our histories are very similar, our attitudes on that point were quite different. And there was more solidarity among elites when it came to international affairs. They fought like cats on internal policy, but on this kind of issue they tended to hang together more and not push attacks beyond a certain point. The French press was of course in any case a very much tamer affair than the British press, certainly then. They don't have, or didn't have then, anything like the British tabloid press. They had people writing erudite, learned articles about how awful this or that development was, but the screaming headlines and fierce assaults of the *Daily Mail* or the *Sun* were just not there.

The other side of this was that politicians' private lives, which were scandalous in various ways, including at the highest level of Mitterrand and Presidents before and after him, were never gone for by the press. The journalists in Paris all knew about these things; indeed very often the affairs were with journalists, which perhaps gave them an extra reason for not running with such stories. But the attitude was that a politician's private life was nothing to do with his activity as a politician, nothing to do with his judgment as a minister and not of rightful interest to the public. Of course, it was of interest to them, in a salacious way, but there was self-censorship of the journalists not to write about it and in a way self-censorship

on the part of the public not to be interested in it beyond a certain point. They assumed the politicians all had mistresses; it had always been like that; so what's the problem? I think that attitude has changed significantly now. I think it changed when people discovered after Mitterrand's death that he'd not only had a mistress all that time, but had also been keeping her in a flat at public expense, and had had a daughter with her, who only emerged publicly after his death. People also only found out after Mitterrand's death how ill he had been for so long. That too had been hushed up. I think many people were shocked that there was a whole side of Mitterrand which everybody around him had known about and connived at and that had never been revealed. People felt that they had had a right to know that their President really wasn't, by the end, totally fit to operate. I should add that when it came to money scandals in politics, rather than just the private lives of politicians, it started to get more serious, even in France.

CM: I have always felt that the French don't have the penny pinching attitudes to public finance that the Anglo-Saxons have. They like their government to project a fine image.

JH: I think it's a bit more complicated than that. The French public were OK with politicians' private lives: that's their business, we don't need to know that. The press doesn't need to write about it, and that's OK. When it came to money, I think they certainly believed that their President and other ministers should be kept in an appropriate style, which involved cars and flunkys. They didn't really have a problem with that. They even accepted a level of corruption that we wouldn't accept. But when they thought those limits were being exceeded, that was a matter of legitimate public concern and those concerned should be exposed. That sentiment grew over time, to the extent that more recently there have been lots of scandals about ministers' flats and how big they are, for which ministers have had to resign.

It was quite shocking for me to discover when I was there that inside these ministerial *cabinets* I was talking about, the *chef de cabinet* or the *directeur de cabinet*, the effective head of it, seemed to have a slush fund. They actually had brown envelopes with cash in them which they could use for all sorts of things, in a way which was not accountable. There were no records kept, as far as I know, and I don't think anybody really knew what they did with it. They could give bonuses to their staff, or they could have some little operation that nobody knew about. That was inconceivable in the British system, literally inconceivable. And if the officials in France had such slush funds, you can be sure that the ministers did as

well. Again this was more or less known to the press, and accepted as part of the system in a way that it wouldn't be in the UK. But if any of it went beyond a certain point, either with Mitterrand and his mistress, or later on with Chirac and flats in Paris, then there could be real trouble.

The *cabinet* system was a big difference between us. I had been a private secretary in London, where a minister had two or three private secretaries and a couple of other people, a PA and a diary secretary, and that was it. That was the whole ministerial office. In London, the real power or at least the real knowledge and expertise lay in the departments who funneled their views up to the top, and then decisions were funneled back down. The French on the other hand had these large *cabinets* as parallel structures.

CM: And what about the use of SPADs (special advisers) in Britain, which must have come in the late 90s?

JH: That's a bit of a replication of the *cabinet*, but even now it is on a much smaller scale than in France. French ministers might have had fifteen or twenty SPAD equivalents.

CM: And in France were the cabinets paid for by the civil service or by the political parties?

JH: I think they were paid for out of government funds. They operated like civil servants in many ways, but they were parachuted in from outside the normal structures, not necessarily knowing anything about the subjects in question, but no doubt thinking they knew a lot. Of course the system had advantages, because it meant that politicians had plenty of alternative sources of advice and were therefore not as reliant on their staid civil servants as perhaps ministers were in the UK. One of the features of the French system, I always observed, was that the government could turn on a sixpence; they could change policy very quickly and without warning, in foreign policy particularly. Our system was much more joined up, and was one where information flowed much more freely, where we didn't have this attitude that the French have, that information is power, so you keep it very close to yourself. In our system, once we had worked out a policy, everybody knew what it was and everybody promoted it in a very uniform way across the world: that's what the Foreign Office did. But it made it quite hard to change policy. The French had their own policies, of course, but they didn't necessarily share information and ministerial thinking in quite the same way. So they could change approach quite quickly, and nobody seemed to turn a hair when they did. It was quite normal. They could for example announce a major international conference on

some big issue at a moment's notice, without any preparation, without the press asking too many awkward questions about why they were doing it. And of course the President did not have to answer questions in Parliament or give press conferences except when he felt like it. All this had its advantages, and the *cabinet* system was part of it.

CM: You were in France for three years?

JH: It was about three and a half years.

Assistant Head of Soviet Department, FCO, 1987–89

CM: You came back to London in 1987 as the Assistant in Soviet Department. Things in the Soviet Union were starting to get a bit more exciting by the end of the '80s.

JH: They were. I must have started there in late '87 as the Assistant - an odd title, but it just meant the deputy head of department. Gorbachev had come to power in '85 and had begun to bring in his new policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The Soviet ice was beginning to crack, but that wasn't anything like so evident in '87 when I started in the department as it was when I finished a couple of years later. When I had been in the Soviet Union in the mid 70s it had seemed inconceivable that the comprehensive grip that the Party and the KGB had on the population could be broken, but by '87 it had become clear that Gorbachev had understood that the Soviet system didn't work, particularly economically.

CM: Did you see Gorbachev with Mrs Thatcher?

JH: Yes, there was a Summit in December '87, when Gorbachev was on his way to Washington. My recollection is that it was very brief, at Brize Norton. Of course the two knew each other already because they'd met originally in 1984, when she famously said, 'This is someone I can do business with.' But she was still extremely suspicious of anything to do with the Soviet Union and the debate still was, even then, in '87: is this Gorbachev-inspired change for real, or is it just a lot of talk which isn't changing anything in reality? All the Soviet nuclear apparatus and military apparatus was still intact at that stage. Gorbachev had no obvious intention of destroying the Soviet Union or the Soviet empire. He wanted to go back to what he thought was the pure milk of Leninism - I think this was an illusion about what Leninism was actually like, by the way - which had started to go wrong as early as 1924.

I wasn't in the room when they had their meeting. I was too junior. In any case I would have been with the Foreign Secretary, who was having a separate meeting with his opposite number. All the entourages on both sides were there. But at least I got a glimpse of Gorbachev, and sensed the excitement there was around his relative youth and more dynamic approach.

When I got to the department in '87, it was still early days. There was lots of talk about economic reform, but the system hadn't changed substantially - and in any case the strains underneath were always hard to see from the outside. So it really wasn't clear whether Gorbachev's reforms were going to go anywhere internally, and meanwhile Soviet foreign policy at that stage didn't look very different. Things started to look really different by '88 because Gorbachev not only continued his reforms, and started to dismantle the power structure of the Communist Party, but he started to talk in a different way about some of the foreign policy issues. He was for example much more open to nuclear disarmament. There had been a massive issue about INF (Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces) in Europe. We were stationing American missiles, Pershings, in Britain and in Germany, which was very controversial. The Russians hated this, but they had their own equivalent weapon systems. So Gorbachev was beginning to propose to Reagan: Let's just abolish these weapons, get rid of them altogether, about which Reagan was extremely suspicious - and so was Mrs Thatcher. Overall, we always had the same question. How genuine is Gorbachev? How far is he going to go? Will he survive? We didn't know the answers to those questions at that point. So we were being quite cautious, but at the same time we were looking at what was beginning to happen, and increasingly saying to ourselves: well, something really does seem to be changing. And as time went on and more and more dramatic things started to happen, and then of course you had to take the reform process more and more seriously. My overwhelming impression from those two years was that, compared to when I had been in Moscow, only about ten years before, you read something more or less impossible to believe every single day. Some senior official or minister said something, or something happened that, looked at from the perspective of the mid-1970s, was extremely difficult to imagine. Surely whoever it was couldn't have said that and still be in office? Surely this or that development couldn't be happening without the Red Army trying to do something to stop it? But these were things that were being said and were happening, without being stopped by the Soviet leadership. And this process continued to gather momentum. Things started to happen in and around the Baltic States, for example, which had previously seemed

impossibly stuck in the Soviet Union, with no chance of ever escaping that suffocating embrace. Suddenly the populations in those countries sensed an opportunity and began to demonstrate and sing, which was extraordinary, and to make claims about independence which had been completely impossible to imagine a few months before.

CM: Did you go back to Moscow?

JH: Yes, twice during that time. It didn't look that different then, to be honest. Still a grey, dull, buttoned up place. One of the things I was doing while I was there was to negotiate a new visa agreement with the Russians, because visas had always been an issue. We were always refusing visas to people we thought were KGB agents, and the Russians were always retaliating. There were endless delays for visas for all sorts of people, and very complicated rules about different kinds of visas. It was a mess which wasn't working for anybody. We needed a new agreement to modernise the processes, and for example try to put in better, more efficient time frames for when certain visas should be granted, or at least decided upon. Businessmen needed quick visas, and some wanted multiple entry visas. Cultural links needed better visa contexts in which to operate. In negotiating all this, whatever the wider political developments might have been, I was of course still negotiating with the old Soviet Union: the same suspicious, slow, solid bureaucracy, with the intelligence services lurking in the background. The classic techniques of let's go on negotiating without breaks, and not give you any food until late at night, if at all, really did happen. It was a tough negotiation where the KGB was still no doubt there pulling the strings. We were talking to the Foreign Ministry, but occasionally funny people would appear in the room who seemed to have a lot of power. Nevertheless we did succeed in reaching agreement in the end, even if it wasn't a radical change - more of an improvement in ways of working than a completely different system. Interestingly we still have these visa problems with the Russians, thirty years later. At the time, the visa negotiation seemed like a microcosm of the whole system - new things were happening, but the old system was still there and all the old mutual suspicions were still there, so the question was how far could change be taken?

I left the department in 1989, when the ice was already cracking very seriously, internally, in places like the Baltic States. Even Ukraine was starting to talk about independence. The central Asian republics were beginning to say we don't actually like being part of the Soviet Union, and not being slapped down for saying it. Georgia and Armenia were beginning to make the same sorts of noises. Poland was beginning to drift away from Soviet control

under the influence of Lech Walesa and Solidarity. The crucial point was that Gorbachev appeared to be letting this happen. The critical concern was how long would he go on letting it happen, and would he in the end do what his predecessors had done before and say, 'That's enough. We can't have this. The Red Army's going in.' In my view, this is the greatest thing about Gorbachev: he didn't do that. All his predecessors had sent in the troops when they had felt forced to do so, in Poland and Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Even internally, Gorbachev didn't do this. There were some killings in the Baltic States, but no wholesale repression, no big army and tanks moving in. And he didn't do it in Eastern Europe either. There had to have been senior people inside the system saying, 'You have to stop this. Otherwise all is lost.' But, even though it wasn't his intention to dismantle the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe or the empire in the Soviet Union itself, when it became clear that this was going to be the effect of his actions, he didn't change course and send in the Red Army. I think he deserves a huge amount of historical credit for that. The West has of course always liked Gorbachev, not least for that reason, but many Russians have always hated him for exactly the same reason, for leading them to humiliation, as they saw it, and a historic catastrophe. I am sure he didn't think at the start, because he had been brought up in the way that he had, that if you gave people freedom in Eastern Europe or the Baltic States, that they would do what they did, and reject the Soviet Union and all it stood for. He no doubt thought they would have an internal reform, such as he was having in Russia, perestroika, glasnost, economic freedom, a bit more efficiency, but they would still want to be part of the system, and retain Communism. But absolutely not. That was the one thing they were not going to have. This all culminated – I had left the department by then – in the Berlin Wall coming down, which was the great symbol of how radical the change had been.

Traditionally, Soviet Department had simply managed many ghastly things, like visa wars, followed Soviet foreign policy and the terrible things they were doing in other parts of the world and tried to counter them, and tried to understand what was going on in the almost completely impenetrable Soviet political system. All of a sudden the whole thing was disappearing before our eyes. It felt very odd. I don't think even in '89, when I left the department, that we believed it would go as fast or as far as it did: the complete collapse of the Communist Party, the Soviet Union, the Soviet empire, all these countries all of a sudden independent, and then the formation of the CIS, the Commonwealth of Independent States.

There were a lot of factors involved. Economically, the system wasn't working; the Soviet Union couldn't compete and that was increasingly obvious to them. They were putting most

of their budget into the military to try to compete with the west in the arms race, but we could do that much more easily than they could because they weren't generating the necessary resources. At the same time it was very difficult to change the economic system without changing everything. I think the point was that change had to come from the top, and you couldn't see it coming. Just as you wouldn't have imagined before he came to power that Khrushchev would do what he did in 1956, and denounce Stalin, because he had been just another Soviet bureaucrat, so Gorbachev had been rising through the ranks, but there was nothing to show, from his record or from anything he had said publicly, that this was a radical reformer with completely different ideas from everybody else around him. That's obvious in a way. You could never reveal your different thoughts in such a system, because you wouldn't get to the top if you did, so your own views about things could only become obvious once you were at the top. Then you were in a position where everybody had to start following you. The risk is that if you are then too far ahead of the rest of the system, you get deposed, which is why it's surprising in a way that Gorbachev wasn't deposed before he was. People were trying, but didn't succeed until '91. In any case, what I am trying to say is that the fall of the Soviet Union, or at least the timing of it, really wasn't predictable. You couldn't have followed Gorbachev and said in advance, 'He's the man who is going to be completely different.' It wasn't like that, and it isn't like that now in China. You don't know what potential leaders think until they get to the top. The Soviet Union could only be changed from the top, and once the top had said the old ways are no good, the system was so rotten that most of it collapsed more or less at the first push.

Seconded to Thomas de la Rue & Co., 1989-91

CM: After two years in Soviet Department, you went on secondment to De La Rue. Did you ask for this?

JH: Yes. I asked to do it; I wanted to do it. There was an initiative at the time, which had been running for a little while, of exchanges between the FCO and the private sector. In my case De La Rue sent someone to the Foreign Office for two years and De La Rue took me from the FCO. There were a number of other companies doing it - BP for example - though not very many, because it was quite hard to find companies which really saw the advantage in it, and were prepared to make the effort. In my case I'd always wanted to go to see what the private sector was like and this was a risk-free way of doing it. I didn't know when I went

whether I would want to come back. Not that I was unhappy in the Foreign Office, but I wanted to see what the other side was like.

CM: Can you describe for us what job De La Rue gave you to do?

JH: Yes. The problem with it in both directions was that you arrived as a middle level, presumably reasonably able, person in the Foreign Office or in the private company, so you had to be given something decent to do, while at the same time you knew absolutely nothing about what their business was. So it was never going to be very easy for the leadership to trust you with something serious. I think I did reasonably well in the circumstances. De La Rue put me in a department which was developing identity cards, automatic identity cards, which they produced for countries around the world. They had some big ID card schemes already in operation, for example in Malaysia, but with rather old-fashioned technology. The particular thing they asked me to do was to look at the market prospects for a computer-based card system, of the kind everyone has now, but didn't then, where a computer with a camera takes a photo of you, digitises the image, and then prints it onto a card along with your details in a secure way. De La Rue was essentially a security printer; that's what they did, mostly bank notes, but also passports and other key documents. The question was whether there was a market for this new computer product, and if so, where was the market and how would you go about selling it. I did a study of almost all the countries in the world.

CM: Was there anything in your Foreign Office experience to help you in this study, or did De La Rue say we want it done like this, or did you make it up out of your own head?

JH: I had to make it up as I went along really. I hadn't done anything like that before. There were some people there who could help me, who knew this market. I spent quite a lot of time talking to them, and visited some places to see what the market might actually be like. I spent quite a lot of time, although I knew nothing myself about the technical side of it, with a software company, with whom De La Rue were working, to see if they really could produce these cards with a good enough image to be recognisable. That was the big problem - at that stage the images often weren't good enough once printed. After a few months I produced a report about sales prospects which I presented to the Board. They said, 'That's fine. Now go and sell it.' So then I had to try to sell the product to some of the most promising countries. I went around to places like Cyprus and Malta, and tried to interest them. It was quite tricky and at that stage there weren't any real takers. It was no doubt more of a long-term sales prospect than an instant hit. In any case after a few months on the road, I moved

on for a while to the currency side of things, which was much more the core De La Rue business. This was the very early days of the first ideas about the single European currency. De La Rue wanted to be in on the ground floor of how this was going to work and to be able to print some of the euros themselves, if they could get into that market. I visited the European Commission and asked them questions like, 'Are you really going to do this? How are you going to do it?' This was the printing side of it, not anything else. Of course we had no idea at that stage whether the UK would be part of it, and if we were, whether the Bank of England would be bound to print euros for the UK, or whether somebody else could do it instead or as well. I also did a bit of selling of De La Rue's bank notes in Eastern Europe and in Africa, visiting for example Rwanda and Burundi, I remember, and also places like Romania and Bulgaria, emerging from the Soviet tutelage, to try to sell them bank notes. Quite a different experience from what I had been used to!

CM: More generally, what was your reaction to work in the private sector as compared with the Foreign Office?

JH: De La Rue was a very specific company because it dealt mainly with governments, so it was logical to have an FCO secondee there in some ways. Printing currency is very closely connected to sovereignty and power, especially in developing countries, which was where most of De La Rue's business was, and is controlled very tightly by finance ministry and the central bank, with a lot of security. De La Rue therefore had very good contacts with governors of central banks and finance ministers. Occasionally, for example, they needed to do a very secret operation of printing a whole lot of new bank notes for a country. It happened while I was there for Nigeria, without anybody in Nigeria knowing that we were doing it, beyond a very few people at the very top of government. We flew in the bank notes in jumbo jets, and overnight the Nigerian government said, 'Tomorrow the bank notes are new and instead of a ten thousand Naira note, the main note will now be a new one Nigeria' or whatever it was. This was partly because the currency was physically worn out, because they got a real battering through much handling in damp and dirty surroundings, but it was also a way of flushing out illegal money. Bank notes and other security products were interesting in that sense. It wasn't like selling baked beans. These were sensitive items over which you had to deal closely and confidentially with the government. So in a way working for De La Rue wasn't as unfamiliar as it might have been, but still my perception was – not an original perception, obviously – that there was a huge difference between working in an organisation whose object was making money - at the end of the day, if the company didn't

make money, it died – and an organisation which, while conscious of costs, and increasingly so - the Foreign Office was already stuck in cycles of cuts – was not one whose existence was about money. It was about something else, to produce a common good, a foreign policy for the good of the country. I'm not necessarily making a moral judgment about which was better; I'm just saying it's a completely different attitude and a different experience. Another interesting aspect for someone coming from the FCO was the attitude to writing things down, and how decisions were made. The Foreign Office specialised in writing things down, if you like. You produced reports which made sense of what was going on; you polished them to make them comprehensible documents which could really inform readers in depth and be the basis of sensible decisions. When I got to De La Rue, I tried to do the same thing. People looked at me as if I were mad. What is this document? It's very nice and interesting no doubt, but we don't do things like that or take decisions like that. Of course, there were some written reports, but they were usually poorly produced and badly written. A lot of decisions were taken quickly on the phone; many decisions were taken in quick meetings on the basis of not much by way of preparation. The bureaucracy was terrible, in the sense that nobody recorded anything properly, so they never knew what they had agreed, which meant they were often arguing later about what they'd agreed. There were lots of good things about this. Decision making was obviously quicker, and had to be, than in an organisation like the Foreign Office. Those in charge were much more flexible when they needed to be, and much more focussed on whether something was going to work quickly or not, because if it was not going to work, there was no point in spending any money on it. The downside was poor record-keeping and unsatisfactory decisions on the basis of partial information. It was quite a shock in a way to find that some of my diplomatic skills were of no value. But I also enjoyed that contrast and enjoyed working in the company, though they were having some difficulties at the time. I remember in one of the areas I was working in at the time, about half the staff were fired to reduce costs, and it literally was: here's the black bag, you're off this afternoon. These weren't incompetent people. The management had just chosen some who had to go, hopefully not completely at random. The Foreign Office had itself been retiring people, but it was done in a much more civilised way than that, even though people in the Foreign Office didn't necessarily think so. That was a useful, and interesting, lesson in private sector ways.

CM: Were you attracted by this flexibility, agility to react and things like that?

JH: Yes, but not enough to want to stay in the end. Basically, what they did was not as interesting as what the Foreign Office did, even though security printing was quite an interesting product. Although they were better paid than we were, and had better packages of healthcare and cars and so on, the difference in that kind of company was not so radical as to make you think, 'Never mind whether it is interesting, I'd just like to earn three times as much, thank you very much.' So I wasn't seriously tempted not to go back to the FCO. I was happy to have done the secondment; I enjoyed it and I hope I gave them some value, at least, but I was content to go back when it finished.

CM: And presumably the hands-on experience of working in a private company must have been useful for your next job.

JH: I think it was, and it was also useful to say that I had had that sort of experience, to be able to say: I'm not just a civil servant who doesn't know what a company looks like and doesn't know what making money is like. I had been there and done it, to some extent.

Counsellor, Economic and Commercial, New Delhi, 1991–95

CM: Your next job in 1991 was Counsellor and Head of Chancery in the High Commission in New Delhi at a time when India was just coming out of forty five years of autarky, or close to autarky, and entering the world economic system.

JH: The first thing to say is that I should have gone back to Moscow, in the sense that it would have been the normal and logical thing for me to do, to go to be Head of Chancery in Moscow, and then eventually, if nothing went wrong, later to become Ambassador. That's what people like me did, having learned a particular hard language. But the Foreign Office said to me at a certain point when I was away in De La Rue: you can still do that if you like, but we need to train some more people to speak Russian, and they then need to be found things to do, so if you don't mind, we think you might like to go to India instead. Obviously, it would have made sense to go back to Moscow, but even though so many fascinating things had happened there since my first stay there, Moscow was still not in my view a great place to live, especially for a family, and to be honest I didn't feel a fundamental love of Russia or Russians which drew me back there. I thought India would be more fun, more interesting for the family and for the children, and different, so I was not too hard to persuade. It meant my career took a different turn, and in the end I never went back to Moscow on a posting.

CM: What were your first impressions of India?

JH: I think I can say I liked it from the start, because it was so completely different and interesting. I didn't mind the heat; that was fine. There were so many opportunities there, such an enormous country, and it was a place where it felt natural to be, because it was so much part of British history, for better or for worse, whatever you want to think about the colonial period. It seemed familiar because I had heard so much about it and read so much about it. Pretty much from the start we enjoyed our time in India enormously, which is not to say it was without its problems. We lived a very artificial life. We had a bungalow on the compound in the British High Commission in Delhi, which was great in the sense that our power worked, our water worked. So the things that people had to experience who didn't live in those circumstances, about the real India, we didn't experience. At the same time, it was a bubble, a British bubble with all the problems of living in a confined space. There were advantages: the tennis courts were there, the swimming pool was there, the facilities were there, I could walk a hundred yards to work. And yet I think that was a net disadvantage in a way, because we didn't see the life outside or live the life outside, or know the real India so well.

I started off as the Head of Chancery and the Political Counsellor, but with the knowledge that I was going to move, when the previous incumbent moved, to become the Economic and Commercial Counsellor, which is what I really wanted to do. I wanted to see what the commercial and economic side of diplomacy was like. It was quite interesting when I did make the move, because for the Indians, not least for our Indian staff, being Head of Chancery was seen as a serious thing, a proper political job. As our head bearer put it when we told him I was moving, 'Head of Chancery royal, sahib.' He meant being Economic and Commercial Counsellor was second rate by comparison – the taint of trade. So there was a real dilemma on his part, because he'd been the Head of Chancery's bearer for thirty years. We were staying in the same house, but the question was, were he and other staff going to move to where the new Head of Chancery was going to be, because they they couldn't cope with the drop in their status when I changed jobs. In the end they did stay with us, which was a relief. But before that, for the first few months I was there, I was Head of Chancery, with a lot of interest in what was happening politically in India after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, and always a lot of concern about what was happening in Kashmir, which was the main Indian internal issue of major concern to the outside world at the time, because of the tension in the relationship with Pakistan. We also followed very closely all aspects of

Indian foreign policy, and the chances that it would evolve towards a less spiky political relationship with the west, now that the Soviet Union was no longer around.

CM: Who was the High Commissioner at the time?

JH: It was David Goodall when I first got there and then a few months later - I can't remember the exact timing - he was replaced by Nick Fenn, for the rest of my time there. Both were excellent High Commissioners, and rewarding people to work with and learn from. Peter Fowler was the Minister, the number 2, for most of my time, and was an old India hand. David Goodall I think had been there before, but Nick Fenn had not, though he had been in Burma. Both got on well with the Indians, and had less problems than some of those who followed them.

India is quite a shock to the system on first contact as anybody knows who has been there. I was there on my own for a little while before Penny joined me, and I made a big mistake when she arrived, because I took our car and drove her to Old Delhi with the children. I thought I'd show them what the real thing was like. It didn't go well, because it was hot, millions of people were rushing around in all directions and Penny had a real attack of claustrophobia, which took quite a while for her to get over. She finished up loving India more than anybody else possibly could, but it wasn't a good start. It was only when some other friends took her off on a trip on the train and said, 'Look, you need to get into this,' that she fell in love with the country, and has been in love with it ever since.

It was a good time to be in India, especially on the economic and commercial side. As I said, we had arrived just after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, which was a big trauma for the country, and the arrival in power of an improbable leader called Narasimha Rao, who was already old and had certainly been around Indian politics for a long time. He had no known particular views on things, was a compromise candidate, and no-one expected him to do anything much. The great joke about him was that he spoke thirteen languages but never said anything interesting in any of them. It was no doubt unfair, but you could see what those who made such comments meant. Nevertheless he quickly decided that the time had come to open up the Indian economy, which had been largely closed for many years, with the idea of self-sufficiency. Foreign investment had long been viewed with huge suspicion, because the view was that foreigners were just trying to do down India, and would do nothing for ordinary people, plus all the anti-colonial feelings were still there in some minds as well. Narasimha Rao wanted to change economic policy, working with people like Manmohan

Singh and Montek Singh Aluwalia, who could see that the Indian economy was struggling along with a growth rate which simply wasn't enough to lift people out of poverty or get the country moving in the right sort of way. So they started to open it up to foreign investment and to foreign entrepreneurs, which more or less coincided with my arrival, and especially with the time when I moved over to the economic and commercial side.

The overall relationship between India and Britain was tricky, not as bad as for example between some of the French colonies and France, but still the history was always awkward. The Indian civil service, who were the cream of the cream in the country, and extremely clever and capable, were in many cases also extremely prickly and very conscious of being patronised by westerners, particularly the British. They were just not prepared to accept any impression of being lectured to. In the period when I was there, they were not in fact as chippy and difficult as they had been previously; some at least were a bit more open. My impression was always that these people in the Indian civil service, in the Foreign Ministry in particular, had a tricky psychological mixture of superiority and inferiority. They were superior because they were very clever, because their country was much bigger than virtually anybody else's country, and because they had this sort of Gandhian, non-aligned approach, which could make them sound very smug about many issues. At the same time they were very conscious of how poorly their own country was performing in some ways, how bad the conditions were for most people, how terrible the contrasts were, what terrible things were happening all over India in all sorts of ways, about which they were embarrassed, even if they were never going to admit it openly. This combination of a superiority complex and an inferiority complex can make people particularly difficult to deal with. That's why some of the Indians were so prickly, in my view. It may also be that we were not always as tactful as we should have been about avoiding the impression of lecturing them.

One of the nice things about the commercial job was that you didn't feel this sense of inherent hostility on the part of the businessmen. They were more open, and more friendly to people like us. Quite a few of them were Sikhs, who tended to be jolly and to enjoy their whisky. So as a whole the businessmen were easier to deal with, and fun as well, without so many colonial hangovers. Many did quite a lot of business with the UK, and liked going to London; they felt at home there; they didn't feel badly treated or discriminated against. In contrast many of them hated going to Paris, for example; they thought the French looked down on them, which some probably did. It was partly the language as well; in any case the Indians didn't feel comfortable there, whereas they felt comfortable in London, which gave

us a considerable advantage. And for our part, the British still liked India. We felt an affinity and an interest which the French and other nationalities didn't feel. There were people who were very successful in business terms, but hated being in India. For example, many of the Japanese just found it difficult to cope on a day to day level. Their culture was one of fastidiousness and cleanliness, which made India hard to take for them, and they could not find locally anything they liked to eat, whereas the British were much more adaptable in that sense. Altogether we seemed to be playing on a fairly favourable wicket. And of course we had cricket itself in common as well.

Under Narasimha Rao, the Indians slowly started to reduce the rigid rules about business and investment. It wasn't a revolution, but it was quite distinct from what had come before, and a real opportunity for us. There were already quite a lot of British businesses there; there always had been. Companies like Unilever and ICI had long-standing and sizeable operations. But the really new and big possibilities seemed to be on the infrastructure side; the infrastructure needs of India were and still are almost infinite, so there were plenty of opportunities for companies. We started to talk about things like power stations and roads. The Indian view was that we urgently need more power stations and roads, but we haven't got the resources or capacity to build them quickly enough ourselves. We need people to come in and invest, and we're going to give you conditions which will allow you to make money out of their operations. That sounded easy but then became a very, very long saga which hasn't finished yet, twenty years later. Still there was an opportunity to start on a new footing, and there was a lot of interest, particularly from British power companies which had recently been privatised and were looking around for ways to exploit their new-found freedom.

One of the things we did was to establish something called the Indo-British Partnership, to try to put together big Indian companies and big British companies - to some extent smaller ones too, but this was essentially big business stuff - to make partnerships to think about investment in power or in toll roads or telecommunications, also beginning to open up, as well as in more traditional forms of import and export business, and to press the Indian government to create the right conditions for these partnerships. We had regular meetings of the Partnership and many ministers and senior business figures came to Delhi, as well as in the other direction. Exports started to go up quite significantly. The partnership was led on the British side by Bob Evans, who was the head of British Gas at the time. And on the Indian side I think it was Ratan Tata, one of the big figures of Indian industry. We had a

very close relationship with the industrial federations, particularly the CII, the Confederation of Indian Industry, which was the most influential of them. I got to know quite well some members of the big Indian business families, the Tatas, the Birlas, the Tapas and people like that. We did a lot of socialising with businessmen: they were very hospitable. But one of the things we had to learn was how different entertaining was. The first dinner we ever went to in Delhi involved an invitation for 8.30, so we turned up fashionably late at 8.45. There was nobody there, including the hosts. We were given a whisky, and then another, and then eventually the hosts appeared. About an hour and a half later, other people started to appear. We were feeling rather drunk by this stage. Then dinner appeared; everybody ate quickly, and fled in a flash. That was the way it was done and we just hadn't really known. We quickly learned you don't turn up at 8.30, you turn up at 10, and you might have been somewhere else before and you might be going somewhere else afterwards, and you don't hang around with the food a long time, you just eat and run. As long as you know the rules, it's fine. We also had the opposite experience of trying to do dinners as you would do them in Europe: you invite twelve people and you place them round the table and so on. Well, it never worked like that in India, because some didn't come at all; some came and didn't eat; some came and brought three relatives. We learned you had to go with everybody else and do buffets, because that way there was maximum flexibility. Lots of the women seemed to be on a fast the day they came to dinner with you: you didn't quite know whether they really were on a fast or they just didn't trust your food. But in any case people were friendly and dinners were always cheerful occasions, as people came and went freely.

CM: What about travel?

JH: As part of being the Economic and Commercial Counsellor, I supervised the aid programme in India, which meant I had the opportunity and the excuse to go absolutely everywhere in India that I wanted - there was always a commercial opportunity or an aid project to be visited. We had a very big aid programme in India in those days, including major slum improvement projects in lots of cities. So we did a lot of travelling and loved it. I spent plenty of time in Mumbai, Bangalore and Madras, as it then was, and Calcutta. But sadly, there were also places we couldn't go at the time. We couldn't go to Kashmir, for example, because it was seen as too dangerous during all our time there. And we couldn't go to Assam, for the same reason. For personal travel, especially when the children came out for holidays, we used to travel quite a lot by car, which was always an interesting experience in India. All human life, and a lot of animal life too, was there on the road. The most

exciting place we went to as a family was Ladakh; we drove all the way, round Kashmir, through Manali and places like that. It took us about a week to get there, with all sorts of adventures on the way: landslides and mountain roads that you were convinced you were about to fall off. We went through the most spectacular scenery on the way, including very high passes, well over twelve thousand feet, with the risk of altitude sickness. My eldest daughter Sarah and I then went with others on a white-water rafting trip, with further dramas and spills involved too. Penny was flying back with the other children; but the flights were all cancelled because the weather was bad, and she only managed to get a flight in the end by telling the children to cry at the airline desk! We also went to the so-called game parks – not a lot of game there usually - and the bird sanctuary at Bharatpur. We did see tigers once, in Kanha Park. And of course we did the usual tourist trips to Agra and the towns of Rajasthan, which were wonderful, and much less adjusted to tourists in those days.

More seriously we did some novel and interesting commercial promotion activities while I was there. The Royal Yacht *Britannia* came out, without the Royal Family, and docked in Mumbai, so we had all the business men of Mumbai for a reception on board, and the Royal Marine Band beating retreat on the quayside. Everybody loved it. We always used to try to sign some big deals on these trips. *Britannia* was a very good vehicle for that, because it had a certain difference and prestige. Then Concorde flew to India with a bunch of senior businessmen; we went to Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai and I think Madras as well, or maybe Bangalore. The plane wasn't allowed to fly supersonically but it was still a major attraction. The group was led by a businessman turned politician and trade minister called Richard Needham; he was a difficult man to manage, but very good at giving speeches. I was full of admiration in a way. He was quite difficult to get out of bed on this tour. But when you eventually got him going, he'd have a piece of paper with two words on it, or maybe three, and on that basis would give a twenty minute speech of complete fluency and persuasion. He was a serious professional at that. Again a lot of agreements were signed. The problem was that a lot of them didn't go anywhere in the end. Many power projects never happened because the Indians could never quite get the rules right. They were too suspicious of being ripped off by clever foreigners. Enron, an American energy company which later collapsed amid tales of fraud, was one of the first on the scene and built a power station near Mumbai, and basically – it's a long story – the prices that they were allowed to charge had been set too high. The Indians realised this after a while and had to try and change it, which became a big scandal and cast a shadow on the rest of the power sector. The same was true to some extent

in telecommunications. A lot of apparently exciting projects somehow never quite came off. So it was frustrating, even though I was there at the most optimistic initial period. There were always problems with the bureaucracy, and with the differences between the centre's rules and those of the states. Making things happen was a long business at the best of times, and companies had to have a lot of patience. Plenty of the companies were suspicious themselves and cautious as a result. I used to think they were often too suspicious and cautious, because the investments they were contemplating were usually not massive from their point of view. My observation was that a lot of these companies would go and invest a billion pounds in the United States without giving it much thought, because they thought they understood the Americans. But they were often ripped off, because if the Americans are selling you something, there's usually a good reason why. Still they thought they knew what they were doing and that the US was a non-risky environment. The same companies would argue endlessly at Board meetings about investing twenty million pounds in India. The risks were certainly there, and the speed of decision making was painful, but the potential rewards were also very high. The risk-reward ratio was actually quite good. But many companies didn't see it like that. Then there was always this interesting comparison, as there still is now, between India and China. China was already beginning to motor by then, and India was lagging behind, partly because the bureaucracy was so terrible. But from Delhi we used to argue that at least in India you had a political and legal system that you could recognise. It was a democracy, even if an imperfect democracy. You had things like courts and independent judges; they didn't work as you'd want them to work. They certainly worked very slowly; but there was a recognisable system there. There was a civil service and bureaucracy you could understand, even if you didn't like it very much. China on the other hand was the wild west. You could make a quick buck there, but you could also crash in flames very quickly. India was a bit more reliable. That debate essentially still goes on today. Of course, China has rushed ahead economically in all sorts of ways, but India still has many advantages. The old story of the tortoise and the hare may still be applicable. In any case there was a lot of interest and enthusiasm about trading with India when we were there, and on the whole it was a rewarding period.

Head of European Union Department (External), FCO, 1995

CM: In 1995 you went back to London and you were Head of European Union Department External, but only for a very short time. When you went into that position did you expect to be there for three years, or was it just a holding position?

JH: I didn't know at the time, because I was unsure about my prospects of the FCO private secretary job at No. 10. I knew I was one of the people competing for it, but I didn't know I'd got it until later. I think I might have stayed in EUD (E) if I hadn't got the No. 10 role.

CM: Were you pleased to be going to an EU job?

JH: Yes. At that stage the European Union was what it was all about. That's where the future seemed to be, including working in Brussels, which I had always wanted to do, though that never actually happened for whatever reason. Brussels was where the real decisions were being taken, not just in foreign policy terms. My observation about it was that, if you were working in UKRep in Brussels in some committee or other, a lot of it was going to be quite hard grind, tiresome negotiation, referring back to departments in London and so on, but what you were talking about was often very practical and had a real world impact, whereas a lot of other things you might do in the FCO might seem more grand and exciting but also had a more tenuous connection to reality. You might be negotiating in one of the committees about the size of pineapple chunks or the noise of lawn mowers, rather tedious, low level stuff in a way, but getting the right result was very important for companies back in England. I was always interested in that. And these things had significance politically too, because for all the complaints about interference from Brussels and EU bureaucracy, these kinds of industrial standards were very important for growth and market access, in the EU and more widely.

CM: What was your role as Head of the EU External department?

JH: Our remit was to a large extent about external trade. The EU were the negotiators on external trade deals, but we had a huge interest. The DTI were in the lead, but in those days we shadowed the DTI, and other so-called domestic departments, very closely on all European issues. So we had quite a lot of people working on that side of things. It was my first brush with the external trade rules and all the complicated business of the WTO and bilateral and regional deals.

The most interesting thing I did while I was there was to start thinking about further enlargement of the European Union, because there was a big debate beginning about how far the European Union should enlarge in the end. The UK was of course always in favour of maximum widening of the EU, partly because we didn't like deepening, and hoped widening would mean less deepening. But the question was who was entitled to join the European

Union, in theory, and who might do so in practice. I took it upon myself, I don't know why particularly at that moment, to write a paper about how far enlargement could go. Some of it was relatively straight forward. Of course, we were going to support the obvious countries in Eastern Europe: Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, as it then still was, to join. It was going to be a difficult, long road for them, but the objective was shared and for us relatively clear, even though the French were very suspicious of the consequences in some ways. The Germans generally shared our keenness for their own East European policy reasons. The question was, where would and should this process stop? I can remember writing about this and suggesting, basically, that the limit might well be Ukraine? For me Ukraine was a European country, no doubt very difficult to absorb, and very difficult to say when it would be ready to join, but if they wanted to join, on what grounds would you say no? Ukraine was a long-term objective, but you shouldn't say no to it. Russia we always thought was a bridge too far, and we didn't really look at that. Interesting cases were Georgia and Armenia. Were these European countries? Not geographically, but how far should culture count? There were no real rules about this, so they could just about be seen as possibles. Turkey? Was Turkey European? A little bit, geographically, but culturally? Views were divided, then as now. Azerbaijan? Probably not. It was an interesting exercise to start looking at countries and trying to say which could be seen as European and which not.

CM: And what about the Balkans. We're in '95 and in the thick of the war.

JH: It was the time of the Dayton Agreement; it was concluded in December '95, so it was very much on everybody's agenda. You looked at all these Balkan countries – it wasn't clear exactly which countries would exist at that stage – but nevertheless, whatever mess they were in, these were all clearly European countries. So eventually they would qualify, and of course the possibility of membership of the EU would be a very powerful lever we could use to try to force rising standards of governance and commitment to peace.

CM: When the war started Jim Baker said, 'We haven't got a dog in this fight'. The Europeans said this was the European moment. But In the end we had to get the Americans to come in to sort it out. Was there any sense in your department that Europe had had an opportunity and failed?

JH: I think that was true in the military sense. We and the French working together had not hacked it properly, not that we necessarily blamed ourselves, but it hadn't worked. So we did need the Americans to come in. But it was still obvious that the Americans were not

really going to be interested in these places much in the long term, therefore Europe was going to have to deal with it. This was our back yard. As I have suggested, the one bit of serious leverage we had over all these countries was EU membership. It still is. It was a very powerful magnet, which you could already see working on the countries that were nearer to us in Eastern Europe. One of the interesting things was that people would talk as if the enlargement process was a negotiation. It wasn't a negotiation in any real sense. The EU said: these are the rules. You can fiddle around at the margins, but essentially you get what you're given. This is how it works; this is what you have to do internally to become a member. Of course there were still big questions to be answered. How long was it going to take for these East European countries to be ready? We were the ones pushing for them to join quickly, and I think rightly so, because one of the great successes of the European Union was the eastern enlargement and the effect it had on these countries emerging from the Soviet empire. This gave them a democratic and security anchor; this was what they wanted. Going back to the Balkans, Serbia is clearly a European country. If Serbia at some stage wants to join and is ready to join, on what basis are you going to say no to them, given what the European Union's founding document says, that it is open to any European country. Of course, the founding fathers hadn't defined what European meant. Which is why the difficult ones were countries like Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey. It was an interesting intellectual exercise.

CM: How was your paper received?

JH: I think quite well. We weren't taking decisions at that point, but nobody had really sat down to ask where would the boundaries of the EU actually be - not necessarily now, but in twenty or thirty years' time. So people in the FCO were interested, and receptive to the underlying sense of openness to a wide membership.

INTERVIEW 3 WITH SIR JOHN HOLMES 15 FEBRUARY 2018

Today is 15 February 2018. This is the third interview with Sir John Holmes for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme. Catherine Manning recording.

CM: John, I am going to start by asking you to tell us about the job that you moved to in No. 10 in January 1996. I believe your title was Overseas Adviser to the Prime Minister.

JH: It was also called Private Secretary for Overseas Affairs in the Prime Minister's Office. Obviously, it was a very coveted role - a great job but a complete nightmare at the same time.

I knew the latter before I started, because the hours were always ridiculous and the number of issues you were dealing with was absurd, so it was a challenge, but a challenge I accepted willingly at the time. I think it was more a sacrifice for my family than it was for me, as always with these things. Basically, I was responsible for advising the Prime Minister on everything international, particularly foreign affairs, though not so much international economic affairs, because there were other people who did that. I also dealt with everything to do with international security, because I was also responsible for the defence portfolio, and with overseas aid. So those were the three main responsibilities, together with dealing with the Intelligence agencies. The other part of the job, which was very prominent in my time, both with John Major and Tony Blair, was Northern Ireland. The Overseas Adviser, the Private Secretary for Overseas Affairs, was the person who dealt with Northern Ireland. It always seemed paradoxical that that was the case, because in an obvious sense it was not international; Northern Ireland was part of the UK. I don't know exactly when this became the situation, but I think the logic of it was that a lot of policy to do with Northern Ireland involved dealing with the Irish Republic, because they were so intimately involved in lots of ways, and with the United States, because the United States had in recent years taken a huge interest in this, with their sympathies for Irish Catholics and Irish nationalists, given the very large and influential Irish-American population in the US. In any case, that was the way it was, and all in all it made a pretty considerable portfolio.

There were times when I was in No. 10 when I spent 30-40% of my time on Northern Ireland, and occasionally even more, which didn't really leave enough time for the rest. On Northern Ireland we were dealing with something very immediate, where we were in control of policy, rather than some other foreign affairs issues where we were only one of many actors. It was often a matter of life and death for people, which gave it an extra edge, an extra responsibility, which you had to deal with the whole time.

No. 10 in those days, and it's still true to some extent, was a very small team. There was the Principal Private Secretary, Alex Allan during John Major's time. I was effectively the No. 2, the next most senior private secretary, dealing with international affairs, and then you had private secretaries who dealt with the Treasury and a variety of other departments, a Diary Secretary and then a very small supporting team. I had an assistant, who was very important because he could do all sorts of things I didn't have time for. But it wasn't a team as such; it was just the two of us dealing with all this. My assistant was Edward Oakden when I started, and Philip Barton later on. Both were first class. One mitigating factor for the lack of front-

line staff was the excellent support structure. There were clerks who would find quickly any and all papers needed, chase up briefing and so on; and lots of Garden Girls, as they were called in those days. The Garden Girls were a group of PAs, secretaries, who were based downstairs in No. 10, looking out over the garden, hence the name, who were available day and night. They would take dictation, which seems a weird idea now, because nobody does that anymore, but I could dictate records of meetings and letters and so on to them, and they would produce them beautifully minutes later, because they were just incredibly good. Of course the Diary Secretary was very important as well – Arabella Warburton under John Major and Kate Garvey when Tony Blair took over. Nevertheless, it was a very small team. There was important support from the Cabinet Office, because they had a European Secretariat and an International Secretariat and a Joint Intelligence structure. But they were a bit further removed from No. 10, both physically and in policy terms.

As always with these kinds of roles, proximity to the Prime Minister was everything. In Major's time, he used to work in the Cabinet Room, sitting at the Cabinet table, and Alex Allan and I were in the next room with our rather large desks. Every time he came in and out he went past us, so you could always get a minute if you needed it, which you did quite a lot of the time, or you could pop in and ask a quick question. The other private secretaries were in a further room beyond ours. Later, Blair took over the room where we used to work and everybody moved into the next door room. That was the set up. You had very close proximity to the Prime Minister; you were with him day and night when he was around. He lived in a flat above No. 10 and we would be in there, often very early morning or very late at night, whether his wife was there or not, whether he was in his suit or his pyjamas. So you did get very close to the Prime Minister. You were in a position to know what he really thought and to pass that on to others, but also to inform and influence that thinking when you needed to. As well as that interaction during the working day, there was the usual system of putting papers in boxes for him to read overnight or at the weekend: Foreign Office telegrams, recommendations from departments and so on. You had, just by virtue of that position and that proximity, quite a lot of influence on what was going on. At the same time, as I was saying in the context of the role of private secretary to the Foreign Secretary, you had to be careful that you didn't just become the principal's agent, telling everybody else what to do, because only you knew what the Prime Minister wanted, and getting too big for your boots. You needed to transmit the messages the other way, from departments and other advisers, not distorting them, and making sure the principal had access to that advice and you

were both treating it with sufficient respect, even if you didn't always think it was particularly good.

John Major was a diligent reader of his boxes. We tried to keep their contents within reason, because one of the things you quickly realize when you are in that position is that the job of a prime minister is a dreadful strain. His or her day is full from morning till night with meetings, a few of which are with foreigners, but most of which are not - to do with domestic policy, or political issues, or party issues. The point is that the Prime Minister in the British system has to do everything, unlike in other systems, including answering questions in the House of Commons every week, and keeping on top of his own constituency business. The US and French Presidents didn't have to do anything like that. In any case John Major almost always read what we put in, commented on it and would take decisions when he had to. He was an easy boss to work for: he didn't throw things; he didn't swear, very rarely anyway, and never at us. He respected what we said, so he was also very good to work for in that sense. He was a paradoxical figure in some ways, because at that point, he was pretty unpopular in the country, not particularly because of himself, but because the Conservatives had been in power for sixteen and a half years by then. It was already pretty clear when I joined No. 10 that they were going to lose the next election, short of some miracle. They didn't have a majority in Parliament of any reliability, and it was a very difficult time: the Government and he had less and less authority, because everybody could see that an election was coming; everybody could see that without some sort of huge upset, the Labour Party and Tony Blair were going to win the election, and win it comfortably. You couldn't say that to the Prime Minister, but that was the general view. In a way there wasn't much he could do by this stage; there wasn't much left he could achieve. He could manage affairs, which he did successfully, but it wasn't a time - this was the last eighteen months of his tenure - when he was going to start great new projects. A lot of time was consumed with fire-fighting and surviving. I say he was a paradoxical figure, because he was unpopular with the public, but pretty much everybody who knew him respected him, and whenever he interacted with people, they were always impressed by him and liked him. But that wasn't the public image he had. The image was a rather flat, wooden figure, who was not a big leader as prime minister. It's different now, maybe, but at the time and in the immediate aftermath of his prime ministership, I think people tended to see him as a short interlude between the big figures of Mrs Thatcher and Tony Blair. But actually he was Prime Minister for seven years - people tend to forget that - which is a long time, if you look at the history of British prime

ministers. Not many served as long as that. And although he had a difficult end to his prime ministership, and some very difficult moments along the way, he had won an election that no one expected him to win in 1992. And if you look at the strength of the economy he left, after the huge issues in the early 90s with Black Wednesday (16 September 1992) which were terrible, overall, he left the country economically in good shape. I think people recognize that more and more now, and increasingly appreciate him, but it wasn't obvious at the time that was how it was going to be. When I was there, he was tired, and he was a bit fed up with how difficult it all was. He had not too long before emerged from the most awful, protracted struggle in Parliament about the Maastricht Treaty with the Eurosceptics in his party, the Bastards, as they had become known, trying to undermine this at every stage. The Government succeeded in the end, but it was a very long and painful process. I think he felt worn down by that and worn down by all the pressures within the Party about Europe which continued to be very strong at the time. So it was not the easiest time for him, and not the easiest time to work for him in some ways, but still he was a good boss, whom I respected a great deal.

He was very sensitive about his public image. And indeed he was very unfairly treated by the press: there was all this stuff about the grey man, that was the image; and about how his favourite meal was egg, chips and peas at the Happy Eater, and he tucked his shirt into his underpants, and other similar stuff that the Labour Party spin doctors spread. He didn't have a thick skin. He pretended he did and he always said, 'I don't read the press any more.' But this often seemed to be followed by something like, 'Have you seen that piece on page 48 of the Evening Standard? It's an absolute disgrace.' He did read the press cuttings, even though the people around him tried to conceal from him some of the worst things that were said about him. I think he was sensitive about what he saw as his lack of education. He hadn't been university-educated - he had a rather exotic background, as you can see if you read his autobiography - and I think he felt sensitive about that. He wasn't part of the patrician Conservative Party. He came from a completely different background and had arrived in power as Prime Minister almost by accident, by default in some ways, after the fall of Mrs. Thatcher. All that meant he felt prickly about his position and sensitive to slights on it from the outside. That didn't make things any easier for him or for those who worked for him. Nevertheless, in my view he did a very solid job as Prime Minister. He was always trying to do the right thing. And he has conducted himself very well since he left office, by intervening rarely but always sensibly, which is what some others maybe have not done so

well. I think his reputation has gone up steadily since he left office, but it is of course true that his public reputation was not so high when he left office. I think he skipped away after the election thinking, 'Thank God that's over', and went to watch the cricket at the Oval. In any case the point was that he had no real majority. The Government more or less had to depend on the Ulster Unionists voting for them in Parliament. It wasn't a specific coalition, or even a supply arrangement, but that was the reality much of the time. They had to be aware of it. And this was of course a big issue in Northern Ireland policy. Did the Ulster Unionists have a veto over Northern Ireland policy or not? The fact is that they didn't, in any meaningful sense, but of course the government had to take account of their views and be sensible about what they were trying to achieve.

If we start with Northern Ireland, which as I say, dominated quite a lot of my time with him, and even more so with Tony Blair, later, I had a pretty rude introduction. I started at the beginning of January in 1996. A few days later we had the report from Senator George Mitchell about the decommissioning of IRA weapons. This had become a huge issue in the Northern Ireland peace process, because it was intimately linked with whether you could talk to Sinn Fein and therefore effectively to the IRA. Should you talk to Sinn Fein without the IRA having given up their weapons first; or could the talking process lead to the weapons being given up later? Before my time, the Government had impaled themselves on a hook by saying that Sinn Fein couldn't be involved in talks until there had been at least some prior decommissioning. This was a perfectly defensible position in some ways, but the reality was that it was not going to lead to what they wanted, which was to get Sinn Fein into the talks. The Government were impaled on this hook and couldn't easily get off it, and the Unionists were absolutely not going to let them get off it if they could help it. So one of the devices to try to find a way through was to commission George Mitchell to produce a report on this. He wrote a report which said that one side says prior decommissioning and the other says post-peace process decommissioning. Let's split the difference and have what he called parallel decommissioning. We can then have decommissioning which can start and hopefully continue as the talks proceed, but we don't have to see it happening before the talks get going. This was a very difficult thing for the Government to accept, and certainly for the Unionists to accept. Major handled it very cleverly. I don't take any credit for this, because I had started literally a week before. Major said that the way forward here – he almost ignored the specific recommendations that Senator Mitchell had made – was to hold new elections in Northern Ireland, with the specific purpose of electing delegates to a peace

process conference. This effectively shifted the emphasis away from this very awkward recommendation about decommissioning on to another process. This wheeze was of course denounced by the Irish and by the Nationalists as a device to ignore the real issue, which in a sense it was, and as adding fuel to the flames of Nationalist discontent by manifestly ignoring a sensible recommendation from Senator Mitchell. So there was inevitably a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with the Irish and the different parties about this. Then three weeks later, at the beginning of February, the IRA cease fire was broken. There had been a cease fire until then for a few months, a very fragile cease fire, with lots of accusations of the IRA breaking the cease fire in some way, through things like punishment beatings or shootings of dissidents in their own ranks, or of people misbehaving in the Nationalist community, or of the IRA continuing to reconnoiter targets and arm themselves, and therefore questions about whether it was a genuine cease fire. There was plenty of room for argument about all this. In any case, the IRA cease fire was broken by the explosion of a bomb in Canary Warf. It came out of the blue in the most immediate sense. We had heard during the afternoon of that day, from the Irish, that the IRA were going to make some kind of statement and that the cease fire might be declared to be over, but it was a bit unclear what was going to happen. While we were still wondering what that meant, the bomb went off in Canary Warf. A couple of people were killed, not necessarily deliberately: there was a watchman there and a newspaper seller. But this was a huge crisis because the whole peace process, such as it was, was thrown into chaos. The idea of getting Sinn Fein into the talks was inevitably off the agenda for the time being. It was a difficult moment to deal with. How was the government supposed to react? Did you go just for immediate denunciation of the IRA and Sinn Fein and all their works, which was obviously the most immediate temptation, and say all bets were now off; or did you do the denunciation and say this was a major setback, but also make clear that we had to continue our efforts because Northern Ireland desperately needed peace? Although a lot of hard things were said, and had rightly to be said, because of the horror of it, and the emotion of it, and because of political necessity, essentially the decision was that we had to keep trying. We had to plug on with these elections and then plug on with some peace talks, which is what eventually happened. Elections were held, three or four months later, and peace talks were started under Senator Mitchell's chairmanship, but without Sinn Fein. They were never going to go very far, because nearly everybody thought, or knew, that this was Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark without Sinn Fein there. The Irish said that openly. We didn't say that, but we pretty much knew that was the case, and that the other Nationalist party, the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) could not fill that

gap. They were a much bigger party than Sinn Fein at the time, but they couldn't bring the violence to an end, which of course was one of the objectives, though far from the only one.

Northern Ireland policy went on for months like that. We were constantly trying or being pushed by the Irish and the SDLP to find new forms of words in statements we made to get the process back on track. This was a game that had been going on in one way or another for ten or fifteen years, to find ways to enable Sinn Fein to come in to the peace process, to demonstrate we didn't have any selfish interest in hanging onto Northern Ireland, and that we wanted to see the violence to come to an end and the nationalists and unionists to be given equal respect and esteem; but to make clear also that we had to balance that with our commitment to democracy and the rule of law, the need to respect the interests and views of the Unionists, and the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. There were endless exchanges of drafts. We didn't really have any direct contacts with Sinn Fein at the time. There were some back channels, but essentially it was done through the SDLP with John Hume, who was still a big figure in Northern Ireland in those days, and through the Irish Government, who did of course have good contacts with Sinn Fein.

We continued the process of trying to find a way to get Sinn Fein into the process and to move it on, and to find a way of getting everyone around the table so we could make some progress on the talks, until the late autumn of 1996. At that point two things became clear: one was that we couldn't find a form of words that was going to make enough of a difference, and certainly not a form of words that the Unionists could live with at that stage. The political context was tricky, as I said, because the Ulster Unionists were important for the Government in a wider sense. The other thing was that everybody was beginning to wait for the next government, so our ability to influence events was slipping away. At that point Major essentially had to say, to his own frustration: 'I can't do any more. I have done all I can. We are now about to fight an election and there is no significant point in putting more effort into this now.' He effectively had to abandon the search for further major progress from November 1996 and focus on the election.

I think he deserves a huge amount of credit for going on with that search for peace as long as he did, because there was never anything in it for him in terms of votes, and that was one of the big issues with the people around him, Michael Howard and others would say, 'Why are you doing this?' and were inclined to take a much harder line against Sinn Fein than he was. Major was clear that it was unacceptable, and this was a view that Blair adopted later as well,

that there should be violence and a civil war in a part of the United Kingdom. So it had to be one of the main responsibilities of a prime minister to try to bring this to an end in a sensible fashion.

CM: In your work on this, did you go to Belfast and Dublin or did you pretty well do it all on paper and on the telephone from London?

JH: Mostly on paper and the telephone, but I did go to Dublin when necessary and my Irish counterpart came to see me quite a lot as well. I also went to Belfast occasionally, but not very often, just to meet people and know who they were. The bulk of the work was being done by the Northern Ireland Office about the details of the peace process, but one of the peculiarities of the situation then, and this continued under Blair, was that the Unionists did not trust the Northern Ireland Office. The Unionists thought the Northern Ireland Office were essentially following what they called a Green agenda: their hidden agenda was to help the nationalists, or even to reach a position where Ireland could be reunified. The Unionists were convinced that the NIO were too sympathetic to Sinn Fein, too eager to talk to them, and not tough enough on the basics of keeping violence out of politics. So No. 10, when I was there, both myself and via me to the Prime Minister, somehow had always to be available and to be there to see fair play and to reassure the Unionists and say, 'Yes, we understand you; yes, we understand what your concerns are; yes, we shall make sure you are looked after properly, and we're not going to give the shop away.' There was in fact a continuous process of reassuring the Unionists, who were endlessly complaining about the NIO: too close to Dublin; too close links with various characters in Dublin who were in touch with Sinn Fein. It was a very suspicious relationship. I was the main conduit for the reassurance, so I was endlessly receiving calls from Unionist leaders.

There were some very difficult moments along the way. I don't know if you remember the issue of Drumcree, which was one part of the broader issue of marching in Northern Ireland. Drumcree was a little village where there was always an Orange Order march to the church and back in July, including down the Garvaghy Road, which was a Catholic area. There had been trouble for years, not only about that march, of course, - there was trouble about lots of marches every year - but this one had become particularly symbolic of the clash between the insistence of the Orange Order and others that they had the right to march, and the right to march where they liked, and the right to celebrate their victory over the Catholics in 1690 on the one hand, and the resistance of the local Catholic population on the other hand who said,

‘Why should we have to have these people walking in front of our houses every year, celebrating past military victories and trying to rub in their superiority?’ Every year there was an issue about this but it came to a particular head in 1995. The government had decided to block the road, to stop the march from going through, but the Unionists turned it into a confrontation with a massive presence, including of loyalists, with the accompanying risk of violence. There was a stand-off of several days, getting worse all the time. In the end the government forced the march through, and there was a terrible moment on the way when David Trimble and Ian Paisley marched arm in arm at the head of this march, dancing a jig as they went through the streets of Drumcree, rubbing in to all concerned what they saw as their victory. You can imagine the nationalist reaction and the violence all around the province which this provoked. In 1996, when I was in No. 10, there was again a very long stand-off. Eventually, we again decided – No. 10 became very closely involved in this and the Prime Minister decided, on my recommendation as well as that of others, that the best thing to do was to push the march through because the risk of violence was growing at every moment. We thought that basically, if you pushed the march through, it was a terrible moment, but the worst of the confrontation was over at that point. So the march was pushed through. What was so awful was that we then had to take the same decision a year later, with ever more emotion and determination surrounding it from both sides. As I recall, with Blair we forced it through one more time, in 1997, but the next year the newly formed Parades Commission banned the march from the Garvaghy Road, which did not end the problem – far from it – but at least the government was not quite so much in the front line of decision-making. The whole business of marching and parades was and is a nightmare in Northern Ireland, and symbolized, and symbolizes, the gulf of misunderstanding and hostility between the two communities – and the difficulty of appreciating from outside quite how fraught and violent these issues so easily become.

In any case, where Northern Ireland is concerned, John Major, to his credit, persisted in the search for a break through as long as he possibly could. He would have liked to do what Tony Blair did later, which was to meet the Sinn Fein leaders, because that was a thing we were obviously going to have to do in the end, but he was not in a position politically to do it, certainly as he came to the end of his time. The Conservative Party wouldn’t have allowed him to do that, I think, and would have found it too unpalatable. After the cease fire broke down, it certainly became impossible for him to do that. There were more IRA bombs that year, with a particularly big bomb in Manchester. I remember it was on the day of the

Trooping of the Colour, so we were all watching the ceremony from the windows of No. 10, which the staff traditionally do on that Saturday in June, when the news came through that there had been a bomb in Manchester with huge damage and people killed. There wasn't a huge number of such things, compared to what had happened in the 1970s, but there were enough to show that the IRA just wanted to remind us that they were still there, and still capable of destructive violence. That was always extremely difficult to handle.

I was the main conduit to the Taoiseach's office in Dublin. There were lots of contacts between the Irish Foreign Ministry and the Northern Ireland Office, but again the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach was crucial. The Taoiseach in 1996 was John Bruton; Bertie Ahern was elected about the same time as Blair and that was who he worked with, with great success as it turned out. The link with the Taoiseach's Office was my opposite number, a man called Paddy Teahon. We would speak several times a week on the phone and I would visit him and he used to visit me. We had a good relationship, though it broke down briefly at the time when Major abandoned the effort to find a way forward. The Irish thought we'd done the dirty on them. But it was just a recognition of the political reality. That relationship continued under Blair. All this to say that Northern Ireland dominated a lot of thinking and a lot of work for me at No. 10, and that it was always a very tricky business. For example the issue of decommissioning of IRA weapons was an issue all the way through the Blair years until finally it was dealt with by 2005 or 2006. John Major had laid the foundations for what Tony Blair was able to do later, which Tony Blair accepted, but Major wasn't able to finish it off, because he wasn't in the right political position to do it and it was too late in his time as PM to take it further.

The other point to make about this is that the Americans were constantly on our backs over the issues. My predecessor, Rod Lyne, had had a huge struggle with them about a US visa for Gerry Adams, but had in the end been unable to prevent them from issuing it. That was the background. There was a distinct sympathy from the Clinton White House towards the Nationalist community. They tended to see it through Irish American eyes as the last vestiges of British imperialism. They took a simplistic view that the Catholics were being oppressed by the Protestants, which of course in some senses they were, but it was more complicated than that. They also had a romantic perception of Irish violent resistance. I spent a lot of time on the phone with my American opposite number, the National Security Adviser. Of course we talked about lots of international issues too, but often we talked about Northern Ireland. I had a phone on my desk which linked straight through to him. At the

time it was Sandy Berger and he had a deputy called Nancy Soderberg who was the main link with Sinn Fein. They spent hours on the phone trying to persuade me and persuade the British Government that the IRA/Sinn Fein were actually peaceful and reasonable people, were being excluded unfairly, and needed to be treated better. This debate continued all the way through my time at No. 10. I went to Washington and spent some time with Sandy Berger and Nancy Soderberg, and also met some of the key congressmen and senators. For our part there was a constant effort to persuade them that yes, the Nationalists had a case, but the Unionists had a case too. One of the good things that had happened was that the Americans had started inviting the Unionists to St Patrick's Day celebrations in Washington as well as the nationalist representatives. So David Trimble who was then the leader of the Ulster Unionists started to go and have meetings with key Washington players and to explain to them, 'We are not just a bunch of lunatic backwoodsmen; we have serious views about democracy and our rights which you need to take into account as well.' That was quite helpful in beginning to introduce a bit of balance into the American position which had not really been there before. It was interesting that the Americans at that stage were prepared to turn a blind eye to Irish terrorist tactics in a way that they weren't prepared to turn a blind eye to anybody else's. That changed later with 9/11. Gerry Adams did have privileged links to the American Administration. They were aware of his weaknesses, of course, but basically they thought we should be talking to them. At heart we did as well, but we also had to deal with the political realities of the UK at the time.

CM: The other big item on the agenda at that time, which we have all forgotten about now was the BSE crisis.

JH: It was awful, truly awful. The crisis began to develop soon after I started at No. 10, in March 1996, when it first became clear that BSE had a link with human health and CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease). There was no concealing it by then, because the scientists had established the link. It really led to panic, political panic, public panic, about what the consequences of this might be, in a very exaggerated way. A lot of the politicians and the media did not react well in these circumstances. I think it was *The Observer*, in the initial stages of the crisis, which had a front page with what Britain would look like in 2020 with weeds growing up the motorways, because most of the population was dead from CJD. It's easy to laugh now, because the number of deaths has been less than a couple of hundred, but no one knew at that stage whether we were all incubating CJD in our brains and whether there were going to be hundreds of thousands of cases, or even millions. And as we have

discussed, the government wasn't in the best political shape at the time, which didn't help matters. The then Minister of Agriculture, Douglas Hogg, came up at one stage with a plan to slaughter all the cattle in Britain, because he thought that was the only way of combating the risks. This was obviously over the top, because there were more risky parts of the cattle population which could be identified and dealt with, rather than wholesale slaughter. The sense of proportion was also lost as to what the real risks of BSE were, compared with other things, like smoking or alcohol, but in the political atmosphere of the time, dealing with it quickly became very difficult. At the beginning it wasn't my problem, but it quickly became my problem because the Europeans very soon said, 'We are going to ban the import of all British beef', which we knew meant that the export of British beef would become impossible not only into Europe but to much of the rest of the world as well. We thought at the time that this was an overreaction, because it was such a blanket measure, and it was also suspected by some as being protectionist, because other countries who exported beef or wanted to protect their own markets from British beef, like the French, who were always the villains in this scenario, could benefit. In any case the point was that it played straight into the arguments inside the Conservative Party about our European policy, and whether we should be part of the European Union and should be obeying European rules, and why somehow we did not seem to deserve EU solidarity when something went wrong. The political pressure went rocketing up as soon as that happened. It was the one time I remember seeing John Major completely lose his temper when he was talking down the phone to Jacques Santer, who was then the head of the European Commission. John Major had rung him up to say, 'You have to reverse this decision. This is completely unreasonable.' And Santer said, 'I'm sorry. This is what the vets have recommended.' We all became experts on these obscure EU and international animal health committees, and their voting methods, whether they made their decisions by unanimity or weighted majority voting. When Santer said it couldn't be reversed, John Major completely lost it and swore down the phone at him. There was a huge panic in Europe about the effects of BSE. I remember our Embassy in Bonn getting calls from members of the German public, asking things like 'Am I in danger from wearing leather shoes?' The Germans completely lost the plot in their wish to ensure there could be no risk to anyone. This culminated eventually in Major being forced, by parliamentary pressure and party pressure, into saying, 'You have to reverse this ban or give us a promise of when it's going to be reversed, or our whole role in Europe is going to be compromised.' This then led to what was called the policy of non-cooperation, to force the rest of the EU to play ball, which a number of his Cabinet colleagues were very happy with,

those who were Eurosceptic; while others like Ken Clarke were extremely dubious about it. I remember the morning this happened. There had been a discussion in the BSE ministerial crisis group. They had said in effect, 'We can't accept this ban from Europe, so we have to go for a policy of non-cooperation until it's lifted.' This is what the French would do - this was the argument - if they were faced with a similar situation, as they had done at one stage in the past, when they had practiced the policy of the 'chaise vide' for a few months. Ken Clarke, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, was summoned over to see if he could live with this approach. He said something along the lines of: 'I suppose I can live with this. It's not what I would recommend; it's not what I am happy with, but I can see that politically we don't have any choice. But let's try to do it sensibly'. I was then left with the job of writing a statement for the Prime Minister to make that afternoon at 2:30, announcing this policy of non-cooperation, and trying to give it some substance. Because of course no-one had really thought through what they meant by a policy of non-cooperation, or how it was actually supposed to work. So I had to try, with the help of European experts in the Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office as well, to make it tough enough to be acceptable to back bench opinion howling for something to be done, but not so insane that we were going to shoot ourselves in both feet. I don't know whether I did a very good job in the end, but we tried to make sure that we limited the effect, and to give ourselves an eventual way out. It was not a glorious moment, because what could you do in such circumstances which would really make much sense? In the end, we announced this policy of not agreeing anything we could block, in other words where the requirement was for unanimity, until the ban on British beef was lifted, or there was a process that would lead to it being lifted in relatively short order. I think we announced this in May. Non-cooperation went on for several weeks. At all European official meetings and ministerial meetings, we raised the beef ban, and blocked decisions on whatever we could. Of course we didn't really want to block everything - there were some important issues where we ourselves urgently wanted decisions. So a whole official and ministerial machinery was quickly set up to decide what could be the exceptions to our blocking policy. Sometimes we would not block something because it had been our idea and it was so manifestly in our interests that blocking it would be even more insane than the blocking policy was to start with. But in other cases, we did block things that we wanted to see happening, just on principle, because we'd announced a non-cooperation policy and had to seem to be at least a bit consistent. It was very difficult for the rest of Europe, who thought we'd lost our senses, but didn't have any choice but to go along with it. Every British official and every minister had instructions to block decisions, except where there

were these specific exceptions which had been agreed in advance. As you can imagine the list of exceptions got longer as time went on, especially when there were things on the table where a lack of a decision was going to be damaging for our foreign policy or for our relations with friendly third countries.

There was a negotiation in parallel with all this to find a form of words for a Summit in Florence in June for the European Union to say that the blockade would be lifted when the following not completely unreasonable conditions had been met. And that is essentially what happened. A form of words was found that we decided was good enough for the policy of non-cooperation to come to an end. What I remember clearly also is that many of us somehow assumed that this would lead to a lifting of the ban on British beef relatively soon, not of course immediately, because we could see that there were things we had to do and safeguards we had to put in place things like removing spinal cords from carcasses, and not selling any brains, and only marketing beef from cattle of a certain age, which wouldn't have developed BSE. We also knew that the process would start with particular products, rather than beef in general. We became experts on all these minutiae. But we still thought we could see some progress quite quickly. At the same time advisers from the Cabinet Office, Andrew Cahn in particular, kept saying to us, 'Don't get your hopes up too high. This whole thing is going to last for years and years.' People like me knew it would be longer than we were claiming in public, but still said, 'No, no. Surely it can't possibly be that long.' Sadly he was right; it did last for years and years. Nevertheless the immediate crisis was defused, and gradually there were some cracks in the wall. There was a question of whether you were allowed to export bull's semen, for example to places like China, which was an important and valuable trade, and that crept through the decision-making process on these European veterinary committees, which were incredibly complicated. Gradually, ways were found of exporting other bits of things, but the full ban was not lifted until ten years later in 2006. In fact one of the last remnants of this was when the Chinese lifted their ban on British beef in early 2018, when Theresa May went on a visit, 22 years later! There was of course a protectionist element in some of this, because it was a good way of keeping British beef out of your market. In any case, that was how this difficult agricultural issue became at the same time a huge British crisis over European policy which fed into the whole decades long British argument about Europe. The European reaction to BSE, which was not unreasonable in many ways, given the fear and the many unknown factors, was seen as a political act by those who hated Europe. Europe was a running sore all through my time with John Major, and as

over Northern Ireland, people started to wait for Tony Blair because they could see there would be someone different in No. 10, who should have the ability to make different things happen.

CM: Something else we have forgotten about that period because of the terrible things that have happened since, is Saddam Hussein and sanctions against Iraq.

JH: Yes. Don't forget that John Major was Prime Minister during the first invasion of Iraq. That policy had been started by Mrs Thatcher, but then she fell before the war, so it was John Major, with George Bush senior, who had carried the thing forward and had gone for the first Gulf War, which had been successful in getting the Iraqis out of Kuwait. They were completely overmatched by the Coalition forces that were put into place. The first Gulf War ended with this very dramatic moment when an Iraqi convoy was destroyed by Coalition airpower. The whole road heading north to Baghdad was littered with burned out vehicles and corpses, and that was the end of it. However it was seen by some, not least in the US, as unfinished business, because Saddam Hussein was still there. We had no-fly zones; we had sanctions; we had all sorts of things, but it didn't stop him suppressing the Marsh Arabs; it didn't stop him continuing to oppress the Shia population, so people felt that somehow he had been allowed to get away with it. Very strong sanctions had been put in place and of course a system of inspections, with UN inspectors to look for his weapons of mass destruction. Yet there was a rumbling issue all through my time with Major, and into Blair as well, about the gradual weakening of the sanctions regime. The Iraqis were finding ways round it; and there was a big issue about who we were punishing. Were we not punishing the Iraqi population, because they were the ones who were suffering, rather than Saddam Hussein, who continued to get what he wanted and live a life of luxury in his palaces. The poor ordinary Iraqis were suffering malnutrition because they weren't getting the supplies they need. This then led to the UN-led Oil for Food arrangement, which then in turn led to corruption and all sorts of dodgy deals. So sanctions were weakening and some countries were saying openly that the sanctions were not working; they were punishing the wrong people; so were we sure this was a good idea? There was lots of nibbling away at the edges of the sanctions. Then there were issues about the inspectors, because one of the conditions of the ending of the Gulf War was that the inspectors had the right to go anywhere they wanted in Iraq to look for weapons of mass destruction. At the beginning they had been allowed to do that, but over time, as Saddam Hussein regained confidence, he started to obstruct the inspectors. There were issues then and later about, for example, were the

inspectors allowed to go into presidential compounds. Did they have to give notice and if so how much? Were the Iraqis allowed to exclude them from certain places? This became a game of cat and mouse. For all these reasons this was a difficult time. What were we going to do to enforce the sanctions? Were we prepared to go back to military action to enforce them? Was Saddam cocking a snook at the UN and the international community? Yes, of course he was. So this crisis rumbled on and flared up in different ways at different times. In 1996 there was another mini-crisis and there was a risk of military action against Saddam Hussein, not an invasion, but bombing. Kofi Annan went to Baghdad and managed to negotiate an agreement with the Iraqis about continuing to allow the inspectors to do what they needed to do and letting them into presidential compounds. That was the moment that Kofi Annan said, 'Negotiating is always good; negotiating is always easier if the threat of military force is there.' Which it was in this particular case. Nevertheless it remained a running sore. Solidarity in Europe was beginning to unravel, because of this argument about what the real effects of sanctions were. And even then questions were increasingly being asked about whether Saddam really did have weapons of mass destruction. The inspectors did find some things; they did find some rusting old drums of chemical weapons, and evidence of biological weapons and missile sites and parts. They did find them and they did destroy them, but it was a long process, an attritional battle, led by the inspectors, that continued into Blair's time. Major was very interested in all this because he had been instrumental in the first Gulf War and the resolutions which had emerged from that, which were supposed to be controlling what Saddam Hussein was doing. And of course lots of other things were happening in the Middle East at the time. That was the time when Yasser Arafat and the PLO accepted the existence of Israel and that made it easier to talk to the PLO.

CM: John, in your notes you mention the network of diplomatic advisers which was just beginning to emerge. Is there something you'd like to say about that?

JH: It was a time when in general, and in the UK as well, prime ministers and presidents were beginning to take a much closer interest in foreign affairs. Of course, they had always had to be involved in foreign affairs to some extent, and if there was a big crisis they always had to be drawn in, but otherwise, for the most part, they had been content to leave it to their foreign ministers to deal with foreign policy, as long as they were kept informed and had a chance to direct the strategy. Now they were increasingly directly involved themselves. What was emerging to support this was a network of advisers of presidents and prime ministers who were on the phone to each other constantly and not just operating through foreign ministers.

These direct contacts could be very important. I had a very strong link with my American opposite number, with a hot line. You didn't need to dial anything; it just went straight onto the desk of the National Security Adviser. I had a close relationship with my French opposite number, with my German opposite number, to a lesser extent with the Italians and Spanish and Japanese. And this gradually became more of a group, rather than just individuals, and a rather powerful group because we all had the ears of the presidents and prime ministers we worked directly for.

Before we go on to Blair, could I just mention one more thing from Major's time, which was Hong Kong, which was also an issue at the time. The decision to hand over Hong Kong had already been taken, but the handover wasn't until July 1997. Chris Patten, who had been Chairman of the Conservative Party in 1992 and then lost his seat in Bath, even though the Conservatives won the election, had become the Governor of Hong Kong, and was a very close friend of John Major. There was a battle going on, including during my time at No. 10, about how you dealt with those last few years of British rule in Hong Kong. Patten's determination was to leave as much democracy as possible. This was opposed by many of the China experts, who said, 'This is an unnecessary provocation to the Chinese and they'll never wear it.' The Chinese tended to see Chris Patten as an enemy, so there was quite a struggle going on into which I got dragged from time to time. My own sympathies were very much with Chris Patten, I have to say, in his desire to build up the elected councils so that they would be in a stronger position to resist the inevitable Chinese influence when it came, when the handover actually happened. He was successful up to a point, but he was also criticized by people in Hong Kong for not going far enough and not creating a proper democracy. He certainly felt it was incumbent upon us to leave strong institutions in place, that were properly elected, and you can see, I think, that those democratic traditions are still there in Hong Kong. It is a very unequal struggle now between them and China, but popular resistance is still there. I think Chris Patten was trying to do the right thing, even though he got no thanks for it, either from the Chinese or from a lot of the foreign policy establishment to do with China.

CM: Now we come to the big change in the middle of your time in No. 10 when Mr Blair won a landslide victory in the general election of May 1997. It was a change you had been expecting?

JH: Yes, I think everybody assumed that the Labour Party was going to win the election in 1997, not least because the Conservative Party had been in power for eighteen years. They were tired and disputatious, didn't have a majority, and had unsurprisingly run out of ideas. The Labour Party seemed fresh and interesting in comparison, and Tony Blair was certainly young. The election was an amazing moment. He won a big majority and the incoming team were full of enthusiasm. It's an odd moment in No. 10 when this happens, because electoral change is a very brutal process in Britain. The Prime Minister is literally out the next morning. It was very sad for those of us who had been working closely with John Major to say goodbye; he left at ten o'clock in the morning or maybe even earlier. The removal vans went, and then the next lot were straight in there, and we were all lining up to greet them. The king is dead; long live the king. The Labour Party were very good at this sort of thing in those days: they had organized people to line Downing Street, so there was a triumphal entry to Downing Street for Tony and Cherie Blair. I was reasonably confident that I would be asked to stay on, because I had had some contacts with people like Jonathan Powell before the election, but there was no guarantee that that would be the case. I knew they would probably want to replace a lot of the officials, just because they wanted their own people there, people they'd chosen, even if the incumbents had done a decent job. It was unusual, but not unprecedented, that I stayed on. People usually stayed on for a little bit. Alex Allen, the Principal Private Secretary, stayed on for a few weeks, to make sure that everything was handed over properly. Out of the other private secretaries, a few stayed on but most left, so there was quite a wholesale change. All the political staff changed. It was not that Tony Blair had very different policies from John Major. Both of them wanted to be at the centre of Europe, for example – much easier to say than to do – so it wasn't as if there was a huge change there. Blair was probably more enthusiastic; Major by then had the scars on his back of lots of European summits and scores of arguments. Blair came in, full of enthusiasm: I can do this; it'll all be fine. His views on relations with the Americans were not very different. Overall it wasn't as though there was going to be a foreign policy revolution, so in that sense it wasn't difficult for me to stay on. I wasn't going to be contradicting myself from one day to the next. I think the incoming team were quite keen that, because I had been doing the Northern Ireland policy, I should continue to do that, because it would be helpful, because it would be a continuum. In that sense, it wasn't going to be a hugely difficult transition. The big difference between Major and Blair was not what their views were, either domestically or in foreign policy, but most of all their ability to get things done. Blair came in more or less able to walk on water. He had a huge majority; he

had for all my time with him, and a little bit longer, pretty much a free pass from the press. He could do almost what he liked. The British system is a bit of an elected dictatorship, if you have a decent majority. New Labour had lots of ideas; they had been out of power for a long time and they wanted to make things happen. And they did make changes, lots of changes, very quickly.

One of the issues straightaway was the influence of people who were not civil servants in No. 10. Jonathan Powell came in as the Chief of Staff, a post that hadn't existed before, an American import, to replace the previous Principal Private Secretary, Alex Allan. He was a former diplomat, but now a political special adviser; while Alistair Campbell came in to take over the Press Office, again a very political operator, and special adviser. Previously the Press Office had also been in the charge of a civil servant. This alarmed the powers that be, particularly the Cabinet Secretary, Robin Butler, because while special advisers had been around for a while, they had not been in those kinds of positions. How was the system going to deal with the fact that these political appointees now had civil servants working for them? What I lived through was that it wasn't in practice very different from what had gone before. I knew Jonathan already; I didn't know Alistair Campbell, though I got to know him well. They weren't difficult to work with and the operation went on relatively smoothly, not only on my side, but on the domestic side as well. Nevertheless there was a great concern that this was a revolution in British political life. The immediate solution was to make me the Principal Private Secretary, not because I was going to do that overall job, because clearly I wasn't - I had a more than full time job dealing with overseas affairs already - but simply because I was the most senior civil servant in the building. They wanted someone to be able to write reports on other civil servants; take responsibility for running the place as a civil servant, so the proper hierarchy of things would be preserved, even though I wasn't going to operate in the way that principal private secretaries had operated in the past. I did have a role in running the practical side of No. 10, which I tried to do in between doing everything else, but I didn't have any role in domestic policy, nor did I seek one. That satisfied the need to see No. 10 not taken over completely by these dubious political figures. That's why I became PPS, slightly against my wishes, because I was the best resort they had.

CM: This is probably a good moment to ask you about working for Mr. Blair.

JH: It was a good experience. It was a good time. As I said, he could almost walk on water at that stage; he could do anything he wanted to, politically. He wanted to get things done

and he had the ability to get things done. He was very pleasant to work for. It was much more informal; it had been quite informal with John Major, but there was a very deliberate policy by Tony Blair to be even more informal. Call me Tony, and all that. I always struggled with that a bit, because he was the Prime Minister, after all. I switched a bit between the two, depending on the circumstances. You'd always call him 'Prime Minister' in somebody else's presence, but you might call him 'Tony' in private. I got on well with him; and I got on well with Jonathan Powell and with Alistair Campbell and the other parts of the new administration; David Miliband was head of the Policy Unit at the time. I didn't feel myself that the institutions were being undermined by this change in the way things were run. They were just trying to run things in a different way. One of the issues, then and later, was the attempt to run the government through a series of young special advisers, giving them more influence in some ways than the senior ministers, who were the heads of the main departments. Tony Blair had never been a minister. He'd never been a senior minister running a department, so he didn't know what that meant. He was – is - not someone who is interested in structures. He wanted people around him whom he liked and trusted and he could discuss policy with. That's how he'd done it as Leader of the Opposition. When he wanted something done, he wasn't interested in whether this was respecting the hierarchy of ministers, but just wanted it to happen, and quickly. This all led to the issue of sofa government and whether the Cabinet and Cabinet committee system were being subverted. I think a lot of that talk was and is highly exaggerated. Yes, Blair did like sitting on sofas and discussing things with people he knew and trusted, but so did his predecessors. Cabinet meetings had been highly formalized for some time, and not many real decisions were taken at Cabinet meetings. Decisions may have been rubber stamped in Cabinet, but that was not where the real discussions took place usually, although there were sometimes more lively, strategic debates at so-called political Cabinet meetings, which officials like me did not attend. Cabinet committees, similarly, were not this fantastic institution before and a weaker one later: it was a continuum. Nevertheless a lot of people saw Blair's arrival as marking a different way of running the government, and that was what people like the Cabinet Secretary worried about. Blair took over the office Alex Allan used to work in, and put a sofa in it. Maybe I found all this easier because I became to some extent part of the inner circle at that point, and a lot of the things he wanted to do were in my area. He was easy to work for, pleasant, respectful and I enjoyed my time working for him.

CM: And the really big thing at the start was Northern Ireland.

JH: Yes, it was clear before he came into office that he saw an opportunity here, correctly. He had arrived in power with a lot of prestige. All the parties could see that not only was he there with a big majority now, but in all probability he would be there for another term as well, which is indeed what happened. Therefore they were going to have to deal with him. They thought to themselves that Blair was a very powerful individual, so they had better get on with him. That gave him a lot of authority and a lot of power, including on the Northern Ireland front. He wanted to make his mark on that and move very quickly. The particular aim was to get Sinn Fein into talks quickly. So the question was, how do you do that without looking indecently hasty, given that the cease fire had not been restored, and without alienating the Unionists? How do you get them to restore the cease fire and then start some proper talks? He wanted to go to Northern Ireland quickly, so one of the first things we did was to arrange for him to give a speech. I wrote the first draft of this speech, much of which survived, and it was given, bizarrely, at an agricultural show near Belfast. We were trying to balance appeals to the Unionists and appeals to the Nationalists, which is always very tricky, because you can very easily fall off the tight rope on either side. What Blair wanted to do was to reassure the Unionists that he was in favour of the Union, because the Labour Party before his time had been tempted by the reunification of the island of Ireland, as a long term policy. They'd had some people in the shadow Northern Ireland position who'd been in favour of reunification, more or less openly. Blair wanted to be clear that that was not his policy, and at the same time, that he was open to addressing all the Nationalists' grievances and finding an inclusive way forward and talking to Sinn Fein. He made this statement which I had drafted for him saying, 'I do not expect to see Irish unification in my lifetime, or indeed in the lifetime of the youngest person in this room.' This was a very clear message to the Unionists that he was a Unionist, which indeed he was, by the way. At the same time he was saying, 'I want to include Sinn Fein, but there has to be a cease fire. If you declare a cease fire, and you stick to it, we'll get you into talks quickly. But you have to do it, and do it soon.' He used one of those awful metaphors about the peace train leaving the station, addressed to Sinn Fein: the train will leave anyway, whether you're on it or not. The speech went down quite well with the Unionists; they liked the overall message. Sinn Fein obviously hated the bit about the Union, but were persuaded over time that it was a message Blair needed to send, and that there were opportunities in the speech for them too. The immediate question was would they declare a cease fire and if so when? They hesitated and faffed around and eventually they did, a few weeks later. Then the question was, how long should you wait before Sinn Fein could be allowed to enter talks? I think Blair had said in

the speech six weeks. Six weeks is not a very long period to demonstrate that a cease fire is genuine, to say the least, but he wanted to get on with it. And he was able to get away with this because of the political position he was in. So Sinn Fein did declare a cease fire and they were in the talks in six weeks, even though there were lots of wobbles along the way. The Unionists thought this was all a bit of a con and they protested, but in the end they went along with it.

The peace talks restarted with George Mitchell as Chair. There was a very complicated structure to these peace talks which had been around for a long time. There were three strands to them: one strand was about the relationship between the British Isles and Ireland; one strand was about the internal power sharing agreement; one strand was about policing, decommissioning and security. There was an awful lot of time spent in getting both sides in the right place to make a deal. Blair spent a lot of time, as Major had done, by the way, talking himself to the different parties. It was a very time-consuming process. They all wanted to come to see him, and to spend a long time telling him about their particular view of life and their grievances. He had to listen and he had to try to persuade them that it was in their interest to move the process forward. So we did a lot of this talking, for example with the Ulster Unionists with David Trimble, and with the Democratic Unionists with Ian Paisley, even though they were not part of the talks and were not going to join in and never did. Then with John Hume and the SDLP, with the Alliance Party, which was much more significant then than it is now and with some of the other smaller parties, including the women's group which was part of the peace talks. Officials were talking to Sinn Fein. All these people had to be seen; and of course the Irish government, to whom we also had to talk constantly. There was a real feeling that the two governments could and should work together more closely than ever before. One of the important things for the eventual agreement was the excellent working relationship between Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, who was the Irish Taoiseach by then.

CM: The Good Friday Agreement was Easter 1998, less than a year from the date of the election. How had that date come to be set?

JH: It was set at a certain point in the previous autumn. The view was that if you let people talk without a deadline, they would talk forever, so we decided to say there had to be an agreement by Easter 1998, which was highly risky, of course, but I think it was correct to think that if there was no endpoint, there would never be an agreement. It was always easier

for the parties not to agree. If you agreed on something, then you had to go and sell this compromise to your supporters, who were not going to like it. When the talks restarted, all the issues had been known for years and years, and indeed many of the solutions too. There was an SDLP politician called Seamus Mallon – the SDLP were almost always sensible – who said in effect, ‘These talks are a rerun of the previous peace process ten years before when we almost reached agreement, but the Unionists pulled out of it. This is Sunningdale for slow learners.’ The issues were known; the solutions were known; a lot of the negotiation was in a way about not much because the parties knew where they were going to get to, if you could ever get them to agree to screw their courage to the sticking place and compromise on the issues where they knew they had to do that. There was an awful lot of wooing of the Unionists in particular. I remember a long session with David Trimble and Geoffrey Donaldson and others from the Ulster Unionists at Chequers when we were trying to persuade them that their interests were not going to be betrayed. Blair could do that more easily because he was genuinely a Unionist. One of the things about him was - and this is a bit of a parenthesis – his attachment to territory. One of the first things we did when he arrived in power was to go to Hong Kong for the handover and he absolutely hated it. He hated it not only because the whole Chinese thing was difficult - you were handing over a lot of people to a Communist dictatorship - but also because the idea of handing over a chunk of land which had been British was an idea he hated. Still less did he have any wish to hand over Northern Ireland to someone else. He wanted to keep it. One of the things Blair was interestingly obsessed by was population sizes. He knew the population of just about every country in the world and he had this thing about Bigger Britain which we used to joke about. Britain needed a bigger population; you needed 150 million to be a serious country in the world. This is just to make the point that Tony Blair wasn’t about to give up Northern Ireland or anywhere else if he could possibly help it. The whole point for him about devolution in Scotland was not about being ready to lose Scotland to independence and preparing for that, it was about finding ways of keeping Scotland in the Union. You can argue about whether that was the right policy, the right way to do it, but that was the idea. So in Northern Ireland he was able to reassure the Unionists that he was genuine about keeping the Union. But at the same time he was able to say to the Nationalists, ‘We understand your concerns and are doing our best to meet them.’ One of his skills, which is an essential political skill but also a dangerous one in some ways, was to be able to persuade both sides of an argument that he was on their side, and to say somewhat different things to both of them in private to reassure them - things which if all of them came out in public

might be difficult to reconcile and defend. He was very good at that and it worked in this particular case.

One of the other things that happened in the autumn 1997 was the first meeting with Sinn Fein. It is difficult to remember now what a huge moment this was. The first brief meeting was in Belfast, and then Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness came for the first time to No. 10. It was a massive media event, not just in the UK, but internationally. It was a short meeting. Adams and McGuinness were very smart people, whatever you think of their past, and they handled it quite cleverly. They recognized the significance of the moment and one of the ironies of the situation was that they were sitting in the Cabinet Room near where a rocket had landed in John Major's time, fired by the IRA. I think one of them made a crack, not about that, because that would have been a bit tasteless even for them, but about this being where all those terrible decisions about Ireland were taken. It was perhaps a way of saying we can talk to each other now despite the history. Then we met them a few weeks later in Belfast for a more substantive meeting. One of the questions at the time was whether the PM was going to shake them by the hand. Weren't their hands steeped in blood? All that stuff. But we got over that too, and what's interesting is that, while the first meeting had been a huge issue before it happened, once it had happened, such meetings quickly came to seem quite normal. But you need to remember that meeting Sinn Fein was a very difficult thing to do in British politics; there had been bombs not only in Northern Ireland but in London and elsewhere too. Lots of innocent people had been killed. The argument was that talking to Sinn Fein was rewarding violence; and they only probably had 6% or 7% of the popular vote at the time. They were not the big political players, even on the nationalist side, but at the same time there was an awareness that if you didn't deal with them and bring them into the solution, you were not going to solve the problem and the violence was going to continue. Not long after Blair met Sinn Fein, David Trimble did it too, which was hugely difficult for him in the Unionist context, but once he'd done it, then he and others could go on doing it. It became natural. Before that there hadn't been any contact between these sets of politicians. They were having negotiations when they didn't even talk to each other: we had to be the intermediaries, or the Irish government. Gerry Adams once made a crack about this, before the direct contacts, about only meeting Unionists in the Gents in Castle Buildings, where the talks were being held. In any case, once direct contacts were established, it created a different atmosphere and allowed the negotiations to go ahead with a better chance of success.

All this time the stumbling block of decommissioning was still there. How far were Sinn Fein going to have to renounce violence and give up their weapons before they could become part of a power sharing authority? The Unionists said, not without reason ‘They cannot be part of the democratic government of this province until they have given up violence for good.’ But Sinn Fein did not feel able to say that, at least not publicly. They argued in effect that they were not allowed to say this by their own hard men, who were not willing to renounce violence until they were convinced that things had really changed: there were all sorts of arguments about this. We were constantly in the process of dodging the issue, to allow the talks to go ahead, and writing things which were constructively ambiguous in order to try to make the agreement happen. Our view was that we had to draw the republicans into the political process and in the end they would do the right thing, and give up violence, but it could not be rushed too much. Meanwhile we had to keep the show on the road. This was the issue on which the talks almost foundered, because the Unionists could see that the assurances about giving up violence were not as watertight as they wanted them to be. They were right in a sense, and it was a long time after the Good Friday Agreement before decommissioning finally happened. We had set up an international commission on decommissioning, under General John de Chastelain, a Canadian General, and a Finnish former Prime Minister, Martti Ahtisaari, to try to find a mechanism that would be satisfactory for everybody. They started to produce reports about decommissioning but it was clearly very slow and difficult.

Decommissioning was of course not the only difficult and sensitive question. The future of policing and the reform of the RUC was hugely problematic; and what were we going to do with the prisoners on both sides, which was very emotional for both of them? Another issue was what was going to happen about cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The proposal was that in certain areas the two governments – the government of Northern Ireland and the government of the Irish Republic – would work together. This was an extremely sensitive subject for the Unionists because it could be seen as a slippery slope to unification; at the same time they could see that there were practical arguments for working together in areas like tourism or agriculture. So there was a whole issue about which areas they were going to cooperate in, and what structures they were going to have to cooperate, Anglo-Irish joint bodies, they were called. At some point, very close to the final talks, the Northern Ireland Office produced a list of these bodies and what they were going to do, and the Ulster Unionists were completely horrified by the length of the list. John Taylor, who

was one of the leaders of the Ulster Unionists, said, 'I won't touch it with a forty-foot barge pole.' I remember I was shocked because I had been reassured by the NIO that the Unionists were on board and would not object to the list. They were quite wrong! The whole peace process was in danger of foundering; this happened just before the deadline, a few days before Easter 1998. It was decided that the only way to solve this was that Blair was going to have to go and get involved in negotiations personally and the Irish Taoiseach would come too. All the parties would be there at leadership level, and we would try and sort all this out. And that's what happened. Blair made his famous remark at the time on arrival in Belfast, 'I don't want this to be a sound bite, but I do feel the hand of history on my shoulder.' Highly amusing at the time.

An extremely intensive negotiation then followed for seventy two hours, when we didn't sleep. There was a lot of simultaneous negotiations going on, negotiations about the power-sharing arrangement, but we knew that could be fixed, if you could fix the rest, because the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists could do that deal, which they did quite quickly, once the rest was falling into place. But we had to find the right form of words, on policing, on decommissioning and on prisoners. What should we do with those who had been convicted of crimes related to the Troubles, on both sides, but particularly on the Nationalist side? Many had been convicted of IRA bombings and murders. They were not political prisoners; they had been properly convicted by Northern Ireland courts of criminal offenses. But if you did nothing about them, probably Sinn Fein would never be able to sell the Agreement in their own community, for whom the prisoners were resistance heroes and a touchstone problem. The same was true on the Loyalist side, because there were violent Loyalist movements as well, which also had prisoners. So at a certain point, one of the keys to the negotiations was Blair agreeing that they could all be out in two or three years. Each case would have to be reviewed and any prisoner could be called back into prison if they went back to doing the things they'd done before, but essentially, they were going to be released. The Unionists were horrified by this, and it wasn't something that we ourselves would necessarily have wanted to do in that way, but on the other hand it was clear that if we wanted an agreement, that is what we would have to agree, with the hope, which proved largely to be the case, that those who came out would see no reason to go back to violence themselves. We also found words on decommissioning; we found words on policing, around the reconstruction of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the formation of a new Northern Ireland Police Service, which also took years to put in place by the way - Chris Patten did

that later in a separate negotiation. Then there was the question of north-south bodies, how many people would they have in them and how would they work? The Unionists were extremely difficult throughout; but so was Sinn Fein, in their own way.

One of the interesting moments, which illustrated the importance of personal relationships in such negotiations, was when Bertie Ahern's mother died just as this final phase of talks in Belfast was starting. He went back to Dublin for the funeral, but came back as soon as he could the following day to continue the negotiations. This made a huge impression on the Unionists, that he was willing to do that; it helped to soften their position. They thought, this man is really genuine about progress, and this helped to find a way forward on some of the critical issues. It was a dramatic process altogether. There were lots of parallel negotiations going on, but somehow we managed to get the whole text together. Then just when we thought it was all going to be fine, the Ulster Unionists said, 'We can't do it.' They had a meeting of their own party leadership, and said to us, 'We can't sell this agreement. It just won't do.' There was a very dramatic moment when Jonathan Powell went down to see them. We cobbled together a Letter of Comfort, particularly about decommissioning and whether Sinn Fein would be allowed into the power-sharing government, if violence continued. Bill Clinton rang up David Trimble and everybody else. Everybody put pressure on. Still we thought we'd lost it. Honestly, we thought it was all over. Then all of a sudden, David Trimble said, 'OK, I'm going to go for it.' - even though some of his party leadership refused to agree and in effect went home. Very quickly, we had a final plenary; everybody signed up and we'd done it. You felt you'd really achieved something. You didn't know if it would really stick, because there were rats on all sides, getting at it. And there was a whole process afterwards of a referendum, in Northern Ireland, and in the Irish Republic, because they had to change their constitution for this.

My overall perception was that Sinn Fein and the nationalist side had made more crucial concessions to reach that agreement than the Unionists, but they were clever and behaved as if they had won what they wanted. The Unionists had got what they most wanted, which was the principle of the consent of the people of Northern Ireland before any constitutional change, and the changing of the Irish Constitution, but they still felt that somehow they had been diddled, or forced to do things they didn't want. It was an interesting exercise in how expectations can be set or the narrative can be written in different ways. One side says, 'We won,' and sells it to their supporters, which was a very difficult sell, because they had accepted the principle of consent for Northern Ireland, which was fundamental, and were no

nearer to reunification, which remained their ultimate goal. The Unionists had got what they had always wanted, that Northern Ireland could never be part of the Republic, unless the people voted to do so. But the Unionists still felt they'd lost, because of the issues about violence, decommissioning and policing that they were very worried about. And if the nationalists were saying they had got what they wanted, that of course made the Unionists more worried still. And the DUP were of course crying betrayal constantly, even though years later they went into power sharing themselves. So it was a real struggle to get the Unionists to go out and sell the agreement positively to people for the referendum, as opposed to saying in effect, 'This is really not a good agreement, but I've signed up to it, so I suppose you should vote for it.' They couldn't sell it well, which is why Blair then had to spend a lot of time selling it himself. To help with this we produced, Alistair Campbell and I, five simple pledges for the future, which was tricky. One or two were right on the edge of what we could really promise, but I think it did help. In the end the people of Northern Ireland did vote for the agreement with a decent majority, including a majority on the Unionist side, which had by no means been self-evident at times during the campaign. This was not of course the end of the story, because there were endless future crises and breakdowns about the details of power-sharing and, for example, about the famous north-south bodies. We'd fudged that in the Agreement, so we had to have another crisis summit in the autumn of 1998. That's how it went on, long after I'd left, and in some ways is still going on now. Now, of course, it is all between Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionists, who weren't even part of the original Agreement. It was an amazing moment, much later, when Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley sat down and chuckled together over tea, and agreed to work together in government. This was just inconceivable when we started the process. The Good Friday Agreement did not solve all the problems, and did not make the two communities love or even like each other. The so-called peace walls are still there, and children are still largely educated in their own communities, to be suspicious of each other. But the Agreement was still a significant achievement, in my view. Life has become much more normal in Northern Ireland as a result, and a return to serious violence still looks unlikely.

CM: Now we come to the death of Princess Diana on 31 August 1997. What was your part in that tragedy? Mr Blair, with his 'People's Princess' really knew how to say the right thing on the occasion.

JH: I was involved, but not centrally involved. I was woken up in the middle of the night to be told that there'd been an accident in Paris, and later to be told that she had died. I had to relay that to the Prime Minister. Then he made the 'People's Princess' remarks outside his church in his constituency. Alistair Campbell was crafting that, not me. This was followed by that very difficult week when the country sort of went mad. I was involved because one of my normal roles as Principal Private Secretary was liaison with the Palace; I went with the Prime Minister every week. I didn't see the Queen myself of course; I talked to the Queen's Private Secretary. That was part of the ritual. That week there was clearly a whole lot of issues about how the funeral was going to be organized. Then of course the whole controversy arose very quickly about the Queen and the Royal Family and were they showing proper respect for Diana. Why wasn't the flag flying at half-mast? Why weren't they grieving? Why weren't they back in London? You've no doubt seen the film *The Queen*. Though not true in every respect, I think that essentially gets it right that Blair was instrumental in persuading the Queen that she had to do something. She had to come back; she had to go and see the flowers; she had to make a statement on television. Blair really did play an important role. He's a monarchist, as well, by the way, which isn't obvious for a Labour Party leader in this day and age, but he certainly is. And he was instrumental in helping the monarchy get through that week in better order than they would have done otherwise. It was extraordinary, the outpouring of public emotion, which was very unBritish, as many people said at the time. It was fed by the press; they magnified it and then fed on it further, and it just got out of hand in many ways. It was a very odd atmosphere. We had a lot of foreign dignitaries who came for the funeral; Hillary Clinton came, Mrs Mubarak and many others, and we had to deal with them and give them lunch. I slept in No. 10, the only time I ever did, the night before the funeral. It was quite a thing to live through.

1998 was a very busy year for me, and that included on European policy. After all the traumas of the Major years, the BSE crisis and non-cooperation and all that, Tony Blair had come in and said, 'I want Britain to be at the heart of Europe.' This was one of the expressions used. Major had used the same expression himself at some point in the early days but it had to a large extent gone sour subsequently. There was a European summit shortly after Blair took office, in Amsterdam, which had to ratify a whole series of agreements. These were quite serious changes to the way that Europe operated, which had been in negotiation for some time. The crucial negotiation was going to be at that summit.

He had to be briefed very quickly on all this and he quickly showed his strengths as a lawyer in his ability to absorb the main points of a brief and then regurgitate them as an effective negotiator, which he did successfully at the Amsterdam Summit. He was the new kid on the block; a lot of the other leaders there had been around for years. He was young, much younger than most of the others; he was fresh-faced and enthusiastic. At the Amsterdam Summit there was a moment when the leaders cycled from one place to another. Blair was younger and he was pretty clear that he was going to win the cycle race, which he duly did. I think Chirac refused to cycle, because that was beneath the dignity of a French president. Helmut Kohl didn't either, for different more physical reasons. Blair was – it is hard to remember now how much this was true – he was the new thing. He had huge authority from having such a big election victory. He was a breath of fresh air in all sorts of ways, including in Europe, which the media liked, and not only in Britain. But obviously this aroused jealousies among other leaders, not least Chirac, who had been around a long time. They thought to themselves, 'Who is this whippersnapper who's coming and telling us all what to do?'

CM: Did he want to join the Euro and was stopped by Gordon Brown, or was he too canny to commit?

JH: I think he never fully committed to it. But he would have liked to do it. I am not sure that he ever thought he would get it through very easily, but I think he thought that, if we weren't in the Euro, we were always going to be marginal players in Europe, and therefore we just needed to do this. Even though it was a premature project, and it had all sorts of obvious problems with it, even at that early stage, nevertheless we should just be part of it from the beginning, not the usual British thing of being late and reluctant joiners. So there was a lot of very difficult discussion with Gordon Brown and Gordon Brown's officials on how to handle this, a lot of negotiation which I was quite closely involved in, about a statement that should be made about what our attitude was, which led eventually to the famous five tests of Gordon Brown.

CM: Were you a witness to the bad relationship between No. 10 and No. 11?

JH: Yes. Not often very directly, because most of it was about economic policy and the Treasury, and I wasn't directly involved in those policy arguments. The relationship was different in those days from what it became later. Blair and Brown had of course known one another very well for many years in opposition politics; there's all the background about the

leadership and the famous supposed deal in the Granita restaurant. But despite the fact that they had this sort of rivalry, they were incredibly close at that point. They used to speak to each other every day, sometimes for hours, very early in the morning, discussing issues. That habit gradually fell away over time, but in the early days they constantly discussed strategy, and pretty much everything of importance. I don't think anybody listened to some of those calls; it was just the way they did things together, personally. So there was this very close working relationship, at the same time as the rivalry and Brown even then no doubt feeling somewhere in his head that he should really be prime minister; he could do a better job than Blair did. All this wasn't so obvious as it became later when the whole issue of whether he should have handed over at some point became critical. Nevertheless, right from the beginning, Gordon Brown did operate in a very individual way, with a small coterie of people around him. You didn't get any information about their discussions; you didn't get any information about what he was thinking. He didn't necessarily share what he was going to do in the Budget, even with the Prime Minister, unless Blair absolutely insisted on knowing it. It was his way of operating, with this small group of people, which was people like Ed Balls, Charlie Whelan, who was then the Press Officer and a political bruiser, and Geoffrey Robinson who was also part of that little group at that stage. They were the ones who met all the time. Information was very tightly held between them; nothing was written down; meetings were not minuted or circulated, even official Treasury meetings. It was a very different way of operating from the way Blair operated. So those issues were there all the time. I think the only time I got directly involved was over the Euro, because otherwise the issues of controversy weren't really in my area at all. Still it was an interesting dynamic which tended to spill over into everything to some extent.

There was also issues around the relationship with Robin Cook, who was the new Foreign Secretary. Robin Cook declared he wanted a more ethical foreign policy; Tony Blair never believed much in this idea and was a more traditional, pragmatic operator interested in what was good overall for UK interests when it came to foreign relations. But he had to let Robin Cook have his head on this to some extent, so there were tensions there. One of the interesting things about those early days was that these politicians who had been in opposition for a long time continued to behave in some ways as if they were still in opposition. They would brief against each other in the press in a very unhelpful way. The personalities and the personal rivalries were quite strong, involving Robin Cook and Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson and Tony Blair. That was one of the flies in the ointment of the

new government, although in other respects they were just new and getting used to being in control, which is a very different culture from opposition. Some of those around me in No. 10 could not understand when they arrived in power how John Major had got himself into so much difficulty over everything. How had he allowed himself to be so hedged in by events, and his own party, and the press, and all the issues that had made it so difficult for him to operate? I used to say to them – just you wait and see. They came in thinking they could do anything, and indeed they could at the beginning, but they learned the hard way later. In any case at that early point they had everything thing organized. They had a grid of events and announcements which was very rigidly controlled; this led to a lot of talk, particularly in the press, about the dominance of the spin doctors. A lot of nonsense was talked about the spin stuff, and how Blair was led by public opinion and had no underlying views – the wrongness of this was proved by subsequent events, not least the Iraq experience, but it was a commonplace observation at the time. What the new government did believe strongly, and I think correctly, was that you had to build presentation in as a fundamental part of policy-making, from the beginning. Otherwise you could have the best policy in the world but if you could not persuade people of its merits, you were wasting your time. That's why they wanted to control how things were handled and the narrative of the government from the very start. And at that point, they could do that. They only learned later how events and opinion can overtake you and swamp you. At a certain point, the press will turn on you, whatever you've said, and although Blair had a very long honeymoon, that is in the end what happened, and in a way he finished up in worse trouble than Major had ever been in. Still, during my time it was all sweetness and light with the press and everybody else, although obviously I am not taking any credit for that myself.

1998 was an interesting year for me, because I was the Sherpa for the G7 summit and it was also the year when we had the presidency of the European Union, in the second half of 1998. We had to organize the G7 summit in Birmingham and we had to organize the summit in Edinburgh for the European Union, and Northern Ireland was also going on, so it was a very heavy burden. European policy was always an issue, because of the Euro, because of the budget and the rebate, because of all the usual stuff which caused trouble between the UK and the rest of Europe, despite Blair's wish for a fresh and more positive start.

There are two other issues I ought to mention: one is Iraq, related to what I was talking about earlier about Major and the rumbling of problems with the inspectors getting worse and worse and sanctions being more and more undermined. So the question was being posed

with more and more urgency, What are we going to do about Saddam Hussein? Is it enough just to contain him? Or is he a real danger to his neighbours and to the rest of the world? And isn't he undermining world peace and the international rule of law by getting away with murder, literally? Blair was quite focused on this even then. We had successive dramas with the WMD inspectors, about inspecting government compounds and Presidential palaces, and being blocked from certain sites. The Americans were very keen at the time on taking military action if Saddam was blocking the inspectors. There was a crisis in September of 1998 when we set a deadline for Saddam Hussein to cooperate with the inspectors, and said that if he didn't cooperate there were going to be serious consequences, detail unspecified. We and the Americans were working very closely with the French at this stage. The Iraqis hadn't complied and we were about to take military action, when Saddam Hussein wrote a letter to Kofi Annan, saying yes, I'll do what I'm supposed to do. The Americans said, 'No, no, we don't believe that. It's just another trick. We should go ahead with military action anyway.' We said, 'Wait a minute. You've said to Saddam he has to say yes to our demands. He's said yes. You may well be right that he won't stick to it, but you've got to give him the chance to stick to it first before you take military action.' It was a difficult moment, when we and the French were on the same page on this. In the end we persuaded the Americans that we had to take yes for an answer, at least for a while, until you tested it. But it was a very close thing. And one thing I remember vividly was when this crisis was going on, and there were very intensive discussions with the US and French about whether we should bomb Iraq, there was a point when I went home for a rest, around midnight – I think it was a weekend anyway – thinking that we had more or less got to the right place. When I came back the following morning, I found that a promise had been made by the Prime Minister to the President, through military channels, that if the Americans did decide to go ahead, we would act with them. I was furious, which was rare for me. I said to the others, including the PM, 'Why have we said that? We didn't need to say that. Of course we want to be a good ally, but we don't need to sell that card in advance. I don't think that was the right thing to do.' Blair just said, in effect 'Well, that's what we've told them.' Despite that, we won that round diplomatically, and there was no military action at that point. But it did of course happen a few weeks later, when Saddam Hussein had not behaved. In any case this was an interesting early example of Blair's instinctive unconditional commitment to the Americans: 'We're with you, right or wrong,' which I didn't think, then or since, was necessary or right. As I say, we did take military action in December. There were bombing raids on Baghdad and cruise missiles making big holes in the Iraqi Ministry of

Defence and other key buildings, which were designed to bring Saddam to order. Sadly, it didn't really work. One of the interesting points is that Blair didn't take the decision to go military action in any sense lightly, despite his commitment to follow the US. I think he had a very bad night when the action started, because some of our bombers were involved, and we could not be sure they were going to come back safely. In fact, they did, much to the relief of all of us. I think Blair had a much greater belief in the potential efficacy of that first bit of military action, certainly than I did, or than most people involved did. I think he believed that it might lead to the fall of Saddam Hussein or would mean that at least he would behave differently in future. We certainly did a lot of damage to his infrastructure in Baghdad, but it didn't make any difference to the way he behaved in the end, and may even have had the opposite effect by provoking a kind of circling of the wagons internally in Iraq, and preventing any chance of a change of policy or regime. In any case it was interesting that there was that tendency for Blair to have a belief in the effectiveness of military action from the start. I used to have arguments with him about this, saying, 'Are you sure this is really going to work?' He was an admirer of Mrs Thatcher in this respect, particularly because of the Falklands War. He was not gung-ho in any way, but he did believe that military force, applied in the right cause and in the right way, could be effective and sometimes needed to be done. My view has always been that he was influenced in this first of all by the Falklands, then later by what happened in Kosovo. I left No. 10 in March 1999 and the crisis blew up in a big way in April '99, with our bombing campaign against Milosevic starting a few weeks later. The point is that the Kosovo operation and that bombing operation, which was not actually very effective in military terms, went on for a long time without an apparent impact on Milosevic. Blair was the one who was absolutely convinced that we had to carry on with the operation. Some of the European allies were going a bit wobbly; there were civilian casualties; NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by mistake. I did see Blair not long after after I had left, when the campaign wasn't working and he asked, 'What should we do?' One of the big problems at the time was that Clinton wouldn't say to Milosevic, 'If you don't comply, in the end we'll put boots on the ground against you.' He didn't want to do that. I said to Blair then: 'I don't think boots on the ground in Kosovo or Serbia would be at all a great idea, but if we don't make clear we are prepared to do it, including the Americans, we are not going to have any effect. So you've got to persuade Clinton to make clear that he will put boots on the ground if he has to.' I'm not claiming any originality or that's why it happened, but I think Clinton did begin to see that, though he was desperate to avoid involvement on the ground, he had to threaten it seriously, for NATO to be credible. I think

in the end it was that threat, plus the fact that the Russians pulled the rug on him, which was why Milosevic in the end collapsed. But the point I am trying to make is that I think Tony Blair again saw a lesson in this about the effectiveness of the use or threat of the use of force. So one example was the Falklands; a second was Kosovo, where he was proved right: the military force did work and got rid of Milosevic, saved Kosovo and he was a hero locally. And the third was Sierra Leone, which was also after my time, when a very well-directed, though risky, surgical British military operation against the rebels made a huge positive difference to the future of that country. That helps in my view to explain why we finished up with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in my view, because Blair was convinced that Saddam still had WMD and that a good military operation could help Iraq and help the world. By the way, I've always been clear that Blair didn't do it for Bush or for any other reason, and didn't tell lies about it; he did it because he really believed in it and really believed that it would work and lead to a better future. Of course he also wanted to be with the Americans. But he would never have done it; it would never have panned out in the way that it did, if he hadn't thought it was absolutely the right thing to do, however mistaken that view looks to most people now.

Blair was also very interested in the Middle East more widely. I think it was in 1998, after Netanyahu had come to office, that both Netanyahu and Arafat were in London for some reason. He saw them both, and in fact I think he saw them both twice, separately. And I think he became convinced at that point that he could negotiate Middle East peace if he just had the time and the mandate. I used to say, 'Hmm, are you sure about that?' The parties didn't look to me as if they were in a position to do a deal, especially Netanyahu, of whom I was not a fan, then or now. But Blair did have that conviction about his own abilities and his powers of persuasion, which were indeed very great, by the way. He was very articulate and very charming, and at that stage at the height of his powers.

One other thing to mention is the relationship with Clinton. At the end of John Major's time, there was a particular moment when Clinton was clearly not very interested in Major anymore, because he wasn't going to be there much longer and he was interested in Blair. They had had contacts before about progressive policies. So after the 1997 election, the relationship with Clinton was good and close under Blair. Clinton was an incredibly impressive politician and very knowledgeable and wise on foreign affairs, in my experience, and the two men liked and admired each other. So they worked together very closely. That was true obviously on Northern Ireland - the American influence can be exaggerated on that,

but it was important that they were on the right side, not on the wrong side, and George Mitchell's involvement was a very important part of that. But it was true on other issues as well. I have already mentioned Kosovo. Blair also got on very well with Hillary Clinton, because she was also part of the new so-called progressive thinking. They had these summits together, which were not foreign policy summits, but progressive thinkers' meetings. The Third Way was a big deal at that point, about how politics didn't need to be stuck in the old ways; you could find new ways forward. You could combine market economics and social progress; there was no choice to be made between these two things. The old Right and Left labels didn't mean anything. This was also the time in early '98 of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Clinton was in terrible trouble and we went for a summit at that time with the Americans. There was a famous moment, when Blair came out in the press conference and defended Clinton, despite all the accusations about Lewinsky and lying, which was high risk, because at the time it wasn't clear that Clinton would survive. Clinton was extremely grateful that he had been prepared to do that and stick his neck out for him. Alastair Campbell and the head of Clinton's Press Office were very close. All this made the relationship even closer. I think Clinton was in some ways the most impressive politician I have ever met, both in terms of the quality of his thinking about foreign policy, though not always reflected in action, and his extraordinary ability to charm people.

Interview 4 with Sir John Holmes

Today is 22 March 2018 and this is the fourth interview with Sir John Holmes for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme; Catherine Manning recording.

Ambassador to Portugal, 1999–2001

CM: John, last time we finished your account of your time in No. 10, which spanned the end of Mr Major's premiership and the start of Mr Blair's. In March 1999, after almost four years in No. 10, you left London and went to Lisbon as Ambassador. That must have been a lovely posting.

JH: It was. In fact, I didn't go straightaway. I had a couple of months to learn a bit of Portuguese, because I didn't know a word before I started, at the Foreign Office Diplomatic Language Centre. The posting was deliberately, in a way, a rest cure after the travails of No. 10, because I was exhausted physically and mentally. It was the ideal combination: in principle it wasn't going to be too stressful as a job because Portugal was a relatively small

country with which we had always had good relations; on the other hand Portugal was part of the European Union, so I was still going to be engaged in discussions about European issues which had been significant in my No. 10 life before that and were still important questions. Lisbon is a nice city. The Residence in Lisbon, sadly sold now, was a wonderful place, falling down, but still a wonderful place to live, and the Portuguese are very pleasant people to deal with, so it was a good posting from that point of view too. Nice for Penny and the children, but with enough to do to keep it interesting. We didn't know how long we were going to spend there. In the end we only spent two years before going off to Paris, but it could easily have been longer.

CM: You say that you were working with the Portuguese on new economic aims for the EU.

JH: Yes, the Portuguese were going to have the Presidency of the European Union in 2000. The Presidency was much more important then than it has become subsequently, because if you had the Presidency you ran the business of the European Union for those six months; you chaired all the committees and you had the summits in your own country. They don't do that these days; they do all the summits in Brussels. But in those days it was quite important to work with the Portuguese for their Presidency, which I think was the first half of 2000.

We had a strong relationship with the Portuguese, supposedly our oldest alliance of some six hundred years. The history is not as quite as smooth as that when you look at it in detail, but the official version was that it was a deep friendship going back a long time. In any case we did get on well. I think the Portuguese had always seen us as protection against the Spanish and the French, with whom they'd always had trouble in different ways. Their aims in the EU were a bit different from ours at the time, in that they were significant beneficiaries of European spending and keen Europeans. When they joined the EU after coming out of dictatorship in the 70s, they were a very poor country, the poorest in the European Union at that time by some way. Indeed in the 60s Portugal had felt more like an African country than part of Europe; they had a long way to catch up in terms of infrastructure and economic growth. So they had long been beneficiaries of European spending, and they wanted to make sure that remained high, whereas one of our ambitions was always to keep it low, because we were large payers into the budget.

The Prime Minister during the time I was Ambassador was Antonio Guterres, now the UN Secretary General. He was a centre-left politician of the kind who automatically sympathised with Tony Blair. He was a modernising force, not as much as Blair, perhaps,

but that's how he saw himself. The centre piece of the Portuguese Presidency, one of the things that the European Union had set themselves, was to produce a document which would be a ten-year plan to improve European competitiveness. One of the observations at the time - and it is probably still true - was that we were not as competitive as the Americans in some key areas. We didn't seem to create big new companies, like the big tech companies these days - they didn't exist in those days - such as Facebook and Google and so on. We weren't producing those; we weren't very productive overall; we weren't very competitive; our growth rates were relatively low: around 2% a year was the average European growth rate, whereas it should have been nearer 3% or more, like the US. So the idea was to produce a plan to make Europe more competitive and this was going to be decided at the Lisbon Summit under the Portuguese Presidency. We - the UK, Tony Blair - were very interested in this and wanted to make sure they got it right. One of the things I was there to do was to work very closely with the Portuguese to try to influence what they were going to put into this document. They weren't solely responsible for it, but if you have the pen you have a lot of power in how you draft these things. The Portuguese had appointed a Sherpa to prepare this document, Maria-Joao Rodrigues, so I spent quite a lot of time working with her myself, but also, more importantly, getting the real experts from London to come out to talk to the Portuguese to try to make sure that this document and these policies would be modern and forward-looking, technology-based and all those kinds of things, rather than the more left-leaning, protectionist sort of document that some people in the European Union would have perhaps liked more. We were quite successful, I think. The Lisbon Declaration was adopted eventually and did have a lot of good things in it about how to improve European competitiveness.

CM: Obviously other European Ambassadors were trying to influence the text in the same way, but you felt that British attitudes to this question were well represented in it?

JH: We were the most interested in it and the most active, not just in Lisbon, but generally. I think the Portuguese appreciated this, because they understood themselves that they had limited capacity to do it and needed help and a major country as an advocate and friend, which we could be. They liked the injection of expertise that the people from London could bring, so it was a mutually beneficial relationship and I think a successful partnership. You can argue about how much the Lisbon Declaration was ever put into practice; it was a ten-year plan and covered some fundamental areas of change, and I fear the EU got heavily distracted on the way. But it was a good basis on which to work, at least.

CM: Lisbon is a relatively small city. Did you find that you had good access to the President or Prime Minister or Foreign Minister, or were they rather remote?

JH: I had much better access than I could ever have had in a big capital. The UK was also a bigger and more welcome player than we were in some other places. If you think about France where I went afterwards: the competition for the ear of the Prime Minister or Foreign Minister is much stronger there; a mere ambassador has quite a lot of trouble getting into that game. That wasn't true in Lisbon, so I was able to see the Foreign Minister from time to time; I was able to have good access to Foreign Ministry officials, but also Economic Ministry officials and ministers and senior advisers from elsewhere in the government who were the key people for this purpose. Obviously, the Portuguese Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Adviser I already knew from No. 10, so I had an automatic entry in that way. The President, Jorge Sampaio, was a very accessible and interesting fellow, even if not particularly influential politically in an immediate sense because of his mostly non-executive role. Antonio Guterres, because of his relationship with Tony Blair, was prepared to see me, if I needed to see him. I'm not saying I was in and out of his office - I certainly wasn't - but I knew him. He was very charming, and still is, and a well-rounded and well-educated person in every way. He wasn't seen at the time as an unmitigated success in Portugal. It wasn't an easy time. They had had a long serving right-wing Prime Minister, called Cavaco Silva, who'd been seen as very successful in reforming and modernising the economy. Guterres was a Socialist, a centre-left Socialist, but nevertheless a Socialist, and therefore came in with some attitudes which were criticised for not producing enough economic growth. He was also seen, certainly at the time, as not as decisive as he should have been - I think he was often managing problems within his own party - and not as decisive as his predecessor had been. But he was definitely part of that centre-left movement of that time, which Blair particularly symbolised. You will remember all the talk at the time of the Third Way between traditional right-wing policies and traditional Socialism - 'Let's find what works and produces economic growth and social justice combined. Never mind what the labels were in the past,' - which was being pursued with Clinton and people round Clinton and to some extent on the continent of Europe as well as in the UK. He was part of that. He was Prime Minister until 2002, after I left in 2001, and then went on to be head of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) before finally becoming UN Secretary General. He has obviously developed and matured over that time, and I worked with him a lot when I was at the UN. So I'm a bit biased. I'm quite friendly with him and I admire

him. I think he still has to prove himself as Secretary General, but that's bound to be a long haul. In general he was a good thing and favourable to us.

CM: The other big issue you mention in your notes is East Timor, which one hasn't heard of for a long time.

JH: It was a huge issue for Portugal at the time. It had been a Portuguese colony until 1974 and then when the dictatorship collapsed and the Portuguese fled their colonies in Africa and also in East Timor, they more or less abandoned it and the Indonesians took over – they had already been in charge of West Timor, the other half of the island. The Portuguese had since then had a guilty conscience about East Timor, but there wasn't much they could do about it for a long time. There'd always been a movement inside East Timor in favour of independence from Indonesia. But the Indonesians were pretty brutal in the way they dealt with it and with the island in general, as they were no doubt in the way they dealt with most things at the time. It was of course a military dictatorship most of that time. To cut a long story short, in 1999 there was a referendum on independence, which the Indonesians had rashly promised, thinking they would win it. They were offering a form of autonomy. But there was a 78% vote in favour of independence. The Indonesians were shocked by that, although they shouldn't have been. So then there was the question of how to manage getting from where East Timor was under Indonesian rule to independence, which they weren't ready for – they didn't have the political structures and so on to deal with it. The Indonesians at the time were in any case reluctant to pull out and the Indonesian Army in particular was behaving extremely brutally. The run up to the referendum had been marred by all sorts of violence, particularly from militias which were under the control of the Indonesian Army, killing people who they thought were independentists, trying to intimidate the population into voting the 'right way'. When the referendum result was announced, there was a lot more violence. All this was a big issue for Portugal, which had championed the idea of independence and a free vote. Guterres's main concern after the vote was to get the attention of the international community onto East Timor, which for most people was a tiny island in the middle of nowhere, which no one was much interested in, while some in the international community were interested in avoiding instability in Indonesia, which is such a huge and important country. His campaign was to get that international attention and he succeeded in large measure, for example in getting the Americans' attention – Clinton eventually took an interest – and also in getting ours, at least up to a point. We had no particular interest in East Timor ourselves, but we were a Permanent Member of the Security Council and the Security

Council was considering the situation and condemning Indonesian behaviour, and setting up a peace-keeping force. The Portuguese were very active on all these fronts and Guterres was working very closely with the independentist leadership, particularly someone called Xanana Gusmão. He was the Nelson Mandela of East Timor, if you like, a very statesmanlike figure, who was the leader of the independentists, or became so. Like Mandela, once the main political objective, in this case independence, was assured, he was in favour of reconciliation and pragmatism. He was not out for revenge on those who had been behaving so violently, or for hostility to the Indonesians themselves. He wanted to make independence work, and in many ways he was an inspirational figure. I remember Gusmão came to Lisbon at one point, and I and a few other ambassadors went to talk to him and hear what his views were, as well as those of another East Timorese leader called Ramos Horta, who himself became President of East Timor later. Both were impressive. Gusmão himself is still around, I think, as a minister in the East Timorese government. In any case, the point is that the people and media of Portugal were following the situation very closely, and popular feeling was being mobilised to get the international community's attention. I think the only time we've ever had a big demonstration outside the Embassy in Lisbon was a march at that time protesting about our apparent indifference, and demanding to know why we weren't being more active in pressing the Indonesians to behave. Luckily it was largely good-tempered. I remember insisting on seeing a delegation from the demonstration, despite security advice to the contrary, and they came in and gave me a petition. We talked about the issues and I was able to reassure them that we were indeed sympathetic, taking an interest and doing our best to help. I don't think we were in danger of having the Embassy burned, or anything like that, but it did illustrate the depth of popular feeling. In the end the Portuguese did the business. They got the attention of the international community; they got the right Security Council resolutions; they got a UN peace-keeping force, led by the Australians who had a big interest as well, and the Indonesian Army left, though not without leaving a trail of wanton destruction behind them. The transition was extremely difficult, and I don't think East Timor was independent formally until 2002, but it did become a successful story in the end, and not only for the Portuguese. It was also a UN success story, too, because when I was at the UN almost ten years later we were able to withdraw the peace-keeping force and say, 'Now you're on your own. It's not perfect, but you don't need us anymore.' It's now a small but reasonably stable country; they found some oil, which helped and gave them a bit of money.

Another area where we had common interests with the Portuguese was in Africa. Even though their colonies were long gone, they still took a close interest in Africa; they still had close links with Angola and Mozambique, economically and otherwise, and we had a certain amount of discussion with them about those kinds of subjects as well.

CM: Because you were living there and it was such a lovely place you had some visits from Mr. Blair.

JH: Yes, I remember one particular visit, around the New Year of 1999/2000, when I think they were looking for a few days of refuge somewhere, and asked if they could come and stay, to which we obviously said yes. This was in fact quite difficult because we had had a big millennium party and the family there as well, and we couldn't tell them or indeed anyone else that the Blairs were coming. It had to be a secret. They arrived not long after it had been announced that Cherie Blair was pregnant, to everybody's surprise, including the Prime Minister's, I think. In any case there was a lot of press interest, once they had discovered the Blairs were with us, which they did inevitably, almost immediately. So there were a lot of journalists outside the Residence doors and so on, which was all a bit difficult to manage. And there were also questions then and subsequently about whether it was appropriate for the Prime Minister to come and stay privately in a Residence and who was paying for this, which we had to manage as well. He went on after being with us to stay in the Algarve with Cliff Richard, which probably wasn't the wisest thing he could have done, because it further fuelled the stories about the Blairs' penchant for 'freebies' which were already around. Altogether it was an interesting moment. Blair also came and stayed with us at another time when the Portuguese Presidency Summit was on, which meant that Robin Cook, then Foreign Secretary, couldn't stay with us, much to his fury, and he had to go and stay in a hotel instead. I seem to remember that that was made worse because we couldn't explain to Cook in advance why he couldn't stay himself. We also had a number of other ministerial visitors to stay - more than usual because of course I knew many of them personally from my time at No. 10. There were particularly memorable stays, in different ways, by for example David Blunkett and Mo Mowlam. A night on the tiles with Mo in the Lisbon docks area was really a night to remember!

CM: You lived in an amazing residence. Is there anything you'd like to say about it?

JH: It had a wonderful situation, overlooking the river Tagus. We were in fact quite a long way away from the river, on a hill, but there was a wonderful view. We had a picture in the

Residence of the Tagus in 1850 with British ships in it, with exactly the same view that we looked at. The house had been built in the 18th century and the British Ambassador had been there since 1833. The insides of the walls were built from the rubble of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and it was one of those residences which everybody in Lisbon knew. All the politicians knew it; they all liked coming there. It had a certain style. But it was in drastic need of repair, which the Foreign Office could somehow never afford to do, and eventually that was why they sold it. The Lisbon Residence was in fact a prime example for the Foreign Office of how not to do things with overseas properties. They had known for twenty years or more that it needed repair, so if you went back into Overseas Estates Department, as it was then, there was a file as thick as a brick about Lisbon. There had been successive plans about how to repair it, and successive visits by architects and surveyors to look at it. Every time they came up with a new plan, which was often, they never actually carried it out, because they weren't sure they had the money at the time, or they weren't sure they'd got it all right, which meant more architects and structural engineers. All the time, the structural problems were getting worse and worse and repairing them was going to cost more and more. By the time we were there, bits of it were actually beginning to fall down. The Social Secretary's office was held up by acro-props by her desk, and one day the kitchen ceiling fell in. But the Foreign Office could never make their minds up what to do about it, even though it was a historic residence which was important in Portuguese terms and in the history of the Foreign Office as well. Everybody who came to stay said, 'You must never sell this, because it's wonderful.' I developed a plan when I was there that we should sell off a bit of the end of the garden – there was a magnificent garden as well as a wonderful house - which we could perfectly easily have done, to build some flats. We wouldn't build them but we would sell off this bit of land for development, and use the money to do the repairs, which were by then going to cost several million pounds. There would have been problems about planning permission, but we were trying to get the City Council - I knew the Mayor quite well – to give us some indication that they would allow that as long as we allowed for underground parking for the flats. But the Foreign Office never really went for this and, though my successor, Glynne Evans, still lived there, after her it was sold. They then rented somewhere very unsatisfactory to start with, and then they went somewhere else, also rather unsatisfactory. It almost certainly cost the FCO a lot of money in rent, probably about as much overall as the repairs would have been, for much less attractive buildings from every point of view. We went back to the residence when Penny and I were visiting Lisbon last year, and found that the developers that bought it had done a certain amount of work, but then

run out of money and sold it. It's now in the hands of a wealthy individual, who luckily loves its history, and has preserved some of the significant bits we left behind. But what did the developers do, among other things? They sold off a bit of the end of the garden, which you don't even notice, and put some high-end flats there. The building and location are still fantastic but we lost it, and lost something irreplaceable with it. We had also had a lovely Embassy in Lisbon which Stephen Wall, one of my predecessors, sold off in his time there. My point is that I can of course understand the need to minimize the money we spend on these things. In times of austerity you can't necessarily afford to go on living in places which are out of scale. But too often, the FCO, under pressure from the Treasury, has taken bad property decisions from the national interest point of view, and not even saved money. We have tended to lose the historical prestige and power of attraction, without really gaining financially.

Ambassador to France, 2001–07

CM: In 2001 you moved to an even more beautiful house in Paris. You were going back to a city and a country that you knew very well, spoke the language perfectly comfortably, so it was not quite going home, but going to a place which you really knew very, very well. It doesn't always happen, but it's wonderful when it does.

JH: It was a fantastic opportunity when it came round. It was a bit soon, because we would have liked to be in Portugal a bit longer, both to do the job a bit better and also to enjoy it a bit more, but if Paris comes up, you don't say no, so I put my name in the ring and was accepted. We were obviously delighted about that.

CM: We are on houses. Would you like to say something about the Residence in Paris, because the house is a big part in how you interact with the French.

JH: It is a magnificent house, which we have looked after very well over the years, and I hope will continue to do so. It also has a marvellous history because it was bought in the first place in 1814 by the Duke of Wellington from Napoleon's sister, not long before the Battle of Waterloo. We've had it ever since as the Residence. It is in a perfect location, right in the heart of Paris, and close to the Elysée, the Presidential Residence. It was again one of those residences which all French politicians knew, had been to, and liked going to. They would come and have lunch with you as Ambassador because they knew where it was, they liked to look at it and enjoy the surroundings, and it was very convenient for them because it was so

central. So it was a tremendous diplomatic asset, and not just to have intimate lunches with politicians, or bigger dinners with politicians and businessmen, with everybody coming who could possibly do so, but also as a venue for other things. In line with the spirit of the times, we were using it, as our predecessors had been using it and our successors have done, to allow British things to happen there. For British companies who want to have an event to showcase their goods, or their services, or whatever it is, the Residence is there for them to use. They have to pay these days, of course, but they get in return exclusive use of a prestigious and unique location. In other words the Residence was not just for our narrow use; it was for much wider British use. The British Council could use it for whatever they wanted to use it for. We had Young Concert Artists Trust concerts there every few months, to which we attracted large French audiences. That was a showcase for British music. It was very good for the British performers who came, who were mostly young at the time, and very often went on to distinguished careers. Alison Balsom, the trumpeter, came in her very early days and gave a wonderful concert. All those things were very good for the UK in general and for what we were trying to achieve in Paris. Paris is one of those capitals, and the French are one of those peoples, who take symbols very seriously. The fact that you have a serious, beautiful, well-run residence in a good part of town, shows that you are a serious country worth dealing with and confident in your own position in the world and in your own future. You may think that sounds a bit airy-fairy, and of course you have to have the real assets to back it up, but psychologically that's the way it works in a country like France. If we ever abandon the Residence because we say we can't afford it, that will be seen as the abandonment of our status in the world, in the eyes of the French. Can you put a value on that? Extremely difficult, but my strong view is that it does have a value and that the money we spend on it is worth it. Of course you have to keep the spending under strict control; you mustn't waste money, or do things you don't need to do, but you have to maintain it. If you don't maintain it, eventually it will run down and become counterproductive. If it's shabby, your country will be seen as shabby. Clearly, there are people in the Treasury who've always had their eyes on a Residence like this, saying, 'This is precisely the kind of self-indulgence that the Foreign Office wastes money on. How many more widgets do we actually sell by having it? How many serious French decisions have we actually influenced?' But of course you can't prove any of that. And the Treasury's attitude would be that, if you can't prove it and you can't measure it, we don't believe it exists. Luckily, politicians, I think, and certainly businessmen, understand the point of a prestigious Residence better than

civil servants and bean counters do, by and large, and so far it's been protected. Long may it continue.

CM: 2001: it's the year of 9/11 and the run up to Iraq. In your notes you say that much of your posting was dominated by Iraq.

JH: Yes. Of course it wasn't the only or even the main subject when we arrived in 2001. Our farewell party in Lisbon was on the day of 9/11 and we had to cancel it. An odd anecdote: the only person who actually came to the party was the American Ambassador; we had managed to ring everyone else and put them off, but we thought he obviously wouldn't come in the circumstances and would be far too busy anyway, so hadn't tried to contact him. Then there he was at the door when I answered it – everyone else had been sent home by then – and I had to send him away. Extraordinary. In any case we arrived in France in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and all the diplomatic frenzy about how to respond to it. We obviously had a lot of discussion with the French at the time, not least on what to do about Afghanistan. Iraq only came into focus later; the immediate issue was Afghanistan because that's where Al-Qaeda had been allowed to establish themselves. The French themselves had interesting links into Afghanistan and had had a particularly good relationship with the Northern Alliance leader, Massoud, who was himself assassinated just before 9/11. Nevertheless they weren't convinced themselves of the wisdom of invading Afghanistan, as we went on to do. Maybe with hindsight, they may have been right. They did go along with it in the end, because they could see that politically it had to be done, but there was quite a lot of discussion with them, with their questions being along the lines of: 'Invading is fine, but what will you do then and how will you get out?' Which is always the difficult question. At that time they had a consciously and deliberately different view from the Americans on many things, and were always particularly resistant to appearing just to follow US leadership. Of course, they were very much in solidarity with the Americans in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. I think it was Chirac who said, 'We're all Americans now,' which was quite a dramatic statement for a French president. But quite quickly views diverged about what the right response was. Chirac always thought that the American response was too military and insufficiently political. He was also a Gaullist in many ways, and could never quite bring himself to accept rejoining NATO, though the logic of that was obvious to all. We were always more with the Americans on these issues, I guess, and always likely to be suspected of 'poodlism', whereas the French liked to see themselves as the Americans' 'honest friends' who told them the geopolitical truth, rather than just what they wanted to hear. So there

were plenty of political arguments about the right response to terrorism and troubles in the region even before we got to the whole nexus of problems about Iraq.

The other thing to bear in mind is that the relationship between Chirac and Blair was difficult almost from the start. It went back to when Blair was elected, really. He was young; he was of the left, or maybe better centre-left – the British Left wouldn't think he was from the left – but he was definitely not from the right-hand end of the spectrum, from Chirac's point of view. Even though you could argue that Chirac was in some ways more left-wing than Blair, nevertheless the two weren't from the same political family. Blair was also a young whippersnapper, as far as Chirac was concerned, who never paid Chirac the respect that Chirac felt he deserved, as an elder statesman of Europe who'd already been President for two years by the time Blair was elected the first time. Chirac had been Prime Minister before; he'd been almost everything in French politics before. Like Mitterand before him, he'd been around almost for ever, before he eventually became President. He certainly thought of himself as a statesman and foreign policy expert who should be paid due respect by others. Blair didn't really do that. He thought of himself as Chirac's equal, despite the difference in age and experience, and this always grated. Although the two got on in some ways and they had some good meetings – Blair rather enjoyed the 'Chirac show' as he called it, in a funny sort of way - there were still regular rows. They had a particularly bad row at a European Summit in October 2002 about the Common Agricultural Policy and some harsh words were exchanged. We were criticising the CAP, as we often did, not just for its effects in Europe, but also for its effects on countries in Africa, effectively saying, 'The CAP damages countries in Africa, which you, Chirac, claim to be speaking for, while your policies are actually very bad for their agriculture and their development. This is hypocritical.' I'm not sure Blair used quite those words, but that was the burden of the criticism. Chirac took this very badly. There was a row; it was reported in the press and there was a frost between the two. The relationship carried on in other ways, but at the top they weren't really talking to one another, which isn't good. A lot of work went into trying to repair that breach. I used to talk a lot to Chirac's overseas adviser. I think in the end the frost was overcome by a peace offering in the form of gift: the gift of a fountain pen. It did the trick.

CM: Really? Was it one he really, really wanted?

JH: I can't remember what make it was. It was certainly a good one. But it wasn't the pen; it was the fact that Blair was volunteering to give it that was a sign: it wasn't an apology, but

it was a kind of tribute, and was taken as such. So for the time being the relationship was patched up and things were better. No doubt both sides had recognised that it was about time to do that.

In lots of ways, we were working very well with the French. Of course we always had different views about Europe, about the Common Agricultural Policy and about the European Budget. We also had different views about European defence. But one of the things that had happened in 1998, when I was at No. 10, had been the St Malo Declaration, about working together on European defence, which horrified the traditional NATO-philes in the British Foreign Office and MOD, and was also viewed with considerable suspicion in Washington, but which was a very pragmatic way of trying to work together to try to do something sensible about European defence. We'd also reached an agreement at the same Summit at St Malo, which is less remembered, about working together in Africa. One of the most stupid things about the Franco-British relationship for many years had been competition for influence in Africa. What sense could that have in this day and age? It was ridiculous, but it went back in some ways to colonial days, to French memories of the Fashoda incident in Sudan, which no one in Britain has ever heard of, but was a hugely symbolic thing in French thinking. In fact the two militaries got on very well, much better than the politicians or even the diplomats, because they thought of themselves as the two serious European military machines, which of course they were and are. We had worked together quite well in the Balkans. So there were lots of good things happening, but they were not helped by the occasional frost at the top between Blair and Chirac, which was underpinned by a real difference of strategic view about how the world should be run. Blair was someone who believed that the UK had to be very close to the US; of course, very much part of Europe too, and a bridge between the two. But essentially the priority was to stick close to the Americans because that's where you should be, and at the end of the day their protection was crucial. That wasn't Chirac's view. He knew America. He'd worked there as a soda-jerk, as he always told everybody. He didn't speak very good English, though he claimed to. But essentially, he had a Gaullist view that France and Europe should be separate, and different from America, and not in any kind of subordinate role. There were lots of efforts before and during my time in Paris to enable France to rejoin the military structure of NATO, but Chirac was always reluctant to do that, at least without some big win for Paris in return, because the symbolism would have been contrary to his instincts. He very much favoured what he always talked about, which was a multi-polar world. We had gone from the bi-polar world

of the US and the Soviet Union to the so-called uni-polar, super-duper-power of the US, because the Soviet Union had disappeared and was in chaos, and Chirac wanted it to be a multi-polar world, with Europe – with France, of course, playing a leading role – as one of the poles. The Chinese were one; the Russians were another; the Americans of course were the most powerful, but still only one of the poles. Talking about the multipolar world was code for being different from and not subordinate to, America, which was why there was an underlying tension there between Blair and Chirac and between the British and French systems. It wasn't new, but it was there very much in their relationship.

The Franco-British relationship is a tricky one in any case. It is extraordinary, in a sense, that the one country in Europe we haven't fought for almost two hundred years is precisely France. We have been allies in two world wars. We haven't fought the French since Waterloo, but listening to some people talk about it, and not least some of the British press, you would think that we had been more or less constantly at war with them for the past two hundred years.

CM: I think it is to do with the fact that every country has a corresponding country with whom they compare themselves. We always compare ourselves with France. I don't think the French compare themselves with us. They compare themselves with Germany. You don't agree?

JH: I think that is partly right, but the French do compare themselves to us to a large extent. They compare themselves to Germany economically, but historically and politically, and of course diplomatically, they compare themselves to us. That's because we both had large overseas empires and long histories in a way that Germany simply didn't, because it didn't exist as a single country for most of that period. Maybe we define ourselves vis à vis the French a bit more than they do with us, but that rivalry has long been there on both sides. My own perception in fact was always that this was worse and more negative on our side than on their side. They had a bit more respect for us than we had for them. That's no doubt to do with what happened in the Second World War, which is a particularly complicated bit of the relationship. Even without that, it's natural that neighbours of similar size and history should be rivals and have difficult relationships. Still it was and is interesting that this narrative, this myth, if you like, of hostility is cultivated by the British media or parts of the media, and by public opinion, and just remains in our culture in a way that you can't get rid of. It colours everything; it colours politicians' views the whole time,

particularly in the UK. It is very backward looking. To some extent we've overcome it. Even now, with Brexit, we are working together with the French very closely on some military things. But the point is that the underlying relationship of rivalry makes everything more difficult than it should be. We've had lots of efforts to have joint programmes. We've had Concorde, obviously, a great technological success; and lots of military joint programmes, many of which have not worked so well, and have fallen foul of rivalries and different technological solutions. There were plenty of such efforts going on while I was in Paris. There was for example an attempt to build joint aircraft carriers, which would have been an extremely sensible thing to do. In the end it didn't happen for all sorts of reasons. We fell out of Airbus, perhaps partly because of rivalry with the French, though we still make the wings. The psychological problems are still there and they make relationships more complicated than they should be. That's a bit of a digression, but I'm trying to make the obvious point that underlying the difficulties is always this sense of rivalry, and that hasn't helped us in the broader European picture. The fact is that we've never been able to get into the same position in Europe as the French and the Germans. We weren't there at the beginning; we've never believed in it enough, perhaps.

That's the context in which we approached the dramatic moments of Iraq. Everyone could see the Iraq drama coming from early 2002 onwards: once the Americans had changed the regime in Afghanistan, and got rid of Al Qaeda from there, they had started to talk about the axis of evil and Iraq. The association of Iraq with 9/11, which was non-existent in reality, was being promoted by some in the US. It was a psychological link, if nothing else. One of the ways for the Americans to show that they weren't cowed by 9/11 was to do something about Iraq. Tony Blair strongly agreed with the idea of doing something about Iraq, not because he wanted to follow the Americans, although he did, or because he thought there was a link to 9/11, but because he believed himself, very strongly, that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the world, did have weapons of mass destruction and would use them again, if he wasn't restrained and stopped from doing so. The French were much less sure about that, though they had not always disagreed, and the difference in the earlier days was not as clear cut as it became later. Well before the invasion itself, there were endless arguments about what we should do about Iraq, the background being that the sanctions were crumbling; the Iraqis were finding ways round them; companies were dabbling with Iraq in ways that they weren't supposed to be doing. The French weren't exactly in favour of abandoning the sanctions, but they had more of an eye than we did on the economic opportunities that would

come from lifting sanctions, because they had more of an historical relationship economically with Saddam Hussein, and seemed more worried about the negative effects on the Iraqi population. They always had a more nuanced view of sanctions than we did; they were never quite sure that they were effective and could really achieve what was wanted. Chirac's own relationship with Iraq was interesting. He'd had a long relationship with Iraq himself, when he was Industry Minister. I think I'm right in saying that he was the one who signed the contract for the French to build a nuclear reactor for Iraq, the Osirak reactor, which was eventually bombed by the Israelis. He'd known Saddam Hussein for a long time. I remember a dinner between Chirac and Blair in No. 10 when Chirac spent a long time explaining Saddam Hussein's personality and background - how Saddam Hussein had come up through the Baath Party and gone through great difficulties to become the leader. He told a story about how Saddam Hussein had been shot at a certain point in some internecine struggle and had swum across the Tigris or Euphrates with bullet wounds in his thigh and managed to escape, the idea being to show us what a tough guy Saddam was, and someone deserving of respect in a way. So Chirac was to some extent an admirer of Saddam Hussein and was never quite in sympathy with the underlying view of the British and the Americans that Saddam was bound to be a continuing problem. But it was also much more complicated than that as well. Chirac thought he knew about the Middle East. He'd been around the Middle East and Iraq for years and years, as a minister, as opposition leader, as Mayor of Paris, as Prime Minister. He had dealt with all these people; he thought he understood the region and its people in a way that he didn't think that either Bush or Blair did. In a way he was right. He knew far more about it, certainly. His objection to doing something about Iraq was partly to do with his perception of what would happen if you unleashed the Shia beast in the Middle East. He always said, 'You don't know what forces you're playing with here; you don't know what consequences you're going to have in the region if you do that. You've got to be very careful about the relationship between Iraq and Iran, and about giving the balance of power to Iran and the Shias.' In many ways he was right about this, although everybody, including me, was reluctant to think that at the time.

At all events, for all these reasons, instinctively Chirac disliked what he could see was coming down the line, which was the invasion of Iraq. He and Blair couldn't agree about that; they came at it from completely different places. Nevertheless it wasn't clear for a long time whether the French would actually join in our military operation in the end. History was important. Mitterrand had been very reluctant to join in the first Gulf War against Iraq

because of Kuwait, but he had done so in the end. The French military had wanted to be part of it in '91, and in the same way the French military didn't want to be left out in 2003. It was an important moment, and an interesting test of modern weapons and modern warfare techniques, and they didn't want to be sitting on the side lines. The French military were not gung-ho about this, but they would have quite liked to be there. Perhaps partly for this reason, there was a conviction in London in some quarters, which I struggled against for months, to say, 'The French will be there when push comes to shove; don't worry about them. This is what happened before, and in the end the French will be fine.' I remember well the bilateral summit in France, in early 2003, not long before the invasion. There was a big story in the British press that morning that the French would be joining in the war, on the basis of no evidence at all. Maybe it was an Alastair Campbell briefing; I never did find out where it came from. It was an absolutely crazy thing to brief, whoever did it, because, even if the story had had some basis, making it public was bound to set up a counter-reaction. Even then, at that summit, it wasn't absolutely certain what the French would do, although the noises they were making certainly did not suggest they would be with us. We had spent a lot of time in the run up to the war sharing with them the intelligence that we had about weapons of mass destruction. I remember a team of experts coming out from London. I don't think they saw Chirac himself, but they certainly saw Dominique de Villepin, who was the Foreign Minister at the time, and probably Chirac's overseas adviser too. And during that visit the French didn't dispute our intelligence picture. Chirac, to give him credit again, never really believed it, but others in the French system didn't have any reason not to believe it. They didn't have any serious intelligence of their own to show that ours was wrong. They may have been a bit more sceptical of it than we were; they certainly did not necessarily draw the same policy conclusions from it. But even de Villepin didn't contest at that stage that the Iraqis probably did have weapons of mass destruction, partly because Saddam Hussein always behaved as if he did have weapons of mass destruction, always refusing the inspectors permission to go to this place or that place. Indeed, that's one of the conclusions one can draw in hindsight: Saddam may even have thought himself that he still had weapons of mass destruction. His own people may have been misleading him about how they were spending all the money he'd been giving them. Certainly he always behaved as if he was guilty, even if he wasn't, which is a bizarre feature of all this - though there is another argument which says that he was worried about revealing he did not have WMD because he thought this would embolden his local enemies, not least the Iranians. In any case, the point of all this is that the French didn't seriously contest our evidence before the war, and it was

still possible until quite late on that they would join in, however dismissive they were about it all later. But our advice from Paris, more and more strongly as time went on, was that we did not really think they would join us in the end. And that proved correct.

Then there were all the endless arguments in the Security Council about having another resolution; did you need another resolution and if so what kind of resolution would it be? We had a terrible time in the run-up immediately before the war, in this battle about the Security Council resolution, with the French dragooning their friends and allies into voting against our draft, and us trying to dragoon our friends and allies in the opposite direction, with a critical group of countries in the middle which we were both wooing. There was some particularly ridiculous nonsense about Guinea, I seem to remember. Guinea refused to make their mind up and kept saying they had to consult the local spirits and read animal entrails before they could decide which way to vote; that was of course a good way of keeping both of us at bay. Bribes of aid were being offered. It was all rather depressing. The French didn't want a Security Council resolution which was going to authorise the invasion, whereas that was exactly what we wanted and needed. Hence the long arguments about what it should say. Then came the moment, just before the war started, when Chirac gave a press interview – and I don't know why he did this, to this day – saying that 'whatever the circumstances, today I would veto this resolution if it came to a vote.' Frankly, this was seized on like a life belt by a drowning man by Blair and Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, to show that: 'Well, there you are. We want another resolution, and we could get one, but these unreasonable French won't have it, so there's no point in trying further.' I think in reality there was an over-interpretation, perhaps deliberate, of what Chirac said. What he said was ambiguous. I don't think he necessarily meant to say, 'I will veto any resolution there is.' He was perhaps saying rather, 'The resolution, as it is at the moment, I would veto, whatever the context may be.' The British at that point didn't care about exploring the ambiguity, because the more negative interpretation was a way of helping get agreement to go to war through the House of Commons, which was the crucial point in London at the time. In the House of Commons – and this goes back to what we were saying earlier about the relationship – the fact that the French were against it was a very powerful argument for it. That was exploited to the hilt, frankly. The French were seriously annoyed. I was summoned to the Elysée and told that we were being unreasonable and we hadn't properly understood what had been said; that's wasn't what had been meant and it was outrageous that the President was being traduced in this way, and so on. What could I say? I thought they were probably right about their

interpretation of what Chirac had said, but no-one in London wanted to listen at the time, and it was certainly true in any case that Chirac was not interested in helping us, to say the least. It all became irrelevant when the war started a few days later.

Now, would the French ever have gone along and joined with us militarily? Probably not. But it was interesting to watch the way this happened. If you remember, there were two things that happened that were quite influential. One was that de Villepin gave a speech in the Security Council in February 2003 which was essentially against the war, and was applauded, which almost never happened in the Security Council. Frankly, I think this went to his head, and influenced French policy. He was a very complicated, difficult character, with a large ego. Then Chirac, at the beginning of March 2003, went to Algiers, always a difficult place for a French President to visit. He received a rapturous reception, on the streets and elsewhere, because he was leading the opposition to the terrible Americans and their war. That went to his head, in turn, and the French had it brought home to them that they were in a position they loved to be in, which was leading global opinion against the crude Americans. After that visit, that was it, really. The French were not going to join us. The question at that point became not, 'Are they going to join in?' but 'How much damage are they going to do? Are they actively going to obstruct things in the ways they could in the Security Council and elsewhere,' or are they going to say, 'We don't believe in this; we're not going to be part of it ourselves, but you are our allies and we wish you well.' It was unclear for a while which of those positions they were in; they were probably riding both horses simultaneously for a period, but gradually they went more into the opposition camp. This was easier because French public opinion was very strongly against the war; and there were very few French politicians of any stripe who were in favour of it or even neutral. So the French government was operating against the background of strong support from public opinion and elsewhere in Europe. Even in Britain, of course, opinion was extremely divided. And the wider reality was that there was a big division between governments in Europe.

There were a few countries that supported us: the Portuguese more or less did; the Spanish certainly did, and many of the East Europeans did. Which is how we arrived at the big division, as it was described at the time, between so-called old Europe, in the shape mainly of the French and the Germans, who were not quite in the position of the French, but not far away; and then the new Europe who were seen, at least by the US, as the modernisers like the UK, and Eastern Europe, who were of course beholden to the Americans in different ways and weren't going to stand in their way. This somewhat arbitrary division became rather

nasty at times. The French were absolutely furious with the Poles in particular. They said, in effect: 'Is this our reward after all we've done for you? We've let you into the European Union; your loyalty should now be to Europe but when push comes to shove you're with the Americans, which is outrageous and won't be forgotten.' The Poles fought back bravely against this simplistic argument, but it was an unpleasant period for the next couple of years while this fundamental division persisted.

It was also a difficult period for the UK in France and therefore for me and the Embassy. The UK were easily caricatured by the French media and French politicians as America's poodles, and as I said, almost no-one in France agreed with the invasion of Iraq. I was at the eye of this storm, in a way. The American Ambassador was a perfectly nice and intelligent guy, but he didn't speak a word of French, was a political appointee and wasn't really capable of holding his own in that kind of argument. So if there was going to be anyone to defend us in French in the French media, it was going to be me. Which I did, to the best of my ability. To be fair, the French media gave me a fair hearing and I appeared quite a lot. I was often one against the rest, but I did quite a lot of radio, quite a lot of TV, quite a lot of other interviews. Interestingly, there was no personal hostility. There were no demonstrations outside the Embassy and we were not shunned. On the contrary, we were invited to lots of places because people wanted to hear our point of view, partly because they couldn't understand how anyone could believe in this war: 'This is completely mad; why on earth are you doing it? Please tell me what your thinking is.' Every dinner was completely dominated by this subject, and it was often uncomfortable, but it wasn't hostile. They didn't agree with what I was saying, but they gave me a fair hearing. I had my own doubts about what we were doing, of course, like many others, but I wasn't revealing those at the time. There were plenty of arguments you could use at the time to defend the war. The worst aspects and consequences of it only became clear later.

Once the invasion had happened and had been militarily successful, there were two priorities. One was to keep on at the French in order to persuade them to be part of the aftermath. 'OK, you haven't joined in with the military operation; you didn't believe in it. Got it. Put that behind us. Now what do we do? We need your help in the Security Council to get the right sort of internal arrangements in place. We need your help on the reconstruction of Iraq.' They were not at all helpful at the beginning, but they became more reconciled to it over time; they became more helpful, I suppose. Up to a point. They were never very helpful, because they wanted us to suffer the consequences of our own stupidity. Their attitudes

went through different phases. There was a time when the war started when the French thought that we were in for a military disaster, because they massively overestimated Saddam Hussein's capacity and the capacity of his leaders. In fact, the invasion was militarily very successful and the regime collapsed quickly. The French hadn't expected that, so they were on the back foot at that point. But then quickly bad things started to happen as we made all the terrible mistakes in disbanding the army, taking debarthisation too far, not maintaining security in Baghdad, and so on. The problems of the Shia elements came to the fore as well. So the French could increasingly point to negative consequences over time. And we didn't find any weapons of mass destruction, so what on earth had all that been about? It all became more and more difficult. Nevertheless there was a whole underlying drive for years about how we could get the French in a more helpful position about Iraq, whatever their initial disagreement about the invasion. Our line was constantly that now we have to do something constructive with the new Iraq, and we need your help to do it. We could hold out the possibility of some commercial involvement too, but only up to a point, because the Americans were not going to allow the French any commercial favours if they could help it. Overall the French did become more helpful over time, but it was a constant uphill struggle.

The other thing was to try to make sure that our bilateral relationship didn't disintegrate completely. It was clear that Blair and Chirac were not going to speak to each other much for a long time – and indeed they didn't. Eventually summits resumed, of course, but they never had the same relationship. It wasn't that good before, as I was saying, but it never even recovered to that level. They were polite to each other, but not much more. So underneath them we had to make a huge effort to make sure that the broader relationship didn't collapse. I and my French opposite number in London put a lot of effort into this, as did the bureaucracies of the two countries, which understood that there was more at stake than just Iraq, however fundamental in some ways that disagreement had been. We continued to co-operate in other areas. Interestingly, the French never took against us in the way that they took against the Americans. They blamed the Americans mainly for the invasion and thought we had just been playing our usual poodle role. And the British, luckily, never went for the French in the same way that the Americans did. We didn't have the 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys', 'freedom fries' sort of nonsense in the UK. There was plenty of rhetoric against the French, of course. I seem to remember a comparison in the *Sun* between Chirac and a worm, one of those terrible things that the tabloids can do to bring matters down to the lowest possible level. That didn't go down well in Paris. But we

managed to keep it so there weren't any sanctions between us, unlike between the French and the Americans. For example the American military were not willing to meet the French military for quite a while, which did not really make sense. We didn't do any of that. On the contrary, we tried very consciously to maintain all the links, and the two military establishments continued to speak to each other. The French military were in fact fascinated by the military campaign and its lessons, and wanted to know all about it, so they were interested in talking to us. The foreign policy establishments also continued to talk to one another and work together where we could, and all the other bits of the relationship continued so that, as we emerged from the horror of the immediate period of the war and the immediate aftermath of the war, even if we still had a bad relationship at the top, we could still work together in all sorts of ways which we needed to do. I think that was a large part of what I thought I was there for, and a large part of what we did.

One aspect of this was that 2004 was the hundredth anniversary of the Entente Cordiale, so we decided, even before the Iraq split, but reinforced by it, to make something of this, because after all, we had been with the French in the two great conflicts of the twentieth century, and had been allies and friends for the previous 60 years. You might not have believed that from the way the British press wrote about the French, but it was still true. Our relationship before the First World War was very tricky, and it wasn't at all obvious that we would be with the French against the Germans at certain points in time. The Entente Cordiale was therefore an important agreement historically, however inglorious in some respects, because it was partly about carving up empires between us, which was also why we decided to make a big thing of the hundredth anniversary. We put together an extensive programme of events for the year; the Queen came on a state visit in April 2004, and Chirac went on a return visit which, while it wasn't a state visit, did involve going to Windsor Castle for a big dinner; the Prince of Wales came for a gala opera evening. We had all sorts of lower level events throughout the year, to celebrate the fact that we had been together for a long time, had been through a lot together and shared a lot of interests and values. The French understood what we were trying to do and went along with it, even though they had doubts at times. We even had a special logo, though there were endless arguments about what it should be. I and my French opposite number had an Entente Cordiale celebration committee which met regularly. Gerard Herrera was the French Ambassador at the time; not the easiest character in the world, but on the whole we worked together quite well. There was a bicycle race from London to Paris, a pop concert, sporting events, and lots and lots of

minor events all round France and in Britain. We tried to give town twinning, which had become rather unfashionable for some reason, a bit more of a boost, not very successfully. I gave lots of speeches about Anglo-French relations. It was a very visible attempt to repair the relationship after Iraq, and I think it had its impact. The Queen is incredibly popular in France and her state visit was a great success. Chirac's visit to London was not so obviously a popular success, but it went well, and it also meant that, whatever their personal views, he and Blair had to get on with it and start talking to each other. All of this dominated our life for that year. Planning a state visit in particular is a major, major operation in terms of time and effort.

CM: On the EU front were the British and the French always on opposite sides?

JH: Well, fundamental differences were very often there. We were always more on the free trading side while the French were usually on the protectionist end of the spectrum, in terms of trade and investment policy. We always had the same old arguments about the Common Agricultural Policy and the European Budget, which made life difficult, and sometimes about fishing policy as well, though that wasn't necessarily a big issue bilaterally. But we did have some areas where we were usually with the French: foreign policy and security. On those subjects the French didn't take the Germans seriously and they wanted to talk to us, because we were fellow members of the Security Council, with large and effective armed forces, global reach, and global ambitions. The Germans are a bit more in the global diplomatic game now, but even now, not as much as we are. If the French wanted to talk about big world issues, which they did, because they think of themselves as a great power, in Europe they had to talk to us. That means we could work together in some foreign policy areas quite well; not Iraq obviously, as we have been discussing – and the rest of the Middle East was often a bit tricky – but on other issues and in other parts of the world we could work together perfectly well. Nevertheless, on many internal European Union subjects, we didn't naturally agree. The French never thought that we were sufficiently committed to the European Union, and always argued that we had to make a choice between the US and Europe, which we always rejected as a false choice. We hadn't joined the single currency, and one of the underlying arguments was, even after the single currency had come in, was whether this was going to work. We would say, 'We don't see how the basic conditions for the success of a single currency are lined up, given the degree of economic and political integration needed.' The French would say, 'The euro is vital and is going to work. It has to work. We'll make it work. Whatever happens, we'll make it work.' Which is where they still are right now.

So there were plenty of things to disagree on around the future of Europe. But at the same time there were plenty of areas where we could agree and work together. In some respects – this is a curious thing about their relationship – the French were driven mad by the Germans, even though they knew they had to agree with them, because of the lack of foreign policy perspective that the Germans had about so many issues and because of the way the German system works. It's a very decentralised state in some ways, with different ministries having different views, and states around Germany having significant powers. Sometimes it's very hard to get a unified view. If you talk to different ministries you get different views, whereas if you talk to ministries in France or Britain you tend to get the same view, because we are more joined-up systems. So the French found us easier to talk to in some ways, just as we found the French easier to talk to about foreign policy and security, though we found the Germans easier to talk to on many economic subjects. Both times in Paris when I was there, there was an endless underlying argument between the British and the French about whose economic model was more successful. Was it the Anglo-Saxon model of less public expenditure, and more competition and free markets, what the French often called *capitalisme sauvage*, or was it the larger French public sector, and greater protection model, which was working better? This argument is still going on, by the way. The nature of it changed a bit under Sarkozy, because he at least started out by buying into more of the Anglo-Saxon model, but this argument, whenever you are talking about the relationship between the two countries, is always there somewhere. It is irresolvable, at least for the moment, because attitudes on the two sides of the Channel remain different, although Macron may also be moving in a more Anglo-Saxon direction to some extent.

Another big argument we had while I was there was about immigration. There were two angles to this. One was the camp at Sangatte, where people trying to get illegally to Britain from Calais to Dover gathered. These people wanted to be in the UK, but as long as they were in France they were a French problem, not ours. So there was a lot of bilateral discussion and difficulty about how this problem should be dealt with. It was complicated. The EU rule was that people should seek asylum in the European country where they arrived. But we agreed with France that these people hadn't usually originally landed in France; they'd usually come from Italy. We both knew that the Italians were even handing out train tickets, saying, 'Go to France. Get out of here.' The Italians wouldn't take them back, though that was the so-called Dublin rule. So we had sympathy for the French position. It wasn't their fault that these people were there. Nevertheless there was a problem about what

to do with them. We gradually accepted that we had a responsibility to pay for security around Eurotunnel on the French side, so if we wanted more fences to be built, we would at least share the cost of them, as well as for other systems of, for example, carbon dioxide detectors and movement detectors for lorries. I went to Calais several times with ministers and other officials to see what was happening there. I was trying to argue with the Home Office that we needed to take our responsibilities seriously, because it was a big problem for the French, not least for the local authorities and local population, who had to live with the thousands of people stuck on the French side. Eventually, while I was there, Sarkozy, Interior Minister at the time, closed down the camp, the hangar, at Sangatte, dispersed the people there and tried to get rid of them. Of course, they came back, and started to hang around later in a rough area which came to be known as the Jungle. Every time they try to get rid of the problem, it comes back, because people are still trying to get across – and it will be a problem again after Brexit, no doubt. There was a whole lot of bilateral discussion during my time in Paris about how we should best handle the issue, including between the two Interior Ministers. David Blunkett was very pragmatic about it all when he was Home Secretary. We did agree to pay quite a lot to help to pay for protection on the French side, since we understood that they were trying to deal with something which was at least partly our problem, and that if they had opened the border, we would have faced very grave difficulties with those coming across, and with those who would be drawn to Calais and Dover in even greater numbers if they thought they could get across easily.

But there was also an underlying issue between us, which was the French question about why the UK was so attractive to immigrants. They couldn't understand why it seemed to be so easy to be an illegal immigrant in Britain. The French would say that the reason they wanted to go to Britain was that they could get a job there illegally without the authorities doing anything about it. We were therefore asking for trouble, but then the French were stuck with the consequences. Part of our answer to this was to say: 'The reason they want to come to Britain is not our lax controls, but because our economy is successful: there are jobs, unlike in France. And we are not going to apologise for that or make our economy less successful.'

Another French criticism was that we were too soft on Muslim terrorism. You may remember the catch phrase for this was Londonistan. The French claimed that there were mosques in London where people were preaching sedition openly, with impunity, and that rabble rousers like Abu Hamza were being allowed to walk the streets when they were known to be preaching violence. Why were we allowing this to happen? There was a lot of

criticism of this kind from the French media and French politicians, that we were just not alive enough to the real dangers out there. Our argument was that we could not put people in prison if they hadn't done anything. If they were openly inciting violence, that was a crime, but preaching in a mosque was not a crime. Still the French thought we were much too soft in comparison with the way they dealt with things in France, and some of our tabloid press agreed with them – especially when they somehow got hold of a telegram of mine setting out the French view.

There was also the underlying question of who was dealing better with their Muslim community. I was pretty sure at the time, and I think it is still true, that our attitude was better. We were much more tolerant of immigrants, including the Muslim community, doing what they wanted to do in their private lives. We wanted to integrate them, but not through assimilating them. The French had this whole thing about needing to assimilate different communities, and insisted on not differentiating between different groups of French citizens, even to the extent of refusing to find out how many people of different ethnic origins were in France; multi-culturalism was a dirty word in France, while it was not in the UK, at least not at that time. This was all symbolized while we were there by the argument about the headscarf. The French government said that Muslim girls could not wear headscarves in public buildings and schools because this was an unacceptable religious symbol, contrary to French insistence on the government and public sector being entirely secular, and also a sign of difference which would undermine assimilation. There was a huge internal argument about this, including the point that Muslim girls were sometimes forced to wear the headscarf against their will, and legislation against it was therefore liberating for such girls. We looked at all this from a British point of view, and said, in effect: 'What on earth are you having this argument about? What's the problem? How can headscarves be such an issue?' One interesting contrast at the time was to cross the Channel by train and be met by a British passport official or policewoman wearing a headscarf. At the time, we on occasion brought representatives of the two Muslim communities together, to look at our different experiences of integration and how things like radicalisation happened or could be prevented. When that happened the British Muslims would tend to say, 'We are glad we live in Britain and not in France, because at least we have a better life experience than our French counterparts, whatever problems we have.' There were all the issues of the *banlieues* while we were there - car burnings, riots and so on. Sarkozy, when he was Home Affairs Minister, was trying to suppress them and talked at one point about using a Karcher, a power hose, against those

responsible. It was hard to imagine that happening in the UK at the time, though we had many problems of our own. Comparing our two societies in all sorts of ways, politically, economically and socially, was a constant of living there, and one into which, as Ambassador, I was often drawn. Which of the two countries was doing better was a constant question. Journalists and politicians on both sides tended to make these comparisons the whole time, which was in a way healthy and helped us to learn from each other, but was also quite difficult in other ways because it tended to exacerbate other tensions. At the Embassy we were always in the middle of such arguments, trying to explain to London why the French felt the way they did, and trying to explain to the French why things from London didn't look quite the way they did from Paris. Against this background, Sangatte was a big bilateral issue, but at least we managed it in the sense that relations between the two administrations never broke down over it, which they could have done, given the sensitivity of the issue. If you were Mayor of Calais, you certainly felt very upset about what was happening then – and that remains the case as we speak in 2018.

I was in Paris for five and a half years; it was a good innings, and a fascinating one, but it wasn't always an easy ride. I suppose I was surprised at times by the number and extent of some of the bilateral problems. But that's the nature of the relationship, much more than it should be, in my view. I always regretted that my time coincided entirely with that of Chirac, because his global view was not ours. With hindsight I can say he was right about some things, but I didn't think he was a good President for France. He was anti-reform essentially. He said he was in favour of reform, but he wasn't. He was essentially a status quo politician at a time when France needed change. In foreign policy he was always difficult for the British. Towards the end of my time, the Presidential elections were coming, in spring 2007. I left just before they happened. There was a feeling that the next President, who looked like being Sarkozy, would be much easier to deal with for us and more what, in our judgment at least, France needed. I spent a lot of time trying to get to know and understand Sarkozy. He was Home Affairs Minister for a long period, and I did see quite a lot of him during that time, and during the early part of the Presidential campaign. He was much less Gaullist, at that stage any way, than Chirac, more Atlanticist and pro-British. He openly admired the British economy; he had fewer hang ups about NATO and relations with the US. Chirac just couldn't change his views about things like that; he'd been around in politics too long. Sarkozy on the other hand looked like being the breath of fresh air that France needed, both externally and internally. I went to quite a number of events where he

spoke about his attitudes. Whatever you felt about him personally - and he was never the easiest or nicest individual to deal with - he had been very helpful to us over Sangatte and very cooperative in general. The things he said about what he was going to do if he became President sounded like what was needed. I was sorry I was going to miss this moment when he came into power and things would change for the better – though it did not really turn out like that in reality.

CM: And what about the prime ministers? Anything about your relationships with the prime ministers during your time? You had Raffarin ...

JH: Don't forget we had a long period of *co-habitation* (President of the Right, Prime Minister of the Left) when Jospin was Prime Minister. This was another area of complication in that Blair and Jospin actually had rather a poor relationship, perhaps because Jospin did not regard Blair as a real socialist, but also because Jospin was quite a complex individual and not an easy one to get to know. There had been an interesting moment in 1998, when I was at No. 10, when Blair went to Paris and gave a speech to the French Parliament in French. The fact that he did it in French was a bit of a triumph, but he had to do quite a lot of practice for it, because he realised that his French wasn't as good as he thought it was. He had been a barman in Paris when he was young, but that doesn't mean you speak the kind of French needed for the French Parliament. Anyway, he gave a good speech, but what he also did which was interesting at that particular moment was that he really annoyed the Socialist Party, because the things he said could be seen as in support of the attitudes that the Right represented in France, not the Left. So the Right were cockahoop and the Left, including Jospin, were furious. Jospin was an old-fashioned Socialist and Blair certainly wasn't that, and that kept emerging. There was another moment – I wasn't present – when Blair took Jospin to his constituency in the North-East and took him to a pub. One of the characteristics of their relationship when they met was that Jospin would speak in English, because he thought his English was good, which it wasn't; and Blair would speak in French, because he thought his French was good, which it wasn't. The capacity for mutual misunderstanding was therefore considerable when they were both showing off like this. On this particular pub visit Blair said something in French which was supposed to be flattering about how much he liked Jospin, but in fact was not at all what he had meant to say. 'J'ai toujours envie de Lionel de toutes les facons.' It could be seen as quite rude, actually. *Co-habitation* was a difficult period in France because the administration was largely paralysed; they couldn't do much domestically and foreign politicians had to conduct an elaborate dance

around the President and Prime Minister. So it was a bit of a relief when Jospin disappeared after the parliamentary elections of 2002. His successor, Raffarin, was a good guy, not necessarily the sharpest knife in the box, but someone who wanted to do the right thing and was at heart sympathetic to us and an admirer of Blair. But he was not the prime actor in foreign affairs, and could not do much to help when things became difficult with Chirac over Iraq in particular. In 2005 he was succeeded by de Villepin, who had been Foreign Minister at the time of Iraq, and was a difficult and volatile character without much sympathy for us; he and Sarkozy hated each other, so over time there were all sorts of scandals about both of them and the relationship between them, which in the way of French scandals, never really went anywhere, but were distracting for everybody and very difficult to deal with. Then the French had a series of odd and rather ineffective foreign ministers: for example Doust-Blazy, Doust-Blahblah as he was known. It was a complicated scene to deal with, where senior officials like the heads of the Cabinets of the foreign minister and President became even more important and regular interlocutors for me than usual. This was especially true during the co-habitation period. *Co-habitation* didn't work, because there was too much overlap between the powers of the President and of the Prime Minister so actually nothing got done. I was always in favour personally, in so far as it had anything to do with me, of a different system of government in France. I thought that they would be better off with a more parliamentary system, rather than the presidential system they have which was designed to avoid deadlock from a different age and to suit personalities like de Gaulle. Too much depends on the personality of the President, who is a detached figure only partially accountable to either Parliament or people. But the French are very fond of their presidential system. Maybe it works better now, since they changed the length of the presidency from seven to five years. Fourteen years was an awful long time to be in power. Mitterrand was certainly there far too long and Chirac too, I would say, though he only did twelve, because he did one seven year period and one five. Sarkozy was in the end a great disappointment; he didn't do what he said he was going to do. I guess his excuse would be that he ran into the financial crisis which limited his ability to do anything serious.

Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, UN, 2007–10

CM: In 2007, after five and a half years in Paris, you left the Foreign Office and went to work for the UN. I think we should finish off with your UN work. You have written a book about this, which is called *The Politics of Humanity*. It makes a very interesting end to your career in international affairs. First, tell us exactly what your role was. This was one of the

more forward-facing jobs in the UN. People tend to know the name of the Secretary General and of the guy who does the humanitarian work.

JH: To go back one stage: how I got there. I was leaving Paris; I'd been there a long time already and it wasn't clear what I was going to do next. I'd tried to become the Permanent Secretary but didn't succeed and it wasn't clear what else I could do. Various other places that I could have gone to were taken by other people for various reasons, and I didn't really want to be a bi-lateral ambassador again, having done it twice. Eventually, I thought I'd be better to leave the FCO, and do something else, for example earn some money. Then I had a call from Tony Blair in late 2006, who said, 'Look, we want someone good to go to the UN,' because Ban Ki-Moon had just been elected Secretary General. The UK had always had an Under-Secretary General post; for many years it had been the Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, although we'd just lost it. Blair said, 'I want you to go to the UN and get that job back again.' My response was, in effect, 'I'm not really sure I want to do that, but if you say so, Prime Minister ...' I was sent off to see Ban Ki-Moon in New York to say, 'Here I am. I am Mr Blair's candidate to be Under-Secretary for Political Affairs. He highly recommends me. How about it?' He said, 'Thank you for coming, but I have to tell you that that job is not available.' He had already given it to the Americans, I think in return for their support for his candidacy; no one ever said that in so many words, but that's essentially what had happened. Still, Ban Ki-Moon said, 'Why don't you become Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs?' To which I said, 'Well, I don't know anything about humanitarian affairs. Anyway, I am not sure I am the right nationality. You want what you had at the time, a Norwegian, or a Swede or a Dane or a Canadian or a Dutchman, a nice humanitarian, cuddly nationality, not a Brit. We are seen as going around the world killing people, more than looking after them.' He said, 'No, no. I like the British. I think they're reasonable, sensible people. Please think about it.' I went away and thought about it and talked to people about it, though I was not at all convinced. DFID (the Department for International Development) were, I have to say, not very convinced about me doing the job either, because I didn't know much about aid, while the wider British system wasn't sure they wanted this job, rather than an influential political job in the UN system. But the obvious political job had gone, so in the end I was encouraged to do it. Other people said to me, 'The political job is all very well, but in reality you don't have much influence, because it's managed by the big powers; in humanitarian affairs you can actually do something useful.' So in the end I said yes.

My title was Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Co-ordinator. The job had been created a few years before because of the perception that international humanitarian aid was uncoordinated. You had all these UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross descending on a place in a random fashion, all doing their own thing. To simplify, there might be ten aid workers over here in this area of the crisis, and nobody over there; everybody providing water and nobody providing food, or whatever. So there needed to be some way of organising and coordinating everything. This was what the role was created for and that's what it tried to do. It was basically like herding cats, because you don't have any power over these groups. They are all independent organisations with their own mandates and their own boards and their own *raison d'être*. But you have a bully pulpit power through your power of persuasion, and of course there is a recognition by all concerned that coordination is in the end necessary. The organisation I ran is called the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is not the most inspiring name ever, but it does what it says on the tin, and we had offices wherever there were crises and conflicts. I was trying to bring together the system. I was also a sort of spokesman for the whole system; not officially, because as I say the organisations were all independent, but unofficially I often spoke for the system. I had a fund-raising role for the whole system, with an appeals process, which brought everybody together and said, for example 'Here's the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. It's affected these countries; this is what the needs are in the different sectors, and we need \$2 billion. So donors, please give us what you can for these specific things.' Then donors would choose what they wanted to give money for. This appeals system is used for all the main crises and conflicts.

The good thing about the role is that you have some influence to change things on the ground. You can make things happen, by directing attention to them, public advocacy as it's called; by raising money for them, as I was just describing. We also had our own fund, the Central Emergency Response Fund. I was personally in control of where this money from donors was used. I could allocate money if I thought no one else was helping, to get an aid operation started quickly, if we needed to. I could also shine a light on crises that needed a light shining on them, when the press might be ignoring them, and put in some money. The problem is that the press will always focus on the big issue of the day, but there are probably five other crises which are just as bad in humanitarian terms, but which the press are not interested in because they are not 'sexy' in political or human terms, or because they are yesterday's story. That's why you need to make sure that they're getting some light shed on

them as well. What quickly became clear to me also was that I needed to go to the crisis places and see them for myself, so that I could understand them and talk about them with knowledge and authority. I also had a role, not officially designated, but in practice, of negotiating with governments on behalf of the whole humanitarian community, about issues of importance to all relevant organisations - humanitarian access, for example. So if a government were saying to humanitarian organisations: 'No, you can't go to a particular place', it was my role to say, 'But we have to be able to get there, because that's where there are people desperately in need. We don't have a political role. This is not about supporting a rebel movement or the opposition; it's just about keeping people alive. You have to let us in.' That was a kind of combined humanitarian and political role that I could play, which was difficult at times, because some governments were very difficult. I spent almost four years doing it, which was longer than anyone else had spent in the job at the time. It was stressful because I had to spend a lot of time travelling, almost always to places which no one in their right mind would want to go to. I spent a lot of time in Sudan, because of the Darfur crisis, which everyone has forgotten about now, but which, by the way, is still pretty much as bad now as it was then. That was the big cause of the day, when I first started in 2007. We had endless problems with the Sudanese government. I also spent a lot of time in Sri Lanka, because it was the end of the war between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, and we had a huge problem with the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers about getting access to people who were in desperate need. There were a lot of very difficult and quite high-profile negotiations and visits to Colombo and the affected areas. The underlying question was whether we should we stay or go, when faced by a government behaving unacceptably. If we walked out of the country, who would benefit? Should we stay there to look after the people, even though the situation was unacceptable from a humanitarian principle point of view? I spent a lot of time in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where there are always endless humanitarian problems, as there still are. No one pays much attention, because it's not on the super powers' radar. But it's a massive and important country in the middle of Africa, as big as the whole of Europe, with problems to match. There were also of course natural disasters, for example Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, I think in 2009. That was interesting because the Myanmar military regime, as it was then, refused to let international aid workers in. I had to go there and tell the government that that was not acceptable. 'You can't deal with this. You have no idea what to do' - which was the case - 'and you need our expert help and international funding.' We did eventually persuade the government to let us in and that it wasn't a political problem to do so, and we did manage to

mount a decent rescue and relief effort. I think that experience may even have had an effect on loosening the grip of the military regime on the country, and helping pave the way for what happened next politically. The earthquake in Haiti towards the end of my time in 2010 was a massive disaster. We faced huge difficulties getting aid to Haiti even though it was only two hours' flight from the US mainland. Somehow it was and is one of those places where nothing worked. There were also the many running conflicts of the time. We didn't have Syria, but we had Somalia and Northern Uganda, and there were already problems in Yemen, though they are much, much worse now, between the Houthi rebels in the north and the government. There were problems in Kenya, with the Kenyan elections; we had to mount a humanitarian response to the people who had been displaced by the tribal violence. There was always some new crisis.

At the beginning, I was part of a small group of advisers to Ban Ki-Moon, who met him every day. That became more complicated later, because others thought that myself, the American Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs and the French head of Peace-Keeping Affairs, acting as a core group of advisers to Ban Ki-Moon, was unacceptable because we were three white men from Western countries. They had a point. So he had to broaden things out, and we became a bit less central. Still I much enjoyed the experience of working in a genuinely multinational environment. There were some excellent people in the humanitarian area, and we really could get things done in a way which some of the less action-oriented bits of the UN secretariat could not do. We had less politically correct time servers and more young but experienced aid professionals. But one shock was that the political and diplomatic information on which the UN was often acting was not very good, certainly compared to what I had been used to in the FCO – the UN depended a lot on a few member states to keep them properly up to speed. That was not incidentally the case so much in my area because our offices right on the spot kept us very well informed of what was really happening on the ground.

CM: How do you think Ban Ki-Moon will be seen as a Secretary General?

JH: I got on very well with him and he allowed me to do what I wanted. He thought that aid to relieve human suffering was very important. He came from a very humble background, in an area which had been badly affected by the civil war in Korea in the 1950s. He had been helped by the UN when his family were destitute and he was bare-foot. So he had a genuine human sympathy for what we trying to do. He thought, correctly, that humanitarian relief

was one of the areas where the UN could make a difference, and could get a good press, as opposed to lots of other areas where it couldn't and didn't. He was very supportive, but didn't try to interfere too much. His political instincts were also good, though he was seen by many as too close to the Americans, which arguably he was, again because of his formative years in Korea. He had other perception problems. He was seen as a bit wooden - his English was quite good, but not very good, so he could never really manipulate the language well enough to give a strong and effective press conference. He was also seen as weak, which was really not quite fair. I've seen him in meetings with world leaders saying some tough things to them, without pulling his punches, in situations where politicians often tend to resort to being too indirect. But he tended to read out his talking points, as they were called in the UN, some of which were very tough, but then not really move on from there; somehow there was no follow up discussion which could then lead to agreement on action.

CM: He's not going to be seen as one of the visionary and charismatic leaders of the UN.

JH: No. But I think he will be seen as having done a decent job in difficult circumstances. I think he would say, rightly, that he did a very good job on climate change. He made that a big thing of his tenure and kept the world focussed on the need for action, with some success. The Millennium Development Goals were another area on which he put a lot of emphasis and they were also partially successful, shall we say. He was honest and straightforward and incredibly hard-working. And he was not afraid to head into a hot spot. Indeed he often relished it. I remember when the Israelis invaded Gaza, I think in early 2009, he was there in Gaza immediately, as soon as they had left, and made clear that what the Israelis had been doing was simply unacceptable. I was with him on that visit and was impressed by his courage at the time. So he did some good things. But he always suffered by comparison with Kofi Annan, because Kofi Annan did have charisma in a way that Ban Ki-Moon simply did not. Kofi Annan himself had enormous problems at times, if you remember; certainly over the Iraq War; over his son and a corruption scandal over oil for food in Iraq, for example. But somehow he always managed to command respect and great allegiance from those around him. And some of those people subsequently did not hide that they thought that Ban Ki-Moon was a very inadequate substitute for Kofi Annan. So he will no doubt not be seen as a great secretary general. The problem is that it is very difficult to be a great secretary general, especially these days: the great powers do not want you to succeed. If they choose someone who is not particularly dominant and charismatic, that isn't an accident. That's what they want. The standard jokes are that the Secretary General is a lot more

Secretary than General and that SG stands not for Secretary General but for Scape Goat. You always tend to be blamed for things that go wrong, and the same countries that stop you doing anything effective will shamelessly blame you for not doing anything. I'm afraid that goes with the territory. It's very hard to succeed in a significant way - and if you take a stand on something against one of the big powers, you are likely to have a problem. There is also a basic flaw in the system: the Secretary General should be elected for one term of seven years, so he has a decent length of time to do his job, but doesn't have to get re-elected. The way it is now, he is elected for five years and can then be re-elected for another five years. What then happens is, inevitably, that half way through his first term the SG starts thinking, 'I want to be re-elected, because if I am not re-elected I will be seen as a failure'. So he starts currying favour with everybody in order to be re-elected, and makes sure he doesn't offend any important country if he can possibly help it. That is a bad system, but I fear they won't change it. In any case I do have a more favourable view of Ban Ki-Moon than many people do. I think he is much maligned. He tried to do a lot to reform the UN internally, in terms of making it more effective, with more women in senior jobs. One interesting thing about him: he is seen as very mild mannered, and he is indeed very measured in public, partly because of his linguistic problems. But he could get very, very angry in private. He became extremely cross at times, for example when he thought he was being patronised and criticised by Western newspapers and Western politicians because he was Asian. There was a lot of criticism of him for having a Korean coterie round him, which wasn't really true. He did have two or three Koreans in his private office, but that was normal and fine; it wasn't as if he was completely surrounded by his own people, or that they were unreasonable or incompetent: they were actually very good.

I enjoyed the job overall. Despite the difficulty of it and the horror of it at times, you did feel you could achieve some good in some of these crises. Humanitarian aid has the virtue that you can usually see whether it works. To put it crudely, people either die or they don't. But I did get myself into some difficult political situations, as in Sri Lanka, or in Sudan, where I was absolutely caught in two ways. Strong governments don't necessarily want humanitarians there, because they see things the governments don't want them to see, and reveal them publicly, and then there is a dilemma about how far you denounce the government. You can criticise the government strongly and effectively flounce out. My predecessor in the UN, Jan Egeland, who was a great humanitarian, was quite good at that. But if you're not careful, the humanitarians will no longer be there. And if the

humanitarians have been thrown out, they are not there to help, and the ones who suffer most are the people in desperate need. The deeper frustration is that while humanitarians are there to help people and can do so reasonably effectively, too often there is no political solution coming, because no one is trying hard enough to achieve it. And the humanitarians are left holding the baby for years at a time. In many ways that problem is much worse now than it was then. None of the political problems are being solved now, as we can see in Syria overall. But even then problems like Darfur just didn't get fixed, and that was very frustrating, particularly for someone like me who came from the diplomatic world and could see how they should have been tackled if the political will had been there.

CM: Let me finish with one last question. When you look back on your career, No. 10, time in the private sector, the Cold War, Paris and the UN, which was the best period, the most interesting, the most fun?

JH: I think it has to be No. 10. It has to have been the most interesting even if also the most demanding. Very occasionally it was fun too, but there was too much work and too much strain and too many hours, juggling too many different things at the same time, for it to be fun most of the time. Still, it's the time when you have most influence, and when you're most at the centre of affairs, and therefore when you feel that you have most chance of having achieved something.