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### Sir John WESTON

(b. 13 April 1938), CMG 1985, KCMG 1992

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## Sir John Weston

It is Wednesday, 13 June 2001, and this is an interview by Liz Cox for the British Diplomatic Oral History Project with Sir John Weston.

**LC:** “Right, Sir John. You went to Oxford and then you went into the Marines.”

**Sir John:** “No, the other way round. I did my two years’ military service immediately after leaving school to get the National Service over before I went to Oxford, because I calculated that if I had to do it after Oxford, it would be even worse than otherwise. Of course, by the time I’d finished Oxford, they’d done away with National Service anyway, so in the terms of a betting man’s calculation I got it wrong. On the other hand, as part of my career was subsequently to show, that investment of two years’ military service with the Royal Marines was incredibly useful.”

**LC:** “In what way?”

**Sir John:** “Because, first of all it taught me something about military life and what it requires. Second, it made a lot of lasting friends and contacts. When I found myself, in later years, the Head of Defence Department of the Foreign Office, at the time of the Falklands War, and had to go across the road every day to sit in on the Chiefs of Staff meeting in the MoD and to put the Foreign Office input to those meetings, I would put on a Royal Marines tie. There were usually one or two people in the room whom I remembered as brother officers, and I reckoned that, at the margin, the strength of the Foreign Office argument was enhanced by the fact that I was visibly someone who knew a little bit about the military tradition, the military ethos, and wasn’t just a soft Foreign Office wimp.”

**LC:** “You think that the Foreign Office took that into consideration when they posted you to Departments that had to do with defence?”

**Sir John:** “I don’t think they were that far-sighted, as a matter of fact. I think that at a mid point in my career, which was in the seventies, after I’d finished doing the first UK Presidency of the European Union, I had a sabbatical year at Oxford at All Souls, and I knew that I was going to Washington on a posting after that, and that the job in Washington was going to be politico-military affairs. I therefore spent a bit of time with people like Professor Sir Michael Howard and Professor Hedley Bull, really going into depth on politico-military matters. At that point, I began to recognise that not only were the subjects intrinsically very interesting in their own right, but they did, to some extent, resonate with my own impressions when I had been with 42 Commando, Royal Marines. So, I think it was more happenstance than deep planning by the Foreign Office, to be honest.”

**LC:** “So you therefore, when you finished at Oxford you joined the Diplomatic Service straight away?”

**Sir John:** “I did, yes.”

**LC:** “Because of a tradition in the family?”

**Sir John:** “Not at all. Indeed, I’m the first member of my family, to my knowledge, who even went to university. In those days, it was very much the mood of the times. You could go into business, at a pinch, but people tended to be a little contemptuous of that in those days, as if it were just selling soap-powder by another name; you could go into the City and become a merchant banker; you could become an academic, or you could go into the public service. By a process of excluding some of the other options, and because I had already spent four years at Oxford and didn’t want to continue with the purely academic, I decided to look hard at the public service, and in particular at the Foreign Office. I thought it would be interesting to find out about how people live and think whose whole pattern of speech and thought is formed by completely different civilisations and different traditions. That answered something in my own interest at the time in philosophy, which was one of the subjects I was reading in Greats.

I was also enthused by a colleague, whom you may have interviewed, Robin McLaren, who had two sisters, one of whom I was pursuing mildly in Oxford at the time. He came and spent a weekend with me in my digs. He was already learning Chinese, and I became intellectually fascinated by that prospect. So that all contributed to me pursuing the possibility of the Foreign Office. I thought, well I'll see how it goes and I'll see how the people are in the competitions, and if I like the cut of their jib, I'll give it a whirl. Then I came across people in the Civil Service competitions like Christopher Everett, who I thought so highly of, I thought any career that has space for people like this, of this quality and interest, is something that I want to join."

**LC:** "And full of enthusiasm on your first day in the Foreign Office, what was it like?"

**Sir John:** "Well, I remember seeing Duncan Wilson. He came to lecture the new entrants and I looked at his very donnish face peering over gold-rimmed spectacles, and wearing a huge, very wide, hand-painted tie, of a particularly hectic design, and I liked again the kind of contrast that this spelt.

I joined the United Nations Department, where I was put in charge of things like human rights and the status of women and the narcotics commission. Along with Brian Fall, who joined in the same year in the same Department, we were rapidly despatched to New York to become reporting officers at the, I think, seventeenth General Assembly in 1962. It was then, I think, the habit that the people who passed in first and second of the Foreign Office entry every year were immediately sent out to New York to cut their teeth a bit on the UN. We were put on the Queen Mary, given five days to get there, during which the Foreign Office people on the ship syndicated their efforts and won every single prize on the general knowledge competition that used to be run from one end of the trip to the other. By the time we got off in New York we were quite unpopular with the rest of the passengers."

**LC:** "What did you make of the UN? What was being discussed at that time?"

**Sir John:** “The highlight of that period of course, the three months of that General Assembly, was the Cuban missile crisis. That provided high drama actually for newcomers to the Foreign Office. We were able to stand in the Security Council and see the great jousting match that took place between Adlai Stevenson, the US Ambassador to the UN, and Valerian Zorin, the then Soviet Ambassador, during which the photographs were produced, blown-up aerial photographs taken by the Americans, showing the Soviet ships approaching Cuba with the missiles laid out along their decks. These photographs were rather dismissively commented on by Zorin who said, ‘Well, they might as well be cigars that have been blown on model ships for all we know. Why should we believe any of this rubbish.’

There was a sense of drama because one went home at the end of a long day, one switched on the radio, and there would be interruptions of programmes on New York radio saying, ‘Here is a warning signal. If you should hear this signal again, it will not be a rehearsal, it will mean that there is an imminent danger of attack on New York, that war is about to break out and you should take precautions in terms of civil defence and other matters.’ To actually hear these things coming across the radio in the middle of New York, as one stood under a shower in an apartment on the Upper West Side, was quite alarming.”

**LC:** “Alarming or exciting?”

**Sir John:** “It was exciting for those of us who were my age, but at least one of our number on the delegation, John Campbell, had been through the Second World War and he took it very badly as a matter of fact. He said, ‘My God, we’re going to go through all that again.’ And he was really upset by what he was hearing. So we all had this sense of the temperature rising, the tension rising, and the fact that somehow this extraordinary phenomenon, this biggest world crisis that the world had seen since the Second World War, was being played out, at least in part, in front of our eyes in the Security Council of the United Nations. It was really a pretty dramatic introduction to UN affairs.”

**LC:** “It’s good that you didn’t start off with some very long and tedious discussion about some item in Africa. You could keep your romance for a bit longer.”

**Sir John:** “Well, there were plenty of long and tedious discussions. Brian and I would have to sit through them and write up the reports on the day’s debates for telegraphing to London at the end of the day. We used to enliven our lives by trying to insert comments into the descriptive passages, a little bit of irony here, a little bit of poking fun there. The trick was to see whether you could get this through the senior officer in the UK Mission to the United Nations who was reading these draft telegrams before they went off, people with eagle eyes, like Antony Acland and others. Sometimes we did and sometimes we didn’t. Whether they were ever read at the London end, heaven only knows.”

**LC:** “So, after that, you then came back to the Treasury Centre for Administrative Studies.”

**Sir John:** “I came back to London. At that time the Foreign Office was setting up serious career training for people in their first few years. The Treasury Centre for Administrative Studies, then at Cambridge Gate, had been created. Several of us went on the early courses, which lasted I think in those some twelve to fourteen weeks and which were, really, of a very high quality. They were staffed by people like Kit McMahon, who subsequently became Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, and Wynne Godley, the economist and statistician. They were a really good crowd of people there. Very few people know, by the way, that the Epstein sculpture of St Michael, which is on the wall of Coventry Cathedral, bears the head of Wynn Godley, because Wynne Godley was married to Epstein’s daughter.

There was also Roger Opie, who at that time was well known, and Robert Peston (senior); the younger generation of really bright economists were all gathered in that place to give us force-feeding on becoming more literate, more numerate and more generally conversant with the world of economic and statistics and public policy.

That was the earliest moment, I recall, that the world of information technology came over the horizon. If you think about it, this is back in 1964 and already some of these people were saying to us, you need to pay attention to the way in which the computer is going to revolutionise our lives. They even required us, as part of the exercises were went through, to learn an elementary programme writing language, and then would present us with problems for solving, and would require us to write those problems in the programme language in a form that could be manipulated by a computer. So, our first introduction to the intricacies of binary logic took place at that time, and these were fascinating. I don't think any of us had the least inkling of the degree to which that was going to change our lives in due course. But I think it was a mark of the quality of the course, that already in 1964, that kind of thing was being taught to the higher reaches of the Civil Service, to new intake people."

**LC:** "Following from that, you became a Chinese language student."

**Sir John:** "That's right. At this point, having done a couple of years at the Foreign Office, I returned to the charge with the personnel people, saying, 'Look, no-one can really say they've won their spurs in the Diplomatic Service unless they've mastered a hard language, and I want a hard language please. My order of batting is Chinese, Russian, Arabic.' Brian Fall, who was with me in UN Department, was saying the same sort of thing. He said that his order of batting was Russian, Chinese and Arabic. Well, he was given Chinese and I was given Russian. In other words, each of us got our second choice, not our first choice.

We dutifully went off and bought grammars in Russian and Chinese, and started reading them under the desks in the odd moments in UN Department when there wasn't enough to do. After a while, we looked at each other and I was quite well into Madam Potapova, my Russian grammar, and he ditto on the Chinese. We looked at each other and said, 'This is silly, there must be some inscrutable reason that Personnel Department has awarded us each the language which we said was not our first choice. Let us find out.' So I rang Personnel Department and spoke to someone there, it might have been the Hon. John Wilson. I explained the situation, there was a long pause at the end of the 'phone, then a voice said, 'Do you mean to say that if you swapped your languages, you would both have your *first* choice?' So it was just an

example of Murphy's Law in operation, nobody had realised, they'd just dealt out these languages. Far from us having some obscure psychological quirk, which made me more suitable for Russian and Brian for Chinese, it was just a foul-up. At that point, we changed languages, and I went the Chinese route, and Brian went the Russian route, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In those days, the way we did it was to send off the student for two whole years to Hong Kong. I was a bachelor still in those days, and I inherited the Chinese family that John Boyd had lived with before me. He was a professor of Chinese from north-east China who had come out in order to escape the Communists, had married a younger wife, a second wife, and had a small child, a daughter aged about ten. We lived in this tiny, non-air-conditioned flat within walking distance of the language school at Hong Kong University. I managed to create a total envelope of Mandarin-speaking Chinese, with a family at home, with the language school throughout the day, with the local Shantung restaurant, with the radio, the cinema, and everything else one could find to just create a total cocoon of Chinese speaking. I worked very hard at it, for two whole years, and like others, before and after me, with that degree of effort, after two years had reached what the Foreign Office called the advanced level of Chinese, which was a very good preparation for going up the railway line to Peking.

In between the two years in Hong Kong and arriving in Peking, I came back for a few months' leave in the UK, during which time I had summoned up the courage to ask my wife to marry me. We had known each other for thirteen years, on and off over the years, and so, when we went to Peking, it was as two rather than one, fortunately for me."

**LC:** "And so you went out to Peking as Second Secretary?"

**Sir John:** "As Second Secretary in the Chancery, yes, along with Len Appleyard, who had been a fellow student in Hong Kong at the same time. We were still the Office of the Chargé d'Affaires in Peking, headed by Donald Hopson, who had previously been our Ambassador in Laos, No.2 Percy Cradock, Theo Peters, Tony



Blishen, Alistair Hunter and myself, Len Appleyard and others whose names I don't immediately recall. It was a fascinating first posting."

**LC:** "At that time did you have to live in the diplomatic compound?"

**Sir John:** "No. The first of the two years we were up there, we inherited again the little hutong house that John Boyd had lived in, together with his Chinese cook, a traditional one-storey Chinese house in a traditional Peking hutong or alleyway behind grey brick walls. You entered through a moon gate and inside was a little open courtyard with one or two trees and one or two plants, and a kind of bungalow built around the quadrangle, with a kitchen on one side where Lao Wang, the cook, worked, and us living on the other side.

We went to and fro the office by bicycle, through the alleyways of Peking. It was much more interesting living that way because one was not particularly remarked upon by other Chinese, they had assumed the house was always used by foreigners so why should they bother, but you were able to get an insight into life on the street. The bicycle is a wonderful tool because one is in some ways even less visible on a bicycle than on foot, in Peking at any rate. I enjoyed that period particularly. After one year, the heat of events in the Cultural Revolution became so acute that the Chinese authorities began to move diplomats out of such addresses and into the diplomatic compound, and so we had to forgo this house at the end of one year, but we got a tremendous amount from it whilst we were there.

I remember that Lao Wang, the cook, who was a wonderful old-style Chinese, one of nature's gentlemen I suppose one might have said at the time, on one occasion went to the brick wall inside the quadrangle of this house and fiddled around for a while with a brick which he dislodged. He put his hand in and he came out with a bundle of money in notes. They turned out, on inspection, to be old American dollars, and he said in a rather kind of diffident manner to us, almost looking up at the sky as he said it, in Chinese, 'I have this American money, and I've been keeping it for some time.' Then, wistfully looking up at the sky, 'But somehow I just don't think they're coming back. Do you think you could take it for me and have it changed into local currency?'

which I thought was a wonderful little vignette of how the real ordinary Chinese was surviving through the idiocies and extremes of the Cultural Revolution.

He always remained a very reluctant follower of Chairman Mao. If there were demonstrations where the staff of the British Embassy had to turn out, he was always right at the back, and would wave his little red book, but only very half-heartedly, and would find ways of almost apologising to us for the grosser discourtesies visited upon diplomats during our time. I remember him as a kind of exemplar of old style Chinese courtesy and decency.

I must say that he had his tough side. He had a pet bird which he kept in a little bamboo cage in the kitchen, as many Chinese did. On one occasion the local cat, which was a large ginger cat, managed to dislodge the cage and was caught exiting down the staircase at the diplomatic compound with the entire cage in its jaws, ready to dismember the bird at the bottom. Lao Wang was so furious about this that he persuaded our local Irish nurse, who was a member of the Army Nursing Corps and was part of the diplomatic community, to put it to death by lethal injection. He also had a way of catching mice when they strayed into his kitchen. He would set a pudding basin upside-down, lodged against an empty eggshell under which he would place a morsel of food on a piece of paper. The mouse would enter the trap, dislodge the piece of paper while eating the morsel, the pudding basin would fall off the eggshell and trap the mouse underneath. The next morning, Lao Wang would enter, carefully insert his fingers under the pudding basin, grasp the mouse, and in one fist-clench he annihilated it. Otherwise he was very gentle.”

**LC:** “What about your impression of the Cultural Revolution.”

**Sir John:** “Of course this period was in the white heat of the Cultural Revolution in China, a movement initiated by Mao in order to overturn the more encrusted attitudes of the bureaucracy by infusing the whole country with a new, or renewed, sense, as he saw it, of revolutionary zeal. However, in so doing, he unleashed many of the baser passions and emotions of people who then regarded this, among other things, as a convenient opportunity to improve their own position at the expense of someone else, to pursue vendettas, and generally was an example of the old adage that

the scum often rises to the top. I say this deliberately. It's an uneasy expression, but one had to be there to appreciate the degree of awfulness about man's inhumanity to man in those conditions. Family loyalties were overturned, people were denouncing each other, the worst extremes of irrationality were sanctioned in the name of political orthodoxy. It is, and remained with me, a life-long lesson about what can happen when social engineering is undertaken without the built-in safeguards of a truly democratic system.

I was very interested, years afterwards, when I went back to Peking as Private Secretary to Tony Crosland who had taken over from Jim Callaghan as Foreign Secretary and inherited, as one of his earliest duties, a visit to China and indeed to Japan. Susan Crosland was with him. Ewen Fergusson and I went along as the Private Office, and I had half expected that Tony Crosland, with his own very radical ideas about implementing socialism and the benefits of social engineering, might even have been quite attracted by the thoroughgoing nature of what the Chinese were doing. Not a bit of it. To his credit, he absolutely hated what he saw. He was interested but he came away with a profound distaste for what Chinese communism was doing to people in human terms.

We saw a lot of that right up front. We saw it all the time. The nearest thing one can find to it these days would be to think of some of the greater absurdities associated with, say, the Taliban in Afghanistan or other examples of religious extremism run amok. We saw all that in Peking. It produced dead bodies on the streets, it produced violent clashes, it produced a hounding of the foreign diplomatic community in Peking which had not been rivalled since the days of the Boxer uprising. As it happened, the British were among the central victims of that because of the dispute which had arisen between the Chinese authorities and ourselves over the rioting in Hong Kong.

We lived through this, and life was actually very exciting for those of us who had to get about in town reading Red Guard wall posters, buying Red Guard newspapers, trying to understand what was going on. We were often involved in melees and violent arguments on the streets, sometimes surrounded by Chinese who thought we were up to no good, sometimes pursued, sometimes victimised in other ways. It all

came to a crunch in August of 1967 because of the refusal of the British Government and the British authorities in Hong Kong to release a number of Chinese prisoners who had been convicted of riotous assembly in Hong Kong, including two members of the New China News Agency who the Chinese in Peking regarded as their quasi diplomatic representatives in Hong Kong. They were out to get them sprung from jail, and the way they chose to do that was to put an ultimatum to us that if you, the British Government, do not release these Chinese compatriots by date and time x, then you will have to bear all the serious consequences. The serious consequences were that they decided to mount a mass attack on the British diplomatic mission in Peking and burned it to the ground.”

**LC:** “Does that mean they really wanted to go for a closing in of China, a shutting down from outside influences? Were they losing a great deal by cutting off their connections with Britain?”

**Sir John:** “I think, first of all, one has to remember that parts of the Chinese Government itself had been taken over by extremists. The Foreign Minister of the day was Chen Yi. He had been placed under a question mark in terms of his own political credentials. A lot of wilder spirits had, in effect, taken over the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and they were greatly motivated by nice calculations of interest. They were motivated primarily by the extremist political zeal of the political game in China into which they saw the intrusion by foreign governments as expressed by foreign embassies as simply a nuisance. Also, it was a convenient way of harnessing revolutionary zeal to find an external culprit or scapegoat, and foreign embassies, including ourselves, often played that role.

The specific interest that they were concerned about in Hong Kong was simply that they had thought that by turning out hoodlums on the streets and stirring up violent demonstrations in Hong Kong, that they could, in some sense, subvert British rule there, much as they had come close to doing already in those days in Macao. When they found that they’d failed, this began to be a kind of loss of face for the extremist movements, and they tried to regain their position by doing us down, by burning us down, beating up our diplomats, imprisoning us and so forth. And that long stand-off then began which took the best part of a couple of years to unravel.”

**LC:** “Were you there around at the time?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, we were. I think there were twenty-three of us in the building of the British Embassy at the time of that attack, eighteen men and five women. Of the five women, four were secretaries and one was my wife [the only wife to suffer the actual attack - which you would not know from the Hickman book, for which for some reason she was not interviewed!]. We had been going about our daily business that day, but very early in that day, large crowds assembled outside the Embassy gates, and all around its circumference. The PLA guards on the Embassy gates refused to allow us to exit, saying that they feared for our safety, so we were caught inside the building. We had actually got some preparations there of a quasi emergency nature so we weren't without food and stuff. We just got on with the day as best we could.

We observed the way in which the crowds were building up and building up and building up; there were some 10,000 by the end of the day. The ultimatum was due to expire that evening at 10.00 pm local time, and at the point when 10 o'clock came, it was already clear to us that all was not well. Our telephones weren't working. We subsequently discovered that the telephone lines had been cut, as part of the preparations for the attack, therefore people like our friends in the Polish Embassy, who wanted to telephone us and say you'd better look out because we've seen a lot of people moving down in your direction carrying petrol drums, could not get through. We didn't know this at the time. We still had diplomatic wireless communication with London at that point, and we were keeping them abreast.

We had seen demonstrations before, big ones, and it wasn't clear to us whether this was going to be a big deal or not, to be honest. We did not expect what happened. We couldn't have done much about it anyway since we were all hemmed in, so we got on with the best kind of diversion. That is to say, Donald Hopson and some of the others playing bridge, the rest of us watching a Peter Sellers' film called 'The Wrong Arm of the Law'. Then suddenly, at this moment when the time came, the Verey lights shot into the sky as a general signal to all the Chinese who were amassed outside that it had begun. They came over the walls of the Embassy compound like a

great tidal wave. We rapidly withdrew into more secure parts of the Embassy hearing the cry from Donald Hopson upstairs, 'They're coming in, they're coming in,' battened ourselves in, switched out all the lights and just got inside the registry and waited the thing out as we thought.

There was an infernal noise as hundreds and hundreds of people poured against the building. All the windows went, they came into the building, they started battering down every door they could find, a systematic wreck of the Embassy had begun. But, more than that, so had a fire, because quite soon it became evident to us they were firing the building. A lot of inflammable material was put up against windows, the windows cracked under the heat, liquid came in through some of the windows and it was with some relief it was discovered that this was not, as it happened, petrol. But, nevertheless, within minutes we realised that we were in a burning building, which is not a comfortable situation. It got hotter, smokier, and at a certain point Donald Hopson inside said, 'Well, we're going to have to go out.' After about, I guess, between 30 or 40 minutes of the attack having commenced, we took a decision that the less bad alternative was to exit the building into the mob's hands, because otherwise we looked like ending up being fried inside.

I remember tiny details like taking off my Rolex watch, which I still have, and putting it in my pocket, and telling Percy Cradock to take off his spectacles, which were quite thick ones, and put them in his pocket because it would be more important to him to keep his spectacles than not to be able to see too well when he went out of the door.

We had an exit which, from the outside, didn't look like an exit. It was deliberately built there as an emergency exit point. By this time, anyway, the Chinese were actually coming through the wall. They knew where the ultra secure part of the Embassy was, where the encrypting machines were for our diplomatic communications. The diplomatic wireless communication had gone off by this point because the lines had been cut by part of the invading Chinese crew. When Hopson gave the word, we unbolted those doors behind the concealed wall and we went out into the arms of this hostile mob. The whole place was lit up like something out of *Gotterdammerung*. The fire was burning strongly all over the building, there was this

howling mob of Chinese men and women all over the place. We all got quite severely duffed up while this was going on.”

**LC:** “You mean as you walked out?”

**Sir John:** “There was no question of walking. We kind of flowed out of this into the arms of a very hostile mob. There were very large numbers of people there. It was like being in a very big football crowd when you are already slightly nervous that you are going to be crushed because you have no control over your own movement. It was like that. I had my wife under one arm, so to speak, and one of the secretaries I was trying to protect with my other arm. We immediately had a rain of blows down on our head. The girls were being systematically insulted by what Hopson afterwards called in his despatch ‘the lewd attentions of prying fingers’. My wife had long hair at that time. Someone had got hold of the pigtail and was pulling it violently, and I could only disconnect him from my wife’s hair by biting him.

I mean it was really kind of last ditch resistance at this point. The noise was horrendous. We lost touch with one another. I managed to hang on to my wife but we were all kind of spread out among the mob. I remember gradually, after sustaining this rain of blows, spotting on the other side, just on the outside of the compound at about 15 yards distance away, the uniform of a PLA soldier and thinking I’m going to try to get to him. Gradually forcing my way through the crowd, I got within reach of him. I reached out with my left hand and grasped a large handful of his uniform and said to him in Chinese, ‘You’re the People’s Liberation Army, we are diplomats, you’ve got to help us.’ Gradually, gradually, in this flux of emotion and physical aggression, the People’s Liberation Army, who were on the outside of the Embassy compound observing the niceties that they did not have the right to come into it, although 10,000 revolutionary Red Guards did, began to follow what must have been their orders which was to see that actually there was no loss of life. So they began gradually to assert themselves and to try to gather us into one group. Eventually they put us into the back of a lorry, got us to lie down, surrounded the outside of the lorry with PLA soldiers standing up so at that point it looked like a lorry with only PLA soldiers in. Gradually they managed to extricate this truck from

the howling mob, with the backcloth of the burning British Embassy still lighting the night sky.

Even before we got to that point, I remember some of us being cornered. I remember that out of nowhere came large flashlights of a kind that the Press have when they're doing an interview, on poles, being held up, illuminated, exposing us to a strong light. I'm sure that what was happening at that point was that movie cameras were taking film of us because the shouts were that we should lower our heads and confess our faults. They wanted to get shots of British diplomats with their heads lowered in the face of the justified will of the revolutionary masses. Needless to say, this didn't happen.

During this attack, the building was destroyed. We lost one encrypting machine which we had not had time to rescue from the communications centre and get behind the strong-room. Most of the other stuff we didn't want the Chinese to get, we had succeeded in putting behind the strong-room doors within the Embassy which were solid steel of about 9 inches thick. They did not penetrate that strong-room, although they tried very hard.

When, after the attack was over and a few days had gone by, we were able to walk through the ruins to carry out an inspection, it was clear that they had not got in. We then had to drill out the strong-room door with our technical people, get into it, get all the documentation out and then, for about a week, we burned and shredded all the classified papers within the Embassy, and began to pick ourselves up and decide where we were going to go from there.

That was, in a nutshell, what the attack was like. Certainly it was a very frightening experience. I remember at one point, when the Red Guards were coming at the building and we were still inside, there were shouts of, 'Sha, sha,' meaning 'Kill, kill.' This was the cry which, in the history books, the Chinese are recorded as having used when they went against the diplomatic community at the time of the Boxer Uprising. So this was unnerving, to put it mildly, and on the whole, not translated by the Chinese speakers among us for the benefit of the non Chinese speakers among us."



**LC:** “You didn’t spend your time then shredding papers and things while you waited?”

**Sir John:** “We couldn’t. All we could do was to make sure that the most valuable equipment and other stuff that needed to be within the strong-room, was. So, during that period of 30-40 minutes when we were inside the building, last-minute precautions were taken to stuff as much stuff in there and just get that door closed and locked, because it was uncertain from moment to moment how long we would be free agents. More than that we couldn’t conceivably have done. In any case, in order not to draw attention to ourselves, we had all the lights out and it was just emergency stations really. But on the whole, we didn’t come out of it too badly from a security point of view.”

**LC:** “What sort of support did you get from London?”

**Sir John:** “Well, it was quite hard for them to support us I suppose. George Brown was Foreign Secretary at the time. We then had to relocate ourselves and work out of one of the flats in the diplomatic compound. Our only communications were courtesy of the French Embassy in Peking who acted as a relay point to the Foreign Office, so although we couldn’t send the full weight of our normal traffic, really important messages of either an administrative or a political kind, we could get courtesy of the French Embassy through to London.

We were confined, physically, by the Chinese, to one of the big diplomatic compounds. We weren’t allowed to venture more than 400 yards away from that building without prior permission from the Foreign Ministry, which severely curtailed our movements, obviously not only in greater Peking but, more importantly in some ways, outside Peking. That was quite difficult to deal with in the sense that it downgraded people’s ability to simply do their jobs, even under the difficult new circumstances. To some extent we managed to ease that over time, but we were effectively being kept as detainees in Peking against the continuing Chinese attempt to spring their favoured prisoners in Hong Kong. They had already taken, by this point, the Reuters correspondent in Peking, Tony Grey, and he was in solitary confinement in his house for the same purpose.

This long stand-off which then began, which did not really come to an end until the end of the following year, 1968, by which time, as a result of some of the reciprocal moves we had made against the Chinese and their diplomatic fraternity in London, we managed to unwind the crisis, and gradually people began to filter out and normal business was resumed.

The pressures on people were difficult. We had diplomatic wives, for example, who became pregnant who were unable to get proper medical attention or to leave the country, and that induced its own kind of stress. It was quite hard.”

**LC:** “It was before the days when they rushed counsellors out to you.”

**Sir John:** “Well, they couldn’t have got counsellors out to us because they wouldn’t have got them in. Visas in and out were at a premium and normally not given. However, it was a very interesting first posting; it taught a lot of the primary skills, and it taught life-long lessons that were valuable in their own way.”

**LC:** “Did the posting then come to a natural end, or did everybody who’d been involved in fact . . .”

**Sir John:** “We began to filter people out as and when. By the end of 1968, my own wife was pregnant. We actually (I may say for the purposes of this interview) had lost a child during this period. My wife became pregnant earlier and, because she was suffering from tummy problems of another kind, had been subjected, by ill-informed Chinese doctors in the so-called Anti-Imperialist Hospital in central Peking (formerly PUMC), to a whole battery of antibiotic drugs. When, at an earlier point than the one just described, she had gone down to Hong Kong to seek other medical advice from army doctors down there, she had been told that really, medically, it had been quite wrong for her to be subjected to this battery of fairly powerful drugs at an early period of pregnancy. To cut a long story short, we had lost that first pregnancy as a direct result, I would say, of the general hurly-burly that had affected all parts of Chinese society. We went back later, found the doctor in the Anti-Imperialist Hospital, who was a nice enough man, took him onto the roof out of overhearing, and

told him, for his own information and future benefit, the history of this case and the alternative medical advice from Hong Kong that we had received there, because we thought that he ought to know so that he would not make the same mistake with any future patient. To his credit, he was actually very grateful. He said, 'We are terribly poorly informed about these matters. We can't get medical journals from outside China and I'm terribly sorry that this has happened but I'm very glad that you told me.'

By the time the second pregnancy occurred, we were obviously high on the list for the exit point, and we therefore left two years after arriving, at the end of 1968."

**LC:** "And you never came back as ambassador to Peking, which is often the pattern?"

**Sir John:** "It is, but no. There were various points in my subsequent career where Chinese postings either to Hong Kong, on the Political Adviser side, or to Peking, were clearly in prospect. At each point, actually, we felt at the time that there was something else it was more important to do. I remember, for example, when we left Washington in 1981 that the choice was between going back to Hong Kong, probably as Political Adviser at that point, or going back to the Foreign Office and running the Defence Department, and the choice that we made was a function of my own attempts to broaden my career pattern."

**LC:** "Did you feel subconsciously that you didn't want to go back?"

**Sir John:** "No, absolutely not. I don't think that we bore any more scars from that first experience in Peking than anybody else did. It certainly had not destroyed my interest in things Chinese or indeed my liking for the Chinese as people. It was simply a tactical consideration as life went along.

I actually kept my Chinese up, and retook the exam, for quite a large number of years after leaving Peking. I was still up to speed on the Chinese until about 1979, at which point I could not retake it in Washington DC without too big an opportunity cost in terms of other things I was trying to do.

I reckoned that at some point it was perfectly feasible that to go back as ambassador to Peking might be an option, as indeed it subsequently was. I mean at the point when I left NATO as ambassador to NATO in 1995, it was certainly an option for me to push hard for Peking as my final post. But I was faced with what I regarded as the near certainty of Peking with a slightly more uncertain possibility of going back to the United Nations as ambassador to the United Nations. I calculated that to go back to Peking, merely to oversee the handing back of Hong Kong to the Chinese, would be something of a closed loop, and that I would rather go for the bigger job in New York, which, in a sense, was also the completing of a cycle associated with the beginning of my career. I don't regret having made that gamble."

**LC:** "Was it also a preference for multilateral rather than bilateral diplomacy?"

**Sir John:** "Again, it's possible to overstate that. It is certainly true that the latter part of my career tended to specialise in multilateral diplomacy. After all, I think I'm among relatively few in the Service who have served in all three of the major multilateral posts, that's to say the European Union, NATO and the United Nations, and who has headed the British diplomatic representation in two out of those three. I do, as a matter of fact, think that multilateral diplomacy has, of course, a much greater prominence and importance as a kind of mode through which the British interest, internationally, is pursued. I also think that, in some ways, multilateral diplomacy gives you maximum exposure in terms of job interest and the breadth of subject matter that one is dealing with, with a slightly attenuated exposure to what one might call the social overkill of diplomatic life.

So I was quite happy that my last two posts were as ambassador in multilateral organisations, but I don't want to exaggerate that. Obviously bilateral diplomacy is a very important part of what we do. I've been number two in Paris and have served in Washington and Peking, and I think the unidimensional depth that one gets in a diplomatic posting has its own rewards. So I am not trying to caricature this polarity."

**LC:** “Right, so, back from Peking to the Foreign Office in London between 1969 and 1971 before going to the Office of the UK Representative to the EEC. In 1971 Ted Heath is Prime Minister and dealing with the negotiations for Europe. What were you actually doing in London?”

**Sir John:** “In London I first of all went to PUSD, and I worked over the river in Century House as one of the Foreign Office links with the Secret Intelligence Service. At that time PUSD was headed by that wonderful man, Christopher Ewart Biggs, who was subsequently murdered by the IRA, who bombed his car in Ireland. That was a very interesting period, which started another kind of current in my career, because I found in subsequent jobs later in the Service, I had quite close connections with the intelligence services. I learned a lot about them during that period, which I enjoyed.

I then came back and joined East European and Soviet Department, working on the East European side, responsible for Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary under Sidney Giffard and Julian Bullard. That was a time when George Walden was with us as a Diplomatic Service officer on the Soviet side of the department. It was also the period, you recall, when we threw out 105 Soviet intelligence officers who were masquerading in various parts of the Soviet diplomatic presence in London.

From there, the next important step was certainly the move to EC Brussels to join the UK permanent representation under Michael Palliser, just about a week after Ted Heath had let the ink go dry on the Treaty of Accession. So we were, in some sense, the shock troops of the British diplomatic presence in the European Community. We had about a year of transition after the treaty was signed before we became full members. Our interest during that period was to maximise the strength of our foot in the door, and to make sure that decisions were not being taken during that transitional year without taking full account of the British interest.

Also, we were having to acclimatise people in Whitehall to living for the first time with the huge change that membership of the Common Market brought to the process of government in Whitehall. There were many in Whitehall who saw the point in it and rapidly adjusted, but there were quite a few who did not. Our job, at least partly, when they came out from London to sit around the table with other members of the

Common Market, was to help them understand that this was a team effort that they had to be part of. That was quite an interesting process. It required diplomatic skills to be mobilised not only with fellow members of the Common Market from the other nations concerned, but also with our colleagues from the process of government in London, many of whom were having quite a difficult period of adjustment.”

**LC:** “So having been anti European beforehand?”

**Sir John:** “Who?”

**LC:** “Your colleagues from London.”

**Sir John:** “Well, it wasn’t so much that they were, or maybe some of them were anti European. I think it was more the culture shock of realising that if you were the great expert in, lets say, the Department of the Environment in London, who thought that he or she knew all about how the British coped with pollution of the air and the waters around the UK, that you couldn’t just come out to Brussels and assert that this is the way the British did it, and they didn’t propose to change for anybody so everybody else had better live with it. They had to understand that we were in the process of making European legislation that would apply throughout the European Union. We had to find ways of reconciling our comparative advantages here or there with the process in order to build directives and regulations which could sustain a Europe-wide regime. There was a learning curve here which was a very interesting process in terms of our position as a kind of mediator between the other members of the European Union and our own governmental process at home.”

**LC:** “And were you welcomed by the other members of the European Union?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, I think on the whole we were, with some suspended judgement about how it would work out in practice. It must have been quite hard for the old sticks, actually, to live with this. What we had to do was to be careful that people didn’t get too big for their boots. The British have a tendency to be rather preachy and self-righteous, I think, in the international field, and one had to, from time to time,

temper this and say to people, 'If you actually want our view to prevail, you don't ram it down other people's throats. We really have to look at the tactical possibilities here, do trade offs and find a way through that persuades others without offending them.' Sometimes we succeeded and sometimes we didn't. Of course this argument goes on a quarter of a century or more later."

**LC:** "How much did your experiences then colour your future views of the European Union? Have you changed in your attitudes to Europe and integration in Europe?"

**Sir John:** "No, I don't think I have. I would regard my attitudes as being broadly those of, I would say the majority of, people in the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Service throughout that 30 year period, for whom it was probably a given that Britain is geographically, economically and politically a part of Europe. It would be really rather fatuous to pretend otherwise. The question of course is what kind of Europe. Certainly, I think that the European Union today is the better for having absorbed the British, the Irish and the Danish when it then did, because I think there is a more open view of the world these days than there would have been otherwise.

I certainly think that the original Six can very easily think and talk themselves into a kind of closed mind-set about the political shape of the Europe that they think should be created, which may not necessarily suit the rest of us. So, to that extent, I might be regarded today by some of my counterparts in the Foreign Office as being a little bit toward the sceptical end of the spectrum, not in terms of membership of the European Union as such, but in terms of how far we need to go and at what speed to get there. In that sense, I'm probably closer to someone like David Owen, let us say, than to someone like Kenneth Clark.

On the euro single currency issue, I think it is too early to tell, and I certainly think that there are political and constitutional arguments on that front which have to be addressed, as well as the economic criteria.

It's a funny thing that, depending where one is in the world, I found that when living and working and serving in the United States, I tended to become by temperament

more of a European in my mind-set, and when living and working and serving in continental Europe, especially in Brussels, I tended to feel more of an Atlantisist. Just a kind of natural counterpoint to offset some of the gravitational pressures that one might be under, depending on which side of the Atlantic one was on. I doubt if this is an unusual phenomenon, for a Brit at any rate.”

**LC:** “And then Thatcher. First of all she tended to accuse the Foreign Office of being very pro-European, and also she felt quite strongly that the issue of the euro, anyway, was not a question for our time. She saw it very far in the future.”

**Sir John:** “Well, I think it is a question for our time in the sense that some of our partners in Europe have made it a reality for themselves and we need to calculate, very clearly, what the advantages and disadvantages are. I think that will happen and we will see where that goes. But that probably is not one for today, I suppose.”

**LC:** “Right. So you actually moved to Brussels. Had you had a posting in Brussels?”

**Sir John:** “Absolutely, having first of all gone, by the way, and I should mention this because it’s quite interesting, we were one of the first guinea pigs to be put through the Ecole Nationale d’Administration in Paris. We had an arrangement with the French which allowed us to push a small number of British officials through ENA. I went off there for a six week course before going to my Brussels posting which was enormously valuable.”

**LC:** “You had French?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, I did, but whereas up until that point my Chinese had always been more fluent than my French, from that point the reverse began to be the case. It was invaluable to me because it put me above the bar on my French. I got a new sense of self-confidence about handling the language in its spoken form during that six weeks, which were very intensive, and then, thereafter went rapidly on to take the French advanced level, and have kept that fluent ever since.



It also provided an insight into the way in which the French train their higher civil servants, and one was able to sit in on the interviews when youngsters came from 'Sciences Po' in order to gain access to ENA. The interview process through which they were put was very interesting and very different from the British, if I compare it with the Civil Service Commission. The British system is one which puts the emphasis on not being too big for your boots, not presenting as a kind of clever dick, not being too fluent. When you're asked a question, you're probably well marked for reflecting a little bit before you answer. Balanced, restrained. The quality of what you say will be examined by your interviewers, but they don't want a dramatic performance. Therefore, the interviewing system in the UK, I guess, more reflected the habits of mind which were inculcated among undergraduates in our great universities, whereas in the French case, it wasn't like that at all. First of all, at the interview, you were given a subject on which you were expected to coruscate orally for the next exact number of minutes. You were told the exact number of minutes, and a light would come on at the end of that exact period, and the good French interviewee would finish his or her final sentence absolutely at that point, effortlessly, having formed the entire thing as a kind of wonderful little concoction that hung in the air. So, verbal brilliance, fluency, was the order of the day.

I remember that one of the subjects that one of the students was asked, when I was there, was 'When you think of the role of the President of the Republic, do you think that the President ought preferably to be a Pompidou or a Poulidor?' Poulidor was the French professional cyclist, who was a national name at the time, but who always came second in the big races. So the question was really about 'Do we want our President to be one of us or do we want our President to be a kind of majestic figure removed from us?' which is a good question actually, particularly in the French context. That was the sort of thing which was pushed across the table at no notice. The youngster was then expected to come straight into top gear and speak without a break for the next fifteen to twenty minutes, and finish on the dot as the light came on. Some of them did it brilliantly, some of them not so brilliantly.

It explained a lot about, it seemed to me, the French and the way they project themselves, particularly through the kind of ENA culture. My own view was that actually, the British system is much stronger in depth because it has a much more

eclectic way of gathering people into the public service, not only in terms of the schools and universities from which they come, but in terms of the academic disciplines that they bring to the public service. In the British system, you could have been really anything. You could have been a natural scientists, a philosopher, a lawyer, a linguist, musician, it wouldn't really matter what you'd read at university provided you could convince people through the Civil Service Commission procedures that you had the right combination of skills and instincts to do a good job as a public servant. It seemed to me that we have a much more catholic approach, a much richer admixture within the British public service than I thought was the case by forcing almost all the French in through the ENA or the Ecole Polytechnique course. Although they were very brilliant at what they were, they tended to be slightly cloned, and I wonder whether, over time, we don't have the stronger system."

**LC:** "I've done interviews with people who found it absolutely infuriating how brilliant the French were at making a speech or a statement, and how difficult it was to negotiate with them because they were more of the showman than the practical negotiator."

**Sir John:** "Absolutely."

**LC:** "But I would imagine that people would question your view that the Foreign Office didn't, whether it still does, also look for clones in terms of an Oxford or Cambridge background."

**Sir John:** "Well, it's possible to question that view, but I think you have to look at the numbers. I remember at one time, in the mid-seventies, I think it was when I was in Private Office actually. There was a kind of public and media campaign running saying that all these Foreign Office people were all Oxford or Cambridge and public school products. I conducted a little survey of the top people in the Foreign Office at the time in terms of the schools they'd been to, the universities they'd been to, the subjects they'd done, and came up with an answer which flatly refuted this. I got an uncle of mine to sign the letter, which was actually my letter, and sent it to 'The Guardian', and they published it. It just wasn't the case. The Chief Clerk at the time had come from the humblest of origins and up through the state school system."

Many of the others had not been to public schools and they'd read a wide swathe of subjects. I think at that time probably Oxford and Cambridge were in the numerical majority, unsurprising actually, and something we've sought to rectify since. But I would strongly defend the proposition that if you take a cut across any age group in the Foreign Office and actually look at the men and women who are there, you will find a much wider range of personality, expertise, subject matter and approach than you would find in that appropriate set among the French. That's my view anyway."

**LC:** "Good. Well, we ought to move on. Should we go on then to the time that you spent as Assistant Private Secretary?"

**Sir John:** "I joined the Private Office, succeeding Michael Alexander, on the number two desk in the Private Office, first with Antony Acland and then with Ewen Fergusson as the Principal Private Secretary. Jim Callaghan was Foreign Secretary. I then, in due course, moved across to No.10 and Tony Crosland succeeded him. That was an extremely valuable part of my career, and almost probably without precedent in terms of the pressures that it puts on a middle-rank public servant. It really does expose you to what you're capable of in terms of overload on the mental telephone exchange that you're required to operate. It was very interesting in terms of exposure to the people that ministers were interacting with.

I came in towards the end of the problems over Cyprus following the Turkish invasion when Callaghan was in close contact with Henry Kissinger. I went, of course, all over the place with ministers on their visits, including a visit during that period to Moscow and Leningrad with Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan. I enjoyed that opportunity to see, at close quarters, how the machine was operating at ministerial level. The remarkable ability that private secretaries have to influence ministers and, I don't mean on fundamental policy matters, but the degree to which their advice in a timely way at the right moment can change things, one hopes for the better.

Jim Callaghan, of course, was rather like a large grizzly bear, I mean very huggable if he was in the right mood, but if he wasn't you'd better jolly well duck or your head would probably come off your shoulders. I continued to like and respect him over the years very much. I thought he was a good minister and often underrated by those who

write publicly about British politicians. He was a very cultured man for someone whose formal education ended at quite an early stage. He had a profound sense of British history and knew quite a lot of British literature.

There was one period when, I think it was when Antony Acland had left as Private Secretary and a successor had to be found, and the hand fell upon the shoulder of Stephen Barrett. I think he was Head of the Southern European Department at the time, and he was brought in as the new Principal Private Secretary. However, it rapidly became clear that Stephen and Jim Callaghan weren't a natural mix. I mean, Jim Callaghan was not at ease with Stephen for some reason, and this began to be more obvious. It all came to a crunch when we were due to go to Helsinki for a big meeting connected with the Helsinki Final Act. I had gone off with Jim Callaghan to a bilateral visit to Hungary and Harold Wilson was coming in from another angle, and they were due to meet in Helsinki over dinner at Antony Elliott's house before the meeting the next day. When we got to Helsinki and Callaghan and Wilson met up, and their relationship had always been a slightly antagonistic one, Wilson started teasing Jim Callaghan, saying, 'Hello Jim. I see when the cat's away the mice do play.' 'Oh, what's this?' said Jim. 'Oh well,' said the Prime Minister (Wilson) 'You see, during your absence, a letter came to No.10 from your private office telling me that I was forbidden to use the words 'peaceful co-existence' in a speech that I was proposing to make, because this was to accept Communist propaganda and we don't believe in the concept as they define it.' 'Really?' said Jim Callaghan 'Who sent this letter?' looking very hot under the collar because he'd been caught on the wrong foot and didn't know quite what was what. 'Oh, it was signed by your Private Secretary,' said Harold Wilson. Afterwards, all hell broke loose in Jim's bedroom. Why had this letter been sent to the Prime Minister's office without him being consulted? Who had authorised it in London? He was furious at having been made a fool of by Harold Wilson, and although I'm afraid that the letter had actually been authorised by a deputy under-secretary, namely John Killick, rightly in my view because on the principle he was dead correct, the letter had been signed by Stephen Barrett, as Principal Private Secretary, and his head was on the chopping block. I went into Callaghan's office and he said, 'I'm sacking him.' I went off and thought about this for a moment, and he'd actually already spoken to Stephen Barrett, and I thought this won't do, so later in the evening I went back to Callaghan's suite, by which time he

was going to bed. I knocked on his door and he said, 'Come in.' He was in his bedroom. He was actually completely naked, he'd undressed and was just getting into his pyjamas, and I said, screwing up all my courage, 'Secretary of State, you cannot do this, you cannot do this in this way, you need to sleep on this predicament and let us consider anew in the morning how we go.' He said, 'My mind's made up, John, and if you want to go too, then you're quite welcome to leave me, otherwise shut up and let me go to sleep.' And that was the end of that. And he summarily dismissed poor old Stephen Barrett the next day, who in due course was replaced by Ewen Fergusson.

I think that Stephen was badly bruised by that, and actually was quite unjustly dealt with on the issue. But, in effect, the issue had been a pretext for Callaghan to get rid of a private secretary whom he felt just chemically ill at ease with. It just showed that he was quite a tough operator when he needed to be."

**LC:** "The chemistry has to be right, doesn't it, no matter how much your civil servants are provided for you. And was there a big change of tone when you worked with Tony Crosland; he was quite a difficult person."

**Sir John:** "Very different. You see, Callaghan was very good with people at the kind of touchy-feely thing, and that's why he got on well with Kissinger. Quite unsure of himself on the kind of deep intellectual analysis side of things. And with Crosland it was exactly the opposite. Crosland, of course, intellectually totally master of his universe, a very strong thinker. Initially rather uncertain about the Foreign Office, feeling that he'd left a job where he could design a transport policy for the entire United Kingdom, and he could say unto one 'Go' and he goeth, and to another 'Come' and he cometh, and he would just put out his policy and minions would make it happen, and he could get on with designing another wonderful policy. But he didn't actually have to rub shoulders with a whole lot of people he didn't know.

In the Foreign Office it was exactly the other way round. He had to be good at interacting with fellow ministers whom he'd never met before, doing business with them, being friends with them. He also suspected that the intellectual grist of the Foreign Office would be less demanding than it had been in the Department of the

Environment. I think as time went on, he began to realise that he had caricatured the job. He got slightly better at handling the people, though he never quite was at ease with that. But he became more respectful of the complexity of the subjects the Foreign Office would deal with and recognised that made real demands on him and his gifts. He was actually a very good minister to work for in some ways because you could put papers into Crosland, he would read them methodically, and the next morning they would come out and there would be two sentences at the bottom which said all you needed to know about how to carry out a decision that he had made. That was wonderful.

It was sad that he dropped dead when he did. He did live it up, and he was a bundle of quirks. For example, there was this silly business about him unwilling to put on a white tie and tails in order to go to Buckingham Palace. I said to him, 'But Secretary of State, when you were President of the Oxford Union, didn't you have to wear a white tie then?' 'Oh yes,' he said 'I suppose I did.'

The other thing was, I remember that a fellow private secretary, Richard Dales, was once despatched over to 1 Carlton Gardens to look after a visiting minister before a lunch that Crosland was due to host. When Crosland got there a little late, it was to discover that young Dales, quite rightly, had been getting some drinks organised, passing them round to the visiting party, and so on. The drinks, however, were sherry, and Crosland said to him the next day, 'Never let sherry be served again while I am Foreign Secretary.' I said, 'Why on earth not, Foreign Secretary?' and he said, 'Because it is a drink restricted to Oxford common rooms.' The point being a kind of inverted snobbery of his.

He was just a bundle of little complexes like that which had no logic to them at all and which were really quite endearing in a way, but showed that we all have our little insecurities and he did too. I think he was greatly helped by Susan Crosland. They were very devoted to each other, and she was a good foil for him and, because she was quite good at the people side, she helped him along the way and he liked to take her into his ambience as Foreign Secretary on visits abroad and such like.

I think the Labour Party never recovered in a sense from the death of Crosland, in the sense that no-one really replaced him as a serious intellectual contributor, and they suffered for a number of years as a result of that before coming back, eventually, under New Labour.”

**LC:** “Did you feel that they were not as keen on Europe as the preceding Tory administration? Did policy change at all while you were there?”

**Sir John:** “They were hoist with their own petard, weren’t they? They fought the election on renegotiation, so once they got in they had to show that they were going through the motions. Then we got into a classic situation, and I don’t suppose it will prove to have been the last by any means, where the nation was consulted through a referendum, and the wily Harold Wilson maintained all kinds of subtle ambiguities to the very end. Privately, they had concluded, or been persuaded, that our cause lay in Europe, that what we could renegotiate would be minimal, presentational rather than substantive, and that they had to carry the day in the national debate.

It was done quite skilfully, and it was the first time that I ever came across Bob Worcester, the head of Mori, the polling organisation, an American who came to this country in 1969. Already, by 1974-5, here he was being brought into the Foreign Office, to the Foreign Secretary’s Private Office, every day during the campaign preceding the referendum to give us the last update on what the polls were telling us about the shading of British opinion on this issue. The tactics of that operation, I mean the selling of the referendum questions successfully to the British people, were adjusted and modulated on an almost day-to-day basis, based partly on what they were hearing behind closed doors from Bob Worcester on the professional polling side. I guess it must have been good advice, because after all there was a fairly decisive ‘Yes’ vote at the end of the day.”

**LC:** “It must have been one of the first times ever that the Foreign Office had had to be involved with a political decision within the country. It’s not usually something the Foreign Office has to bother itself about. The issues that the Foreign Office are concerned with are not normally ones that the man in the street feels he has to have a say on.”

**Sir John:** “I think that’s a fair comment. Of course, the Labour cabinet at the time was very much a two-headed beast on this subject. There were people like Peter Shore and Tony Benn, and indeed others, around who were severely sceptical on this whole front. It was a tribute to Wilson’s political skills that he managed this, ultimately in the direction which better served the interests of the country, I have no doubt on that. The nature of the exercise we may well see repeated before we’re very much older.”

**LC:** “Was this only a two-year posting as Assistant Private Secretary, because obviously it was fascinating but demanding?”

**Sir John:** “Two years is about enough, I think, in the Private Office, because it is a real drag on your private life, very demanding. I also think that the other thing about being a private secretary is that you have to be someone else’s personality. If you’re doing the job properly, you’re always thinking about the world in which you’re operating through the mind of your political master. That is actually exhausting. Some of the compensations are the exposure to the political highlife, the access that you’re getting in all kinds of ways. But at the end of the day, and I found it later in my career too, to some extent mirrored when I was Political Director, you really have to have a change, re-oxygenate, rediscover your own identity. A two-year stint is enough at any one go unless you’re a very unusual sort of person.”

**LC:** “Someone who could spend seven years with Mrs Thatcher.

You were offered this posting as counsellor, Head of the Presidency Secretariat. Was it something you wanted?”

**Sir John:** “I think that’s what gave me the promotion to counsellor, so I thought a bird in the hand’s worth two in the bush. It was a first time job, someone had to do it first time round and make a good fist of it.”

**LC:** “Was this the first time that Britain had taken the presidency?”



**Sir John:** “Yes. So we put the accent on efficiency of the whole operation, rather than any particular policy issue, as we wanted to show that we could run this more rigorously, more efficiently, more smoothly than anybody else.”

**LC:** “Was this something that you came up with? How much input were you allowed to have into it?”

**Sir John:** “That was not my policy decision, but choosing me may have been connected with it. I mean, we took a view that it wasn’t for us to kind of ride hobby horses the first time we were in the Presidency. What we should show is that this cumbersome, bureaucratic beast of a Common Market, could actually be made to work better than it was working, partly through having a tightly run Presidency. And that’s what we wanted. We wanted to set a new gold standard in terms of the effectiveness of that operation.”

**LC:** “But you only had how long to do it? Six months?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, but that took us about six months to prepare for that, so it was a year-long job, and since we hadn’t done it before, we were very much in a learning curve. I think we probably over-endowed our operation. I think we had more people than we needed, but we erred on the side of having extra hands rather than the other way round, and I wrote it up afterwards for future reference. I hope it was helpful. It was quite enjoyable.”

**LC:** “Do you think it was effective?”

**Sir John:** “I do. I think it was effective as a piece of bureaucratic organisation.”

**LC:** “But are there lessons learnt? Are they passed on?”

**Sir John:** “They should be. They weren’t passed on from me, but whether they were passed on after that, they would have been modified by practice over the years. Certainly as we got into the swing of it, we’d be more at ease with ourselves and do it more by instinct, but then, it was all new so we had to make sure we got it right.”

Then I was offered a sabbatical year. I think the posting in Washington was already pencilled in, and that suited me fine. There was a bit of a fight about where the sabbatical would be because I knew that sometimes we had sabbatical years on offer in the United States. I also knew that one had come up for the first time in Berkeley, California, and I was interacting therefore with Personnel Department, in the shape of Roger Carrick, saying that I thought it made sense that if I was going to go to Washington to do the pol/mil job, what better than to go to Berkeley, California to do the sabbatical. Of course, that would be a natural entree to the thing. ‘No, no,’ I was told, they wanted me to go to All Souls College, Oxford. I said I had already been an undergraduate at Oxford. Well, they wanted me to go to Oxford. There were various reasons from the family point of view why it was not inconvenient. I settled for the All Souls year. Guess who got the sabbatical at Berkeley? Roger Carrick from the Personnel Department, who then subsequently joined me in Washington doing a different job. I didn’t really hold it against him. He remains a good friend.”

**LC:** “What did you actually study? Did you write a thesis?”

**Sir John:** “The most useful part about that year (and I think there are lessons which may have been learnt since, I don’t know) the most useful part about that year was twofold; firstly the preparation for my next posting, by getting close to military and strategic thinkers like Michael Howard and Hedley Bull, the two reigning professors at the time at Oxford. They were immensely knowledgeable and immensely helpful, so I had a really in depth read into the subjects I was going to be handling operationally through my exposure to them. And the second valuable thing about it was the contribution that I was able to make to some of the graduate classes that were run by them and others for graduate students, many of them from outside the UK as well as inside the UK, by writing papers and leading discussion groups in the graduate classes.”

**LC:** “And as someone who was in the Foreign Office?”

**Sir John:** “Exactly, and I did three or four of those, which were quite heavy work, but I enjoyed them. I think they were genuinely valuable to me because they

enabled me to bull up subjects valuable to the people in the graduate classes because of the dialectic process of that.

The 'write a thesis' thing in a sabbatical, I came to the conclusion, was actually a misconception. I mean, I did have a subject. My subject was 'The way in which the Foreign Office interacted with the non-governmental world. Who was the Foreign Office's constituency in the UK? Is it true that it was a kind of ivory tower cut off from everybody and everything except for foreigners?' My contention was that this was untrue from what I had observed in the private offices. The people who came through the doors of the Foreign Office all the time; we were exposed all the time to parliamentarians, to trades unionists, to NGOs, to academics, to people who wrote letters, asked questions. We actually did have our kind of soil within which our own process of government was nourished, and the business community would be another. I tried to show this by constructing a thesis which pulled some evidence out of the Foreign Office how many letters were written to ministers, on what sort of subjects, what delegations came to visit ministers over time, who were they, what about, what were the subjects which kept cropping up, were there examples of policy being modified this way or that?

To cut a long story short, this was an enormous piece of work. I would have needed two years at least to do it justice. Frankly, I think probably I was a bit stubborn in not realising that I was undertaking a piece of primary research here, and I would need another year to write up the primary research, and I got caught a bit in the middle. I did do a paper which I delivered to a bunch of people from senior common rooms at Oxford at the end of the year. The paper went to lodge with Nuffield College in the shape of one of the dons there. There was some talk about whether it would go out in pamphlet form or not. I don't think it deserved to quite frankly. But it didn't matter.

I drew the conclusion, look, if you're going to give people a year off in mid career to refresh, to renew, for God's sake trust them. Don't send them there if you want to apply them to the anvil of writing a lugubrious paper, assume they're going to use their time usefully and benefit therefrom. I don't know whether anybody listened to that. I think there are exceptions. There are some people burning to get something out. I mean, Crispin (Tickell) wrote his famous little book about the influence of

climate on international affairs, during his Harvard year. But others, I think, would probably subscribe to the view I've just expressed, which is that you've got to trust the guy to use that year, wherever it is, productively, otherwise don't have sabbaticals at all. I thought it was productive, for the reasons I have given, although All Souls, as an institution, I thought was a pretty odd place. It was so self-regarding. It is the only college in Oxford or Cambridge that has no student population of any kind, not even graduate students, at least it certainly didn't then. While there are a lot of brilliant people, particularly among the young research fellows, some of the attitudes there are so encrusted and so dreadfully self-regarding that they became really quite tiresome.

There is a wonderful story that Robert Graves tells about visiting Lawrence of Arabia when Lawrence of Arabia had been granted room in All Souls College in order to write up *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Graves went to visit him one day and he penetrated through the courtyards to when he came to the Hawksmoor quadrangle where the Hawksmoor towers are, and he went up a staircase, and there was Lawrence's room. He went in, opened the door, and he was surprised to find T E Lawrence sitting on the window-sill with the window open, with a large hand-bell which he was shaking vigorously while it echoed and re-echoed around the Hawksmoor quad. And Graves said, 'Lawrence, what on earth do you think you're doing making all that noise? You'll wake up the entire College.' He said, 'It needs waking up.' I felt a grain of sympathy with that story.

Of course, the distinguished members of the senior common room at All Souls would probably think this is frightfully cheeky of me. After all, they'd extended their hospitality and how dare I be so impudent as to suggest that they didn't live in a perfect world. But that was my view, and it was encapsulated for me by the fact that in any one year there would be a number of visiting fellows. From the public sector where we are concerned, and I would regard myself as the public sector visiting fellow in a sense a kind of interloper really, but the College liked to do that and so much the better. But then there were a number of very distinguished academic visiting fellows from around the world. In the year I was there they included very good people like Yehuda Elkana, Professor of History of Science, from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Professor John Clive, a modern historian from Yale, and several others of that stature.

It always puzzled me, the one big event of the year which was the Chicheley dinner in All Souls, these distinguished visiting fellows weren't invited. I thought it was so quaint. You know, you go to the trouble of having some of the best minds in their fields from around the world, you give them hospitality in the College for a year, then you actually systematically cut them out of some of the events. Perhaps I'm being unfair to the College."

**LC:** "I think I'll move you on."

**Sir John:** "Yes, move me on."

**LC:** "So, Counsellor in Washington. The ambassador then was Peter Jay?"

**Sir John:** "It was Peter Jay. I was spotted for that job, but he was determined not to accept anybody until he'd interviewed them himself. He decided that he liked the cut of my jib, so I went there."

**LC:** "So he hand-picked his team?"

**Sir John:** "He wouldn't accept the nominations of the department without personally confirming it was all right with them. He did actually make one big mistake, because he took John Robinson, the number two, who was put in at the time to provide a counterbalance to Peter Jay, and they got on famously badly.

That was a very important job for me in career terms. It was the first serious opportunity, at length, of living and working in the United States on a range of subjects that were really right at the heart of things at the time, particularly the whole arms control field. Also, very important I think, you haven't really lived in some ways as a diplomat unless you've lived and worked in the United States. It was important a) because of the subject matter of the job and its intrinsic relevance to international affairs at the time, and b) because of what it enabled me to understand about the process of government in the United States. It is also a very agreeable place to live, especially if you've got small children."

**LC:** “Were you a specialist really in the arms control side?”

**Sir John:** “I venture to say that as a result of the preceding year at Oxford, I had rapidly become a specialist. I mean, I’d gone into the subjects in some depth, and they were quite complex in the fine print of the START and SALT negotiations and the intricacies of test ban negotiations, and some of the hardware side of the US defence policy, hardware and strategy software. So there was a lot of intellectual grist in all those subjects. They seemed to be relevant to the world we lived in, and important to the UK-US relationship, all of which put a premium on this job being done well.

I had a very able lieutenant in Michael Pakenham who was already there when I arrived. We worked first, of course, for Peter Jay and subsequently for Nico Henderson. Peter Jay was admirable at some things. There was nobody who could hold a candle to him in terms of digressing without a note about the currents of the world economy in front of a bunch of prime hitters among the US academic and economist fraternities. He did that brilliantly. However, he was a young man at the time with a relatively young wife, young children, and the notion that you put in a British ambassador in Washington when the Carter people were full of young Turks, specifically because a young man will go down better with them, is quite false. They will accept you, at whatever age you are, depending on how good you are. The age is irrelevant. However, the age was relevant in the sense that I believe it inhibited the ambassador from deploying fully the resources at his disposal in the embassy. Typically, he like giving set-piece lunches with subjects to them, with a discussion always initiated over lunch. And that’s fine, but the house did not have the lights on all the time in the evening, and it’s a wonderful house and it’s one of the few places in Washington where you get anybody and everybody to go if they’re invited, and I don’t think that Peter and Margaret were able to give that the attention that the job deserved to the extent that it deserved it. They were just too busy raising the family and, of course as we subsequently discovered, that put strains on them which their marriage didn’t survive. So, arguably, to put him there in the first place obviously had its downside as well as its upside.

I enjoyed working for him. He was always very considerate to me. He was a good listener. He was a good arguer. It was fun. He was a terrible administrator. He had no idea how to manage a large organisation like that, and he left that really to John Robinson who hated him and sought every opportunity to do him down, which made it very difficult for the rest of us who felt that we were having, in some sense, to serve two masters.

When Labour was displaced by Thatcher in the 1979 election, we had a change of ambassador. Nico Henderson came in, and a more classic pattern of directing the embassy was resumed. This was also a period in which Carter was ousted by, first, the Reagan administration, and that too brought interesting sides to the job in Washington.

We had very good sources in the American agencies and departments, and we would make a habit of going round systematically, each of them in turn, comparing very carefully among each of them what the others had said. Sometimes, some of these departments and agencies would learn as much, if not more, about one another from talking to the British than they would by talking to each other. We were the beneficiaries of that process, in particular in the National Security Council staff, the old executive office building adjacent to the White House. We had particularly good sources there on some of this stuff, and I was sending reports to London on the fine print of the American position on the START and SALT negotiations of a very highly classified nature, which the person who was telling it to me had no business to be telling it to anyone, not even the Brits. But it was done on the basis of confidence and friendship. That was part of what the game was there. You had to be good in doing that. We called him Deep Throat.

We had a very good reporting system to London. There were times when we had to weigh in on our own account, for example the way in which third party nuclear systems like those of the French and British related to, or did not relate to, the Salt negotiations between the Americans and the Russians. Then there were times when we had to get a foot through the door and insist quite rigorously on having our own interests taken into account and real negotiations with the Americans on that sort of thing.

I struck up many working relationships and friendships with Americans in that period, which lasted me for the rest of my career, because these people kept coming back into circulation in other incarnations. There were such good bases established in those days that were of great lasting value in personal terms.”

**LC:** “Do you think the Americans used the British in a particular way then, because in some ways their interests could perhaps have been carried out directly with the Soviet Union? Were we integral to that process?”

**Sir John:** “No, we weren’t integral to it. We might have liked to think we were. We were in constant danger of being taken for granted. Yes, the Americans would accept that on the defence and intelligence side, the British had a privileged position vis-à-vis other allies dating back to the UK-US agreement on intelligence matters, the nuclear relationship during the war and so on. They accepted that we did have that status, they liked to be able to bounce ideas off us as a trusted second source, but in terms of going after their own interests as they pursued them, and as they perceived them, they were in danger of forgetting us. Part of our job there was to keep reminding them, importuning them, tugging at them and saying, ‘Look, you can’t do that because . . .’. Certainly the status of British nuclear systems was one important question. If they were going to accept limitations on certain types of strategic nuclear delivery vehicle, would they be inadvertently preventing us from modernising our own nuclear systems as we would wish to do? This was a constant tussle with them.

Another example would be the status of Diego Garcia, which of course was a British overseas territory which the Americans used as a strategic base in the Indian Ocean. The provisions were governed by an understanding that we had with the Americans which would require them to seek our permission before doing certain things in or from Diego Garcia. They were in constant danger of taking that for granted, so we had to keep plugging away and making life difficult for them and insisting that this be renegotiated in such and such a way. One had to judge the degree to which you could go without being such a bloody nuisance that it became counter productive in other areas. That was the art. On the whole I think we did it pretty well, and I think we had a better sense of our relative stature in American minds than probably many ministers,



whether Labour or Conservative, in London. I think we were more realistic about the true weight in the scheme of things that the British represented.”

**LC:** “And of course it’s Mrs Thatcher’s good relationship with Reagan . . . You left in ’79, and then ’80 Reagan was elected, you came back in 1981.”

**Sir John:** “I came back in 1981 and took over the Head of Defence Department in the Foreign Office from David Gillmore. I was immediately thrown into a whole lot of things, including, for example, the Star Wars debate on which I had quite a lot to do because, by running that department, effectively I was the Foreign Office spokesman at that level. When we went off for days to Chequers, which the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, liked doing, with people like Michael Heseltine, Geoffrey Howe, Michael Quinlan, I was the Foreign Office guy who knew the subject.

I remember we had some right old ding-dongs there. Typically, other ministers would lie back and hope that their officials would have the courage to say things they didn’t want to say in front of her. I do remember arguing the fine print of some of the appendices to the anti-ballistic missile treaty of 1972 with her, in the context of whether this or that aspect of the then Star Wars projections of President Reagan were permissible; could we get round them, was this to infringe the treaty, if so did it matter? And we had some real ding-dongs with her, which was quite unnerving initially until you realised that she wanted to have the argument, she wanted to be exposed to the facts, she would question very strongly, you had to stand your ground and know your ground. Provided you did those two things, she would hear it out, she would not tell you at the time that she’d modified her view, but you could sometimes discern by the way she spoke about, or approached, the subject thereafter, that she had in fact taken something on board as a result of that intense process of dialectical confrontation. That was interesting and, in a way, fun.”

**LC:** “How does the Foreign Office Defence Department relate to the Ministry of Defence? That would have been Heseltine, I presume, then.”

**Sir John:** “The Foreign Office Defence Department was really responsible for handling all the foreign policy implications of British defence policy, so therefore, if

any part of the MOD wanted an FCO view, they would come initially to the Defence Department for it. It was our job to know what was going on in the Ministry of Defence so that the Foreign Office as a whole was not taken by surprise by aspects of developments, either policy-wise or programme-wise in the MOD. In a sense, they were our parish, our constituency, and we needed to know them, both on the military side and on the civilian policy side of the MOD, and interact closely with them.”

**LC:** “And you would also be feeding them with information from the embassies abroad, though they would have had their own attaches as well.”

**Sir John:** “Well, they had their defence attachés, but they were doing a very limited sort of job. I mean, they weren’t always, to be honest, very good people. If you were an up and coming military officer, you wouldn’t want to be a defence attaché, except possibly as a brief interlude. They were often very nice people, but they were essentially doing military liaison with the country in question, and looking a little bit at the military dispositions. They weren’t really, with very, very few exceptions, into policy formulation. There was a very big British defence staff in Washington at that time, headed by an Air Marshal in his own right. But those people really couldn’t tell you anything about things like the START SALT negotiations, CBT negotiations, subtle aspects of the evolution of American thinking, the nuclear fraternity, even sometimes the broader aspects of defence reviews in the Pentagon. They were quite sharply angled on military things, military co-operation and so on. So there was plenty for the Defence Department to do, and of course the Falklands War then blew up.”

**LC:** “Yes, I was going to say were you involved in that?”

**Sir John:** “Very much so. We formed, of course, the almost standing emergency unit in the Foreign Office to collate the various disparate interests within the FCO that were engaged by the Falklands War. But the primary accent on how the British ran their military operation, and how that squared with both NATO on the one side and the Americans on the other, and what were the political and arms control implications of what we were doing, or seeking to do, in the Falklands were for the Foreign Office and the Defence Department was a prime input into that. So, when the Chiefs of Staff

would meet (this comes back to the point we were talking about before) the Foreign Office would need to be present. At the discussions among the Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of State for Defence, representing at that meeting the views of the Foreign Secretary, if these were known, in relation to the agenda; putting down markers where the Foreign Office view might need to be sought; arguing the toss on ‘Who says we can’t sink an Argentine warship when we feel like it?’ Well, we need to think about the public relations on this in relation to who does what to whom first; ‘What business is it of yours whether any of Her Majesty’s warships are in fact carrying nuclear weapons, if that’s normally how they behave when they’re going worldwide in a Cold War situation?’ ‘Well, has it occurred to you that we are signatories of the Treaty of Tlateloco which does not allow us to transit certain waters or to put in at ports if any of our ships are carrying nuclear weapons?’: - this kind of discussion.”

**LC:** “Mostly friendly, mostly constructive?”

**Sir John:** “Well, I hope so. But the other thing that came out very clearly at this time, which was a very important lesson for me, was that we moved from a position of peace to a position of war. It was the first time really in my time in the Foreign Service, and the first time we’d been in a hot war since Suez. What was very, very noticeable in Whitehall was the overnight change in the relative specific gravities and dynamics in the government process. Previously, the military was always in an advisory and subordinate role to the political. Now they were in the ascendant. Their attitude was ‘Look, we accept that we need to consult the war cabinet, and we do need to be told what the political parameters are. But don’t tell us how to run a war. This is what we do.’ All this was very noticeable in the Chiefs of Staff meetings chaired by Terry Lewin, the CDS at the time (John Nott was Defence Secretary).

I can remember on at least one occasion, the Chiefs of Staff meeting starting in the morning when Terry Lewin came in, all chiefs rose to their feet, then we all sat down, and the meeting started, but the Defence Secretary wasn’t there. About ten minutes later, the Defence Secretary came in and muttered, ‘I’m terribly sorry to keep you all waiting.’ ‘No, no,’ said Terry, ‘Don’t worry, Secretary of State, you haven’t kept us waiting at all.’ It was perfectly obvious that he hadn’t, because they’d got on with the meeting anyway. Basically, in the nicest possible way, and in the firmest possible

way, the Chiefs were saying, ‘You’ve had your say, you political/diplomatic guys, but now actually the Falklands have been invaded, we’re conducting a war to throw them out, so kindly just be a little more modest about life.’ They didn’t say that, but that was what I deduced from the atmosphere.

Of course, the thing was always subject to overriding political decision, quite rightly, and they wouldn’t have wanted it any other way, but my goodness, it didn’t half change the balance in Whitehall.”

**LC:** “Do you have any personal comments on the Falklands? Were you appalled when it happened?”

**Sir John:** “I thought it was a war that should never have been fought. I think two things stand out. First of all, in the preceding years, governments of both Tory and Labour stripe, had not been courageous enough in handling a solution along the lines of the fifty-year lease-back idea, by which I mean ‘Let’s have half a century of the British being the tenants and then, at the end of that, we can consider how there might be a referendum of the inhabitants of the Falklands about the future from that point, and can we proceed on that basis’. Each time in the preceding years that kind of solution had been mooted, it had been knocked out of court by relatively few voices from the backbenches of the House of Commons because Ministers hadn’t got the guts to do it. So, strategically, that opportunity had been forfeited, and that was a primary contributor to the thing turning out in the form of invasion, in my view.

Second, in the more immediate period before they invaded the Falklands, we, collectively, had clearly been at fault in not addressing things like the renewal of the ship that we had down there, the relatively small number of Royal Marines who were on the island. There had been times, because I remember reporting at the time, when we’d sat around (this was before the invasion had taken place or been predicted or anything) and there was this question about the research ship down there. There was a ship down there that the MoD didn’t want to pay for any more, and the Foreign Office said, ‘Well, we really do quite value it because it actually sends a message to the Argentines.’ And the MoD said, ‘If you think it’s valuable, you pay for it.’ We had this kind of pettifogging argument.

At a mid-level of the inter-departmental process in Whitehall, there had been occasions in the previous year or so when signals were being registered among us that we were in danger of so far minimising the British military presence down there as to send, or risk sending, the wrong signals. I can remember on at least one occasion, coming back and minuting that within the Foreign Office, saying that I discerned that in the MoD there was a degree of discomfort about this that we needed to think about. But this is all to be wise after the event.

I was quite uncomfortable when hostilities began; there were aspects of it that worried us, actually. I mean, what was the level of casualties we could take if British public opinion became seriously exercised. I think, in some ways, we were quite lucky, given the initial actions like the crashing of the helicopter on the mountainside in South Georgia. It was quite hard, I must say. I used to come back, slightly with my heart in my stomach at the end of the day, thinking what are we going to wake up and hear on the radio tomorrow. Then ships started getting sunk. What I am trying to say is, I don't think that any of us in the Foreign Office felt at all gung-ho about that war. Personally, I felt it was the war that should never have taken place, but given that we were in the position we were in, I accepted that we had no alternative but to do it. That we did it so well, and with relatively speaking such a low level of casualties, is due to the robust skills of our armed forces, and a healthy dollop of luck."

**LC:** "That was obviously the most crystal thing that dominated that period. Then you took on the position of Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, for what looks like quite a short period before going to Paris. Is that right?"

**Sir John:** "Yes, that's right. Again, I succeeded David Gillmore when he went off, I think, to Malaysia, in the AUS slot for defence and security and related matters."

**LC:** "So you continued with the subject matter, really."

**Sir John:** “Yes. Then I went to the number two job in Paris, the so-called Minister.”

**LC:** “I didn’t manage to find out who was the ambassador then.”

**Sir John:** “It was John Fretwell initially, and then he handed over to Ewen Fergusson.

That was a very interesting job in a different kind of way.”

**LC:** “Nice change of direction for you, really, at that point.”

**Sir John:** “I suppose it could be argued that I’d got European Community, United States and pol/mil experience, all of which, in different ways, were quite relevant to the French, particularly at a time when we were trying to understand better the French attitudes to defence and to draw them a little more constructively into the game, out of their Gaullist isolation.”

**LC:** “They were presumably not in NATO at this period.”

**Sir John:** “Well, they were, as they’ve always been, members of the Atlantic Alliance, but not part of the integrated military structure of NATO, though they sat on the North Atlantic Council as full members. They just didn’t allow their armed forces to be fully committed to NATO mechanisms. It was also the period during which the first cohabitation occurred, that is to say when there was a socialist president and a RPR government. That was interesting from our point of view, both because it hadn’t occurred in French terms before, but also for the same reason that applied in the Washington case. When the Elysée was in the hands of one party, and the government was in the hands of another, there was a degree of mistrust between them and therefore we were able to play, in a sense, both sides against the middle by talking to everybody, by allowing each to hear a little bit about the other and therefore to maximise our off-take from that and to report more fully in London as a consequence.

Being the number two in a big embassy like that has pluses and minuses. It's very good from the point of view of learning all the skills of running a large mission, a large embassy."

**LC:** "You are responsible for the running of the embassy."

**Sir John:** "No, there was head of chancery as well, so you're not doing that. What you're actually required to do is be the alter ego of the ambassador, in the sense that, if the ambassador is out of Paris, you're in charge and operating as, effectively, the ambassador in his absence. Or if he's abroad, or if he wants to be in Paris but the embassy needs to be represented elsewhere in La France profound, or indeed, for that matter as I once went there, in New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

The title there of the job, for some obscure historical reason, is Minister Plenipotentiary, so actually in French eyes, you were almost an alternative ambassador. Now, that was very good from the point of view of the learning curve as the ambassador tended to treat his minister obviously as his close confidante. You really were able to observe at close quarters, and to take some of the load of running a large embassy like that. At the same time, there was a degree of frustration, one might say, because, at the end of the day . . ."

**LC:** ". . . He'd say when."

**Sir John:** "Yes. But I enjoyed it very much because Paris is Paris. It's very much a hot house. It's a forcing house. Parisians tend to behave as if nothing important happens outside the périphérique. But, if you're inside the périphérique, then you're getting all the fun of being part of that game. Provided you play that game according to French rules, you get automatic acceptance and just a huge amount of interest. So, it was good in lots of ways in terms of polishing ones diplomatic skills at a different level within one's career, learning a lot about running one's own mission, and intrinsically very interesting because France is an interesting place to be. So, I did enjoy that."

**LC:** “The French assumption, or criticism, that Britain is just a poodle of America, is that something that’s also there at higher levels, or is it just something that’s in the media and in the minds of French people perhaps?”

**Sir John:** “I suppose it’s there, depending a little bit on circumstances. It is a kind of reflex that occurs sometimes, but they would be a bit too polite to say it to your face if you were in the British Embassy. After all, you were there in order to understand French attitudes better, to try to reflect them more accurately, and to look for ways of narrowing gaps, which I did, particularly on the defence policy side: Anglo-French collaboration, can we get close to each other, for example, on nuclear matters?”

This was a period when we had learned, almost by accident, that whereas we thought we had a private relationship with the Americans on nuclear matters, that the Americans had already set up their own to-ing and fro-ing with the French without telling us, thank you very much. We wanted a situation where we thought maybe we should be looking also for completing this triangle by talking more to the French about how we respectively run our independent nuclear deterrents, what we do about modernisation, what kind of collaboration might there be, could we have joint patrolling to minimise the number of boats you had to have at sea at any one point, how do we think about the security of weapons systems, modernisation of weapons systems, what are our underlying strategies for use. All these sort of things we got into a set of discussions with the French which we hadn’t really been in so much before.”

**LC:** “And made progress on?”

**Sir John:** “I think we made some. Certainly that was ground I was comfortable on and could operate quite effectively on, which added point to the job.”

**LC:** “In some ways perhaps a lost opportunity, because the French and ourselves are the only two nuclear players in Europe.”



**Sir John:** “And of course there was this Ted Heath phrase earlier on about holding our nuclear deterrents in trust for Europe and so on. Difficult circle to square because of known neuralgias where the Americans are concerned. It’s all right for them to have contacts with the other two, but not necessarily all right for us to have contacts with the other two. And we had to watch that a bit. But there were some quite interesting, practical expressions of those sorts of effort that had to be managed at the time.”

**LC:** “Right, we’ll go on then. Leaving Paris, I’m sure reluctantly. . .”

**Sir John:** “Well, three years was okay. I came back and succeeded Christopher Mallaby in the Cabinet Office as Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet on Defence, Foreign Affairs and Irish matters.”

**LC:** “So stepping outside the Foreign Office to some extent. Did you continue to receive Foreign Office views to convey to the Cabinet?”

**Sir John:** “Basically, the job is to be the secretariat for the Cabinet and its Cabinet committees, and therefore to be in a position to give the Prime Minister advice on policy matters, mediating where necessary through the group process of joint committees at both senior officials and ministerial level, to sit in on Cabinet, to take the minutes of Cabinet. Very interesting. Also to manage any things that came up all of a sudden and need somewhere to go like, for example, the ‘Death on the Rock’ incident.”

**LC:** “I was going to say, perhaps you’d like to pick out a couple of incidents, because there must have been a lot during that time.”

**Sir John:** “I know that my predecessor, Christopher, said that the job was fine and very interesting, in the ways I’ve just described, but you do need one or two big ones to get your teeth into. I guess the two big ones for me were ‘Death on the Rock’ and ‘Further work on the modernisation of British nuclear deterrent’.

In the 'Death on the Rock' case, you remember the situation during which three IRA people had gone to Gibraltar in order to set off a bomb to kill British military personnel there in a public place. In the course of the pursuit, in or around that incident, they were shot dead by SAS people who were following them on the Rock and who, believing themselves and the lives of others to be threatened, shot first. There was, of course, an inquest held in Gibraltar which returned a verdict of 'not proven' in terms of circumstances of the deaths, but no blame was held to lie against the British Government in those circumstances. However, afterwards in Whitehall terms, it was felt that we needed to take a look at the whole lead up to that to see whether there were any lessons to be learned for the future. I was asked to take charge of that operation, so we had a number of meetings with people around the circumstances of the Rock incident inter-departmentally. Afterwards, I had to go around and talk to people and gather views and write a report to the Cabinet Secretary about the lessons from that.

As I recall, the two primary lessons were, if what you are doing mainly is a policing job, don't send crack soldiers because they are trained in different ways. The only way you survive in the SAS is by shooting first. This is not the same as policing, and people frequently suppose that the two are alike, but they're not. We actually have seen that in other parts of the world where troops are put in the position of having to exercise as military in support of a civil function. They are different, because they are not actually designed to do the same jobs.

The other prime lesson I felt was, if you're going to get into a complex operational situation of that sort, it would be a good thing to have at least a minimum of key decision points recorded beforehand in writing, to concentrate the minds and responsibilities of decision-makers and to clarify that process. My view was that it was very difficult to establish the exact audit trail in the operational planning and authorising of events which led to the situation which resulted in the shootings. I'm not criticising the shootings as such. I met, down in Hereford, some of the people who had been involved in the operation. I know the kind of strains that they were under. I'm not blaming the SAS people, for whom I have great respect in lots of ways. I just think that as an exercise in the procedures of government, it was not optimally handled, even allowing for necessary secrecy over covert operations. There

may be times when there are things that Ministers would rather not be told, would rather not know, but public servants have to be very careful about letting them "rather not know". I think you have to say at certain points, okay I think we understand where we are going here, but . . . signature here please. And I think that it's the duty of officials to see that that is done.

So, those are the two lessons that I drew from this incident, which I thought was often badly distorted by the media.

The other thing was, next steps in where do we go on modernisation of the British nuclear deterrent, revisiting the whole rationale of the British deterrent from which one would try to derive sensible and affordable conclusions about weapons systems choices that would fit against that rationale, while making sure that they are obtainable and sustainable, vis-à-vis the Americans if American systems were involved at any point, that they were compatible with the arms control picture in so far as we could see it, and all that. That's a rigorous intellectual exercise, which brought Tony Duff back into play because he'd done the Duff/Mason study at an earlier point on the same sort of ground"

**LC:** "Did Mrs Thatcher have strong views on this, or is it such a very technical complex matter that she left it very much to you to produce the report?"

**Sir John:** "She did not have strong views on the kind of decisions I've just been talking about. She had strong views about the importance of maintaining a British deterrent, and she wanted to be reassured that what we were going after was something the Americans would have and we could get. But she didn't reach down into the process.

That was fine for about seventeen months, then I began to get itchy feet over there, so I came back to the Foreign Office, initially both as the DUS for Defence and as Political Director, then we split that up again, and I was Political Director. The main thing at that period, of course, was the negotiations on German reunification."

**LC:** "This was the two plus four."

**Sir John:** “These were the two plus four negotiations leading up to the treaty that settled the external aspects of German reunification. That is to say, not, if you like, the treaty which put East Germany and West Germany together, but the treaty which assured that all external aspects of that reunification were properly coped with in treaty terms. How did it affect other belligerents from the Second World War? What about our quadripartite rights and responsibilities in Berlin? Was there an EU angle in any way? What were the NATO implications of going this route? How would we cope with the stationing of NATO troops in a reunified Germany? All damages and other claims resulting from the last war, how were they affected? We had to look at this in its entirety and then devise a treaty in which the two Germanys and the four quadripartite parties from the last war could sign up to, in order to draw a line once and for all on the external aspects. So that was the nature of the exercise.

It was pursued basically at two levels: Roughly at political director level again. In official terms that was me and Bob Zoellick for the Americans, now the US trade representative, and Yuli Kvitzinski for the Russians, Dieter Kastrup for the Germans, Bertrand Dufourq for the French, and there were the East Germans. Then, at ministerial level, periodically to register and endorse the views put forward, ending up with a meeting in Moscow where the treaty was signed.”

**LC:** “Did you meet, as a group?”

**Sir John:** “Yes, we met all along the way in different capitals, at our level and at ministerial level. On the last occasion there was the great signature in Moscow, with Gorbachev standing there beaming as Shevardnadze and Douglas Hurd and Genscher and Roland Dumas signed off.

That was an extremely interesting piece of work because one was suddenly thrown back into classic diplomacy of the inter-State variety.”

**LC:** “Hinging on Versailles type of thing.”

**Sir John:** “Hinging on all those big issues that had come up at the end of the last war, and accommodating the Poles in particular who were felt to be particularly neuralgic on all this. You know, because of the Oder/Neisse line, and related issues. Essentially, the dynamics of the situation were that the Americans and the West Germans were gung-ho to get this whole thing put to bed in the shortest possible time. The Russians were playing hard to get because they wanted to see what they could get out of it. The French and the British were thought to be initially sceptical about the speed of the process, because Thatcher and Mitterrand had got together and assured each other that it was all very dangerous, this big new Germany.

It became clear, quite early on, that (and I think Thatcher admits this in her book, actually) that a lot of people had underestimated the speed of events. This was going to happen anyway, so we needed to get this treaty drawn up in the same space of time so that it didn't lag behind the process, there weren't any untidy ends. Only, we needed to be sure that we had actually got everything, so rushing ahead as Bob Zellick and Baker wanted to do, was all very well, but 'Just hang on a mo, just make sure we've covered all the angles here.' Zoellick very much the Chicago lawyer, 'What's the problem, get on with it.' The Germans wanted to get there anyway because it was their thing. The Russians were being extremely evasive and initially recalcitrant, until the point where Kohl had gone off and had his meeting with Gorbachev, where he basically bought off the Russians. After that it was relatively downhill in negotiating terms, but the Russians put a man up front called Bondarenko who was a kind of old-style bureaucratic apparatchik and took his time over everything, so patience was stretched to the limits by this.

There were some periods when that became quite fraught, notably on the issue which occurred in Moscow. We were out there for the final round, at our level, negotiating, and then the ministers were due to fly into Moscow for signing the treaty the next day. When Douglas Hurd came in and I went to report to him, I said, 'I'm afraid I can't recommend that you sign this treaty.' He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Well, there is this thing here which has to do with the right to station NATO forces in the eastern part of a unified Germany. At the moment, we are being asked to settle for a form of words which the Germans aren't too concerned about and the Russians are saying it's the most that they can live with, and I don't think we should do it because we could be in

a position where, effectively, it's argued after this treaty is signed, that the Russians have created a special zone with residual rights in the former East Germany which do not apply to the rest of a unified Germany. Why do they have this droit de regard? They could effectively prevent us from exercising NATO forces in the eastern part of Germany, and we might need to do so one day.' So he was a bit taken aback by this. I actually had consulted Charles Powell at No.10, and I knew that No.10 took this seriously."

**LC:** "And the Americans?"

**Sir John:** "The Americans were basically persuaded by the strength of this argument. They were very uneasy, but equally they knew that they had a minister coming to town who wanted to get on with it. My view was that we had the Russians over a barrel here, because they had a treaty to sign the next day, and they knew that. The lights were on and this was their one chance to be the big show in town, and therefore all we had to do was sit tight and insist on this point and we would get it. Unfortunately, we had a particular snarl up the evening before with Frank Elbe, the German spokesman of Genscher, because he was getting worried that the public relations of the treaty's signing were going to be sabotaged by us holding out for a point in negotiations which he regarded as expendable. He and I had a furious argument, which I suspect Kvitziński may have partly overheard, in which I was saying that this was a point of substance which should not be conceded. He was saying that we were out to wreck the treaty's signature, to which my response was, 'Don't be silly, they need it, the Russians, more than any of us in this time frame, because we're all here in Moscow.'

To cut a long story short, the ministers had to grapple with this. Douglas Hurd took his brief very fairly, was supported by Baker, and in the end the point was resolved by adding a separate protocol to the treaty, which all foreign ministers signed, which interpreted the text of the treaty in such a way that there was no explicit prohibition on the movement of NATO forces into the eastern part of Germany, which there otherwise would have been if the Soviet point of view succeeded. So, the point was won and the treaty was duly signed, and another piece of history had been accomplished.

This was also the last round of negotiations, I remember on a completely trivial point, remarkable for the fact that when it came to typing up the agreed text on the last evening at official level, it proved impossible to find a typewriter in the hands of our Soviet hosts that could produce the text of this thing in English. It was Jonathan Powell, subsequently Chief of Staff with Tony Blair under New Labour, who was my bag carrier at the time, and who had had the presence of mind to have with him a Toshiba laptop computer on which the text was produced for the good of all the delegations round the table.

Moving to NATO, to which I went as ambassador in 1992-1995. There's a lot one could say about this. It was notable for the last years of Manfred Woerner as NATO Secretary-General for the attempts that we made to bring the French into a more organic relationship with NATO's military structure, for the creation of the Euro Corps between the French and the Germans in a way in which we negotiated to make that compatible with the NATO military dispositions. And of course for the upwelling of the crisis of the civil war in Bosnia, during which allied troops were deployed on the ground in Bosnia as part of the UN force, and NATO went into active operational mode for the first time in its history through the naval blockades in the Adriatic and the air action by NATO aircraft in support of the UN forces on the ground. So, for the first time in NATO's history, we were actually sitting around the North Atlantic Council making real-life operational decisions about the deployment and use of NATO forces in real action. Much of that period had to do with trying to reconcile the American predilection for acting only at arm's length with the ground commitment of British, French, Dutch and Spanish forces in the thick of that civil war and the strains that began to set up in alliance solidarity. This came to a high point for me when it became clear that the UN forces might have to withdraw, almost under fire, from Bosnia. The Americans were going hard at the rearming of the Bosnians, which we thought could re-inflame the civil war to such a state that it might be dangerous for allied forces to remain on the ground in Bosnia, and if they were to be withdrawn they would need to have NATO cover while withdrawing. The question was, if NATO came to the rescue of the UN force, would it include American troops?"

**LC:** “The NATO force, would that include American troops?”

**Sir John:** “Yes. Bob Dole came out on a visit from Washington to NATO because he was very exercised about what he was hearing on this subject, and was closeted behind close doors with just the sixteen of us, the NATO ambassadors. I picked the short straw. I was delegated by the others to open the discussion with Dole. I explained to him what I thought the true situation was, and I told him that if it came to the point that British, French, Dutch and Spanish forces were withdrawing under fire in Bosnia, and NATO was required to mobilise in order to see that they could withdraw safely, and the Americans were not part of that operation, then this could break the back of the Alliance. That was the phrase I used.”

**LC:** “You were speaking for, on the whole, all your colleagues in NATO? Were you representing your views or the views of the whole?”

**Sir John:** “No, I was speaking for my colleagues, and they thought that this would be best heard from the British. We had a strong argument with Dole, behind those closed doors, for some time, during which he did not appear to be conceding anything, but from the moment he went out of the door and started to speak to the Press outside NATO headquarters, and still more when he went back to Washington, it was clear that the visit to NATO had persuaded him that there were real political penalties of a major kind involved here. And when he went back to the United States, he took the lead in persuading the US Congress that they should indeed authorise, on a contingency basis, a NATO force to cover the withdrawal of UN forces, including Americans.

There were many arguments on such questions as the air strikes versus use of ground forces or relations between the two, the types of target to be covered, the dual key arrangements for authorising the use of NATO air strikes or not, many complex interactions between the political and the military authorities in NATO, and between NATO itself and the UN, mediated at Secretary-General level between Woerner and Boutros Ghali. Running through all this were these quite severe strains between the Americans and the European allies, which on the whole were managed successfully at



the end of the day. But it was really instructive to be involved in that in conditions of actual NATO operations, not just pretend.

**LC:** “What assurances were given to the Soviet Union about enlargement and what exactly happened?”

**Sir John:** “Well, we managed that by basically creating a partnership for peace as a kind of enlarged club of interaction between old NATO members and new NATO aspirants. What we said to the Russians was, ‘This is not actually threatening to you. It’s an inclusive process, but you can have a special agreement anyway with us. You can have a Russia-NATO agreement, all for you, specific to you, in which we will try to set out an interactive co-operative programme to run between NATO and the Russian federation.’

We largely bought them off with the optics of that, at least to the degree of pursuing the enlargement of NATO, hinging that in turn to some extent, though not as much as I would have liked, on the thesis that ‘Look, we are enlarging the European Union. It’s absurd to take countries like Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into the European Union while, at the same time, telling them that their own territorial security and defence cannot be handled in the same collective. You should see this, you Russians, as a kind of extension of enlarging the European Union, not as a NATO-driven, anti-Russian, extension of territorial aggrandisement.’ We tried to present to them, on the one hand, that it was a natural evolution of building a larger Europe and, on the other hand, we recognised that they had a special status to be consecrated in the special agreement between NATO and Russia. That’s the way we tried to handle it.

I think that the logic of NATO enlargement should hinge, as far as possible, on enlarging the European Union. If you link it to that, you already build in a kind of speed regulator, which is important. There are some difficult fault lines in the argument, both as regards the Baltic States and as regards Turkey.

Finally, the UN, the final three years 1995-1998, as ambassador to the United Nations in New York.”

**LC:** “Main issues when you were there?”

**Sir John:** “Main issues. The future of the Secretary-General, because that was the end of Boutros Ghali and the beginning of Kofi Annan. The fifth anniversary of the Rio earth summit, looking at the new global agenda and the important implications of subjects like climate change, population, resource exhaustion, and so on. The fiftieth anniversary of the UN and, while I was there, of course, the advent into office of New Labour from the UK point of view.

I would just say that on this that I think my own experience was that the UN was a very important historical creation when it was done, and it is still a necessary feature in the international map. We must have a family of programmes, funds and agencies, broadly under the UN umbrella on broadly the present lines. But the design concept is somewhat out-dated. We have too large an inter-governmental head and too small a muscular body providing real services to those who need them in the field. This is fixable if we applied to an organisation like the UN the same sort of analysis and practices that we apply to national governments, in terms of downsizing, virtualising, networking and de-emphasising old-fashioned, bureaucratic hierarchies. It's all fixable, but it's more difficult in the UN case because you've got so many different nations who all have a stake in it, and pre-eminently the Americans have not given it the attention and the investment that it needs.”

**LC:** “Do you think they ever will?”

**Sir John:** “Well, I think they look at the UN rather like some people in this country look at the European Commission. It's large, bureaucratic, out there, it's always invading one's sovereignty and it would be better if we had nothing to do with it. A lot of Americans think like that. Not the business community, not the media, not on the whole the administration, but a lot of people in Congress think like that. And in the middle of America they may do too, because they are not disabused. So I don't think it's a lost cause, but it's a very uphill struggle. I fear that if the United Nations is allowed to become merely the sort of institutional resting place for the world's crisis case-load, that the money and the skills and the other resources will

simply go elsewhere, which I think would be a tragedy I tried to uphold a view of the UN which is compatible with what I've just said.

Operationally, one of the most interesting exercises was the position we got ourselves into when Boutros Ghali was coming to the end of his first term. He had a terrible relationship with Madeleine Allbright whom he had accused, in the Security Council in her presence, of 'vulgarité' (it was the French word he used). She was determined that he was not going to go on, so despite the fact that he had fourteen votes out of fifteen in the Security Council, he had to go. Everybody else knew that, except, apparently, him. He was given bad advice by his wife who said that if he only stuck it out he would be able to get round the obstacle of American opposition. She was wrong, and most people told him that this was wrong, but he chose not to listen. So there was a very messy end to this and we had to find a successor, and essentially Kofi Annan was the obvious choice. We were able to engineer the recommendation from the Security Council that led to his election by the General Assembly as a result of some really pretty hard work behind the scenes, especially by Madeleine Allbright, myself and Sergei Lavrov, the Russian ambassador to the UN.

It was difficult for all kinds of reasons. Who had the best claim? Who didn't or did want to put themselves forward? How to mobilise the regional caucuses in support of Africans, and if so which African? It was actually quite complex behind the scenes, but my view is that the reason it came out all right in the end was essentially because we had those three in the Security Council operating together. The French came along at the end, very reluctantly when it was already clear that the game was lost. But it was a really prime example of old-style smoke-filled rooms, and negotiating behind the scenes to get what I think turned out to be a very good solution eventually. I think it's clear that the fact that Kofi Annan's effectively been confirmed for a second term by the membership shows that people are very happy with the succession that they got, certainly a man much more in touch in many ways with running the shop than his rather lofty predecessor had been.

**LC:** "He was obviously not chosen by majority voting then."

**Sir John:** “Well it was of course in the end. The system is that you have to have a recommendation from the Security Council that goes to the General Assembly, so the key is getting the recommendation for the Security Council, which is done by a succession of undisclosed blind votes around the table, so there’s an awful lot of room for getting around and persuading people. Eventually, those who are holding out when it becomes clear that it’s say thirteen or fourteen to one, they give way.

My own view is that Boutros needed to go. He has written a book in which he justifies his own approach to life called ‘Unvanquished. A UN/US Saga’ which, when I reviewed it for ‘The Times’ newspaper in London, came out under the title ‘Vanity Unvanquished. A Cautionary Tale’.

**LC:** “I should just finish by saying that you presumably wrote a valedictory, did you? Was there anything in that that you would want to highlight before we finish?”

**Sir John:** “Do you normally ask people this?”

**LC:** “Yes.”

**Sir John:** “How much do you want?”

**LC:** “Well, it’s a sort of reflection on the whole thing, isn’t it?”

**Sir John:** “Yes. I reflected on the career as a whole, and on the Foreign Office as an institution. It’s that last part, is it, that you want?”

**LC:** “Yes.”

**Sir John:** “As a postscript, here are some thoughts which I sent, as part of the valedictory, to Robin Cook when I left the Service in July 1998.

No doubt, the Diplomatic Service today is leaner and more muscular following successive el ninos of management reform, especially in the last fifteen years. Indeed,

the British public service as a whole, unlike the academic world, really has changed and kept pace with the times. Internationally, this is widely recognised, and we have a right to be proud of it. But while change should continue, the vocabulary is becoming over-blown. The aims of British foreign policy can be expressed without dumbing-down. Whether ministers or officials, we are only stewards of national interests and assets that outlast us. Re-inventing Britain's identity or image may be a fashionable or even useful nostrum, but diplomats working in shirtsleeves around the world do not need to be told by Demos neophytes that 'the cocktail days are over'. Which brings me to people, our major resource. It's an irony that the general level of satisfaction about the career was probably higher two decades ago than it is today after years of intensive new-style personnel management. Then, the grumbles of the moment were partly offset by reasonably secure prospects of future betterment and promotion. Now, despite some clear advances, I detect a sense of beleaguement, confirmed by the 1996 opinion survey. Yet morale is a function of pay, conditions of service and career prospects. It will not easily survive simultaneous assault on all three. Particularly for junior members of the Service, and those in the middle reaches struggling to bring up families, that is often, I fear, the impression left by an approach to personnel too narrowly focussed on the balance sheet. Over time, my impression has been that ministers who are seen to take seriously, and not as a passing chore, the career conditions and prospects of their staff, earn a special loyalty and affection.

Younger officers, for their part, can also sometimes learn from past practice. Among traditional Diplomatic Service attributes, good manners are not a disadvantage. Throughout, I have never felt I belonged to a stuffy career. We should stop tilting at this windmill. The Foreign Office has remained unloved by the general public because it is always easier not to put yourself in the other fellow's shoes, especially if he is a foreigner. The Diplomatic Service should be an elite like any competitive team, choosing the best for the job from all walks without distinction, except of quality. Of my vintage, I am by no means alone in having made it to the top from a scholarship-boosted education and from a family background counting no previous university entrants, and no professional or social advantages, so let us do away with residual cant on that score.

Our own children showed no inclination to follow us, and they were probably right. But I have had a thoroughly fulfilling and enjoyable Diplomatic Service career, sustained crucially by that much under-valued institution, the happy marriage. This too will, in my view, outlast fashionable alternatives. I pay huge tribute to Sally's self-sacrifice and tireless support, too little recognised at all levels. I have also been exceptionally fortunate in the support and friendship of my professional colleagues, especially those who have been part of my team in Brussels and New York.

Fresh fields now beckon us both. Time to move over. Time with a final heartfelt 'Thank you' to all my excellent staff at UKMIS too.

That's how I end it."

**LC:** "Excellent."