

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

**GRANT, Sir John Douglas Kelso (born 17 October 1954)
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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

**RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR JOHN GRANT KCMG,
RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS**

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SR: Good morning. It's 21 September 2021 and I'm with John Grant. John, the question we always ask first is 'Why did you join the Foreign Office?'

JG: The Foreign Office wasn't my plan. I applied to do the Civil Service exam. And in those days, on the form, you put your choice. My first choice was the Home Civil Service. My second choice was the Foreign Office, partly because I never thought I'd get into the Foreign Office. Actually, my plan was to go and work in the European Commission. I'd been advised – I can't remember who told me this – that the way to do that was to get into the Home Civil Service and then transfer across to the Commission.

At some point in this process – it must have been after the first round, I think – somehow, a message came back to me that I might like to think about reversing the order of my choices and that this wouldn't damage my chances of getting into the Home Civil Service. The message seemed to be that I was a plausible candidate for the Foreign Office. I got quite excited and it all sounded very glamorous. It still does, doesn't it, but in those days the Foreign Office had the most amazing cachet.

I remember going home on the tube from my induction course, holding a folder with Diplomatic Service Regulations on it, making sure everybody on the tube could see it! I'm sorry, this says more about me than anything else! But I was absolutely drawn to the prestige and glamour of the career. I was 21.

SR: Had you done languages at university?

JG: Yes, French and German. I wanted to work abroad, principally in Europe. I'd done French and German and spent time in both countries. And also – this, I think, may be relevant for later in the conversation – this was a time when France and Germany looked like the winners. The sad fact is that the UK looked like a loser, economically and socially. So, for all those reasons, I was drawn to abroad and particularly Europe.

SR: And so they sent you to West African Department!

JG: They did, yes, because of my keen interest in Europe! I have to say I can't remember very much about that first year. When I went back to the Foreign Office subsequently, I couldn't remember where the offices were as it was such a warren in those days. I was the junior desk officer in a Third Room which dealt with Nigeria and the countries on the Francophone and Anglophone countries on either side of Nigeria. My Head of Department was Mark Heath. He was the London-based British Ambassador to Chad – an odd arrangement. We went there a couple of times, so that made my non-Foreign Office friends laugh.

SR: Was there much in the way of training? Were you just thrown in at the deep end?

JG: The training came from you writing drafts and other people in the Department correcting them. Brutally, actually. Looking back on it, I guess the FCO reflected the society at the time. For the young of today, it would feel like a very harsh, unfeeling, impersonal working environment. I don't think it was particularly different to anywhere else, really. Nobody hugged you! There were moments when I was disoriented. It must have been very obvious but people just shrugged their shoulders and thought to themselves, 'Well, he'll learn.' And, in the end, you do learn. It's how professional communities develop, isn't it? It's not unique to the FCO.

Was I thrilled by it? Did I take to it? Not really. I think everybody was waiting to go abroad. I must have learned some things, but I remember my last confidential report was not glowing. If I'd understood the box system and what it meant, I think I might have concluded that that was the time to stop.

SR: Really? So soon?

JG: I think so. I remember that I got a box C or three. I didn't realise that nobody got worse than that unless you were terrible. But I didn't realise, so I just carried on. And a part of me wanted to prove that I could do the job, to myself and others.

British Embassy, Stockholm, 1977–80

SR: But then you soon got your escape, to Stockholm. Did they send you to learn Swedish?

JG: No, I learned when I got there. It wasn't a difficult language if you spoke German. I didn't learn it in any particularly structured way. My job was a classic Chancery Third Secretary job marking the Swedish foreign ministry. And organising visits – lots of visits. I remember there was one particular visit which my father got very worked up about because he was a Scottish lawyer from the Scots bar. There were all these Scottish legal grandees – it was a sort of junket heaven!

That aspect wasn't what I'd expected. And it must be true for a lot of young men and women: they come into the Office and they think they're going to be dealing with grand strategy. And they find out they're going to be judged on whether the Foreign Secretary's visit goes okay and the car plan works.

My other job was to report on Swedish foreign policy. In those days, of course, there was an extremely sophisticated, methodical, high octane – and, with hindsight, sometimes over-engineered – briefing system in London, where all these reports poured into the centre. And there were a lot of people whose job it was to absorb them, reformulate them, digest them and turn them out in this beautifully produced briefing for ministerial visits.

SR: You were there for three years?

JG: I was 22 when I arrived and 25 when I left. I met Anna, my wife, although we didn't marry until after I'd left. Sweden became a very big part in my life. I was still very impressionable, for good and for ill. That first posting is very formative for many people, I think.

I liked being abroad. I liked the language stuff and the feeling of trying to get under the skin of a different culture. Gradually, as one gets sucked into it, I got to like the community that is the Service, to feel a part of it.

SR: Yes. But it depends, doesn't it, when you're young, on who's above you, who your Head of Chancery is, whether they take an interest in you and give you interesting things to deal with?

JG: Yes, I think it does. For my first two years, David Wyatt, the Head of Chancery there, did exactly that. He spent time with me and helped me a lot. Nice man. It was a nice Embassy. Quite a lot of

ministers came as Sweden was an attractive model, particularly under a Labour government, because the Swedish Social Democrats were kind of standard bearers for international socialism. So I got quite a lot of exposure to ministers. And I got a lot of exposure to the Swedish foreign ministry dealing with people who were much older than me, in their 30s. I built quite a wide range of contacts in the Swedish Foreign Ministry and wrote a lot of reports, all being fed into the very elaborate and sophisticated and rather intimidating process that was the London machine. Great men were great men - distant, brilliant, grand. Donald Murray who was rather frightening had succeeded Jeffrey Petersen (who wasn't frightening at all) as Ambassador. I remember Julian Bullard came at the very end of my tour. Julian came with Peter Carrington, the Foreign Secretary and it was the first time I'd seen a politician with real flair operate. We were asked to provide a speech and I wrote a really boring, classic kind of Chancery speech, recycling all the historical clichés about Anglo Swedish relations. Peter Carrington tore it up and brilliantly improvised a speech about how one of Björn Borg's ancestors had been dug up in his garden! The Swedes thought it was wonderful.

SR: There was direction from the centre, wasn't there? You didn't have much say in where you were able to go next. You were called over to Personnel Operations Department (POD) and they told what you were going to do.

Russian language training, 1980–81; British Embassy Moscow, 1982-84

JG: Indeed. That becomes particularly pertinent as I did Russian language training after Stockholm and I went to Moscow and did commercial work. Then I came back and was given the job I had particularly asked not to be given. I tried it for three months, and then I resigned. So yes, it was pretty directive. You could be sent to places you didn't want to go to and jobs you didn't want to do!

SR: You learnt Russian at the exotic location of the Army school of languages in Beaconsfield. How was that?

JG: Well I knew a lot of Russian words for the size of shells and different types of artillery – these were the kinds of things they were teaching to guys who went to Berlin and engaged in intelligence gathering on both sides, so they had to know all these words.

I got to Moscow and did commercial work. Moscow was an extraordinary existence. There we were, for two and a half years, living in a kind of bubble. It was like being on a satellite and circling the earth. The earth was the Soviet Union!

It was the peak of the Cold War, the Russians had recently invaded Afghanistan, Western sanctions were in place, mistrust and fear were deep on both sides. Life was restricted but in its own way fascinating. We all spoke Russian, but we never really met any real Russians – and if and when we did, the assumption was that they had links to the KGB, and we had to report the contact. Our flats were bugged, and we were frequently followed, and some people were harassed. So much of life took place in the expat community. The great escape was the weekend away in Helsinki, on the overnight train.

SR: Presumably you weren't allowed to travel?

JG: It was possible but cumbersome, and because of the attentions of the local KGB, seldom carefree. On the surface, it was a monochrome place, the colour was hidden away and you had to look quite hard to find it. Russia, and Moscow in particular, are extraordinary places – unique with a kind of magic that is hard to put a finger on – a mixture of the familiar and the exotic.

When I am asked by people where I served in my career, I tell them that the one exotic place I went to, to leaven all that Brussels, was Moscow. They say, 'How interesting!' Well, it was interesting in a theoretical way, but in a slightly detached way. The guys in Chancery read Pravda every day to try and decode what was going on. Of course, the stakes between the West and the Soviet Union in the '80s couldn't have been higher, but that didn't play out on the ground for most of us day to day. It wasn't active diplomacy with representatives of the host country and – I will come to this later – the reason I loved Brussels so much was that it was real diplomacy, hand to hand combat, with national interests at stake.

Doing commercial work in Moscow, supporting and encouraging British companies was a bit counter cyclical in that environment. We took it, rightly, seriously. It kept channels open. And day to day, it was great fun. We used to buzz around, organizing trade fairs, Ministerial meetings, and visits. We got to speak a bit of Russian and there was a fun bunch of people in commercial apartment so we laughed a lot. I went off to Donetsk with Christopher Meyer to visit the British firms exhibiting at a coal exhibition - in the great coal fields of the Donbas.

SR: If you'd had your crystal ball all those years ago, were there any signs at all of weakness in the system and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union?

JG: Not that it would collapse, no. I wasn't brave enough in those days to ever challenge received wisdom. People were still surprised when it happened. But yes, the place was chaotic and obviously badly run. You'd see all these lorries driving around completely empty. So it was clear that the system was not well. But we all bought into the idea of Upper Volta with rockets, but that the rockets worked! We didn't understand that the system wasn't sustainable in the very long term. And almost nobody really understood that, I think it's fair to say, right up until the end.

Soviet Department, FCO, 1984

SR: So you had a couple of years in Moscow and then you went back to Soviet Department?

JG: Yes. I suppose it was my first exposure to, as it were, beating heart of the FCO. It was then regarded as an extremely prestigious job, the external relations desk in Soviet Department. It was the room that generated briefing on Soviet foreign policy for the whole system. And the room that also cleared other people's briefs if they related to Soviet foreign policy. Of course, everything in the world related to Soviet foreign policy. To be frank, I found it quite dull: paper was just coming at you left, right and centre. People were bickering over words in briefs the whole time. I suppose we were running a Rolls Royce system. The process worked beautifully. People were working 12 hour days routinely, 8 until 8. It was the time (late 1984) of Gorbachev's first visit to the UK, of the Thatcher/Reagan relationship.

The interesting thing about it, if you go up two or three levels, is that the whole of the Office in one form or another was either geared towards managing the diplomacy of the Cold War in some part of the world or was affected by it. The reason I think this is important in the history of the FCO is because when the Cold War ended in 1989/90, suddenly out of the blue everything changed. But at the time, in 1984, most of the system was geared to the diplomatic world of the Cold War. My job was a brief writing job. I was writing briefs in a Department where my Assistant was John Macgregor and my Head of Department was Nigel Broomfield.

SR: It was very much a paper based job, wasn't it? No computers, just tons of paper.

JG: Yes, people put manuscript amendments on and things went back to the typing pool. It's difficult to imagine now! It did make you quite careful. Some of the secretaries were quite fierce: if you fiddled around with a draft they could get quite angry with you. And that's a good thing.

I remember my new entrant desk officer, a very nice chap called Ian Bond who now works for the Centre for European Reform. I remember already then thinking I must help this guy master the process. Of course it helps if you're clever, because you're talking to a lot of clever people, but the thing that really mattered in the system, at that age and stage, was that you had to be good at the process, on top of the process. I don't know if you've ever read or seen that bit in Matthew Parris's autobiography when he explains why he left the Foreign Office? He said he hated the Foreign Office because he couldn't bear the obsession with process and it mattering more whether you pinned the flags in the right way on the submission with flags A to F so the minister didn't prick his finger than the content of the brief. I think he has a point, yes.

So I resigned from the Service.

Morgan Grenfell, 1985-86

SR: So you'd only had three months in Soviet Department. And you'd been in the Office for eight years?

JG: I was 30.

SR: It was quite a brave thing to do. Did you have a mortgage and children?

JG: We didn't have any children. Like a later occasion when I did something quite brave I didn't actually realise it was brave. I did ask Peter Jenkins, who was my person in POD, whether he would give me two years out to try this. He said no. Lots of people were trying to dip their toe into the city and wanted a ticket back. I think they felt they couldn't afford to do this because if Joe Bloggs and John Grant did it, everyone would want to.

SR: But they'd put a lot of investment into your language training.

JG: Well they did say I would have to resign, but hinted that they would reinstate me if I didn't like it. I did come back. Actually, since I left the Service, I've spent a lot of time in business and I think I could have really enjoyed a business career as well. But that job in that particular bank didn't suit me.

The curious thing – and this is a point about the sort of curious psychological relationship between members of the Service and the Service – is that although I kicked against the Service in lots of ways, I was also drawn, it had already become a kind of home. I'm very big on the distinction between the Service as a community and the Service as an institution. I think the Service as an institution like all institutions: it's amoral, blind, sometimes ruthless, sometimes unpleasant, rarely kind. But, as a collegiate community, it's very powerful. And, jumping ahead now, I left the Service 14 years ago and I still find where we live now there is a natural community with other ex-members of the Service.

SR: And that wasn't present in merchant banking?

JG: No, absolutely not. The Service is like all professional communities, I guess. Some army regiments are the same. It's quite tough when you arrive, but once you've gone through that, you're part of it.

Maybe I'm jumping to the end here, but I only really understood this after I'd spent some time in corporate companies in full time executive roles: the underlying set of values of the Service were very humane. That doesn't mean it was a cuddly place. There were one or two moments, probably, when it would have been better for me if it had been a bit cuddlier. I do remember bursting into tears in front of one line manager, early on in my career. He had absolutely no idea what to do, and just walked off.

But despite that dimension, the draw of the community was – and I still feel it today – very strong and admirable. It's the underlying set of values and the sense that generally you didn't betray or undermine, damage your colleagues. You supported your colleagues even if you didn't like them. I've worked in five or six large organisations and in that respect the FCO was very special.

News Department, FCO, 1986–89

SR: So then you were sent to a key Department, News Department.

JG: I was very worried about being sent there! I thought that what I had to do is to prove myself in one of the top policy-making Departments. I'd turned my back on Soviet Department. I was ambitious. I saw around me all the high flyers. People who were highfliers, and more outrageously as it was called, the Fast Stream, didn't go to work in News Department in those days, except as the Head.

It was Chris Meyer, because he had known me in Moscow. I must say, I didn't realise that he had a reasonably high opinion of me, but he had heard I was coming back. Chris built a very interesting team of guerrilla crack troops in News Department who went around colonising large parts of the Office in the sense of getting control over policy. And being in News Department was both great fun, and helped me move forward in the Service. It's quite striking, actually, that except for my few months in Soviet Department, I never actually had a policy desk in a Third Room, nor was I ever an Assistant Head of Department, or a Head.

SR: That's quite something, isn't it?

JG: Yes. It says something about the Office, I think. Most people would say, 'Well, you have to do this, that and the other thing if you want to ...' But I did none of those things. News Department was a lot of fun, because we were just coming into the day when the mainstream Office hated the idea that we made policy, because of the presentational aspects and because of the way that policy would be seen and received by the media, the Daily Mail, the party conference, etc. They really didn't like it. And it was resisted very strongly, and we were sometimes unpopular with the mainstream Office. When Chris Meyer was away, I used to go sometimes to the PUS's morning meeting. The Head of News Department always sat at the top table. The grandees didn't like it much when I spoke, which I did occasionally, and often weren't sure who I was. But nevertheless, ministers had reached the stage where they deeply, deeply cared about the media. Maybe they always did.

SR: I know from Peter who worked in the Private Office that Geoffrey Howe was very keen on appearing in the media, even if it was in a critical way on Spitting Image!

JG: That's right. He of course set the tone: he would send back submissions to Departments saying, 'What does Christopher Meyer think?' So it was actually a marvellous job to do because there you

were, sitting at the centre of the Foreign Office. You were looked down on by some of the grandees, certainly, but nevertheless very influential because actually – and this applied to some junior ministers too, David Mellor, for instance – everyone was extremely concerned about the media and that came down from Geoffrey. And so you were right at the heart and you could influence policy. It was a great experience.

I had disasters. Geoffrey Howe almost fired me in my first six months because I was briefing a Spanish journalist, I thought on background. In other words, he wasn't going to quote me about Gibraltar shortly before the Spanish Foreign Minister was coming to London for talks. And he taped the conversation and played it on Spanish radio! I remember Richard Gozney ringing me up and saying, 'What the hell have you done? You've given an interview!' I hadn't given any interview. I'm told that it was only Christopher Meyer and David Ratford (who I had been in Moscow with) who stopped Geoffrey Howe from demanding that I was removed from News Department. There were one or two other moments like that because you were always sailing quite close to the wind.

SR: Were you quite chummy with newspaper editors?

JG: Yes is the answer. It was a very difficult balance to strike, because you had to be useful to them. That meant helping them write their stories without crossing the line which would get you into trouble with the rest of the Office. I did cross that line once or twice. I ended up crossing it in Brussels a couple of times as well. But in terms of giving you a sense of ministers' priorities, and the dynamics of policymaking and seeing the Office as a whole, it was much better than being in a Department. It was also good for me. And you didn't ever have to write anything down. I liked that.

Press Spokesman, UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKREP) Brussels, 1989–91

That job took me to UKREP. I'd spent three years in News Department. I went to UKREP because John Kerr had come across me, because I did the EU press job in News Department. He also seemed a

very grand and distant figure but fortunately he thought I'd be the right person for the Press Spokesman in Brussels.

SR: You describe this period in your notes as intense. Isn't that an understatement?

JG: It is a bit of an understatement, really. From '89 to '91, I was the Press Spokesman. It was the end of the Cold War. But, more important from the point of view of the role, it was a time when the evolution of the European Union and the views of Prime Minister Thatcher were beginning to diverge quite sharply. Already, of course, Europe was very divisive within the Conservative Party. The creation of the euro became a reality. After a year, Margaret Thatcher left the premiership probably as a result, as much as anything, of Europe. Europe – and I think this is relevant to the big picture – was very often on the front pages of the British newspapers and extremely sensitive and beginning to be questioned by British public opinion, particularly on the right, who had the advantage of the reporting from Brussels of our current Prime Minister as well, who was one of the British press corps in Brussels and always added colour and interest to every day!

Macro-wise, it was an extraordinarily important time, because it was the completion of the single market, the first phase, a great British initiative and invention. But I think the really decisive point was that it was the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the creation of the euro and thus the reappearance of the underlying difference between most members of the European Union and the UK, which was that the integration of political institutions was desirable in itself and the right response to major political developments outside Europe.

So the tension was there already, because I knew this from News Department. I'd worked quite a lot with Lynda Chalker who was a very energetic seller of the EU to the British public. Already then, we were writing briefs about what Europe was doing for ordinary people. So the problem existed but, of course, during this period, it got much worse. The fissure which led – not inevitably or necessarily in my view – in the end to Brexit was already apparent.

The British press corps was a very, very eminent group of serious people. The FT was already the house magazine of Europe and all the broadsheets had heavyweight correspondents. They were also a very nice bunch of people. We all mixed together. Some of them I trusted. Some of them I trusted less. It was very entertaining. So the British press set the set the media and public agenda in Europe, even then.

Working Group Negotiator, UKREP Brussels, 1991–93

SR: Interesting. And then you left the spokesman job but stayed at UKREP and became a working group negotiator.

JG: Yes, I was the Spokesman for two years. It was a unique job in UKREP, because you had all these brilliant policy officers doing rather narrow bits of policy, sitting in Working Groups all day, writing telegrams overnight to an amazingly sophisticated system in London. And then you had this Press Spokesman wandering around trying to get people to tell him what was going on and obliged to maintain an overview of the broader picture, and engage on the high level issues with a group of highly intelligent, convivial and interesting journalists.

I changed jobs because I felt that – finally – I needed to do a policy job. I succeeded David Richmond in the Working Groups dealing with the EFTA countries as they then were and the countries of the Mediterranean Working Group, which dealt with other countries of North Africa and some in the Middle East and the Near East and Turkey.

I loved it. It felt like coming home to a home where I'd never been before! I was 35 at this point.

It was an amazingly busy time, partly because there was a lot to do at the Brussels end, and partly because there was a very, very impressive, powerful, fast-moving policy – making process of iteration between UKREP, the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office in Whitehall, which was enormously time consuming. The rule in those days was no matter what time your Working Group finished – and sometimes they finished at nine or ten o'clock at night – you went back to UKREP and sent an overnight telegram reporting on the Working Group. It wasn't a Foreign Office thing as we had people from every government Department. You'd get home at one in the morning. No other country of course did that. Did we have a better system? Were we better briefed? Were we more agile? Certainly. Big picture? Well that's a different topic.

It was wonderful. I love negotiating. We did some really exciting things: the negotiations on the European Economic Area, lots of stuff around Turkey because Britain loved Turkey. (It was never quite clear to me why we were so keen on Turkey). We were always having rows with the Greeks about Turkey in Working Groups. The whole thing was just fabulous. I really loved it.

In 1992, we had the UK Presidency of the European Union, where I chaired two Working Groups. It was just great. John Kerr was PermRep, this towering figure in Coreper, an extremely demanding boss. You could deliver a brief to John at 11 o'clock at night before Coreper with 40 pages of attachments, all flagged up with those bloody pins. You'd get the brief back the next morning at nine o'clock and he'd ask you a question about the last flag. He'd read the whole document. I don't know how he did it, but of course this was the stuff of legend. So that was enormously motivating.

I felt – and I continued to feel throughout my time in UKREP and the Cabinet Office, actually – that UKREP had moved right to the heart of global foreign policy from Britain's point of view. I said earlier that the Foreign Office had been really about the Cold War. The Foreign Office had an organising principle. Of course, there were other things going on. But, in the end, everything came back to Moscow, Washington, NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

That all went in a flash in 1989, 1990. When the Cold War ended, the FCO lost its organising principle. To the extent that there were new real first order global foreign policy priorities for the UK, those emanated from the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Soviet dominion over Central and Eastern Europe. So what were the real foreign policy instruments that were available to the United Kingdom to deal with those challenges and, indeed, the broader challenges of stability and security in what was beginning, slowly at that point, to be an era of globalisation? They were principally geo-economic instruments, and those instruments were instruments of the EU not primarily of the UK as a nation state. Not a popular proposition in the UK, then or now. But accurate. In other words, things like trade and economic agreements with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the long term prospect of membership of the European Union for Central and Eastern Europe, the way we organised our economic relations with the countries of the former Soviet Union and, in some ways, the most important or the most high profile (because of the tragic, tragic consequences of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia on Europe's doorstep), how we use Europe's influence and levers at its disposal to manage the stabilisation of that particularly sensitive part of Europe.

There were other issues that remained very important, for example the Middle East. But I really felt – and I continue to feel as I thought a lot about this is preparation for this discussion – that the EU's long-term economic and commercial relationships – within a political framework – with all these new countries was just about the most important thing that the FCO was doing. I actually think that the FCO

as a whole never really understood this point. I think we understood it. David Hannay, John Kerr, the Euro corps, of course we all got it ... But, in the end, the centre of gravity of this work became more and more economic, as the world became more and more economic and less political. The politics were economic politics. And they so remained actually until 2001, and arguably beyond.

That's why, for me, it felt so enormously important to be in Brussels. I enjoyed the process, but I also felt I was right at the heart of things in a way that I don't think the Service as a whole ever really grasped. The Service actually became less and less enamoured of Brussels over the next 10 to 15 years, not more. That's a different topic, though ...

SR: That's really thoughtful and interesting. Thank you.

Cabinet Office, London, 1993–94

SR: You went back to the Cabinet Office, but you were called back to Brussels after less than a year.

JG: Yes. I worked with very nice people in London. Geoffrey Fitchew from the Treasury and Richard Cardew from MAFF. There was the famous Friday morning meeting, when John Kerr would come over and all the great decisions were taken. It was an interesting period: enlargement was moving forward, and the UK was trying to find its place at a time of very rapid political change at the European level.

But we had a young family, not much money and had loved living in Brussels.

Head of External Relations Section, UKREP Brussels, 1994–97

And the opportunity came up because Stephen Wright got a new job. He was the Counsellor (External Relations) in UKREP and there was a long discussion between John Kerr and Michael Jay about who should succeed. I know (because I've read the transcript of Mark Lyall Grant) that we were both in the running for the job. I ended up getting it and going back to Brussels. Going right back into the world that I described a moment ago in a different role. I didn't really sit in a Working Group but I ran a team as Counsellor for External Relations.

Just to reinforce the point really, during that period in the mid-90s, what happened with EU external relations? The so-called EFTA countries, Austria, Sweden and Finland, went from the European Economic Area to negotiating entry very quickly to the European Union. In the middle of the decade,

having negotiated complex, far-reaching agreements with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, we then started the process of their membership of the European Union, which took roughly nine years from beginning to end, from 1995 to 2004. The last successful Trade Round ever – there hasn't been one since – was concluded in the mid-90s by the European Commission. We were also managing a very sensitive relationship with Turkey. We were also living with the knock on effects of institutional changes in Europe which the majority of the EU member states, not the UK, wanted to bring in in parallel with enlargement and the expansion of the European Union, such as the development of a Common Foreign and Security Policy. So it was an extraordinarily invigorating and exciting time.

John Kerr was succeeded by Stephen Wall in UKREP; it remained a very high octane, in my view, very high performing, enormously satisfying and very demanding place. I did that for three years.

Principal Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1997–99

And then, to my astonishment, I suddenly heard that I was one of the candidates to be Robin Cook's Private Secretary. This was after the election of the Labour government. William Ehrman had been Malcolm Rifkind's Private Secretary. There was an interview process in the summer of 1997. I got the job. That was a less happy time.

SR: What was Robin Cook like to work for? He was having personal problems, wasn't he?

JG: Can I just say a word of preface? There are, I think, some constraints on the way, even now, public servants should express themselves about former ministers. I think it's important before talking about what it was like to recognise his extraordinary intellectual qualities. Sherard (Cowper-Coles) writes in one of his books about what a brilliant man he was. The same for John Kerr's transcript. He was brilliant, intellectually the equal (subject to one point which I'll come to in a moment) of anybody I worked with in the Service and I worked with David Hannay, John Kerr, Stephen Wall, so I know what I'm talking about when I say he was brilliant.

In terms of relationships with, for instance, other foreign ministers, he was also politically extremely adept. He had the most remarkable relationship with Madeleine Albright when she didn't know what to do. It was kind of standing joke in Private Office, when she didn't know what to do on a foreign policy, she used to say, 'I want to speak to Robin.' I'd be somewhere in the world with Robin Cook and it'd be three o'clock in the morning and my phone would ring. Some nice Marine on the other end would say,

‘Well, it’s the Situation Room in the White House and Secretary Albright would like to speak to Secretary Cook.’ That used to happen a lot. So when he wanted to, one on one, he was extraordinarily powerful. He chaired the EU Council of Ministers very well. I was Ambassador in Sweden when he came to see Anna Lindh. She was an exceptional person, exceptional integrity, exceptional mind. She thought he was great. So I think it's important to say all of those things. Some people admired Robin and indeed liked him. Stephen Wall wrote in his book that he never understood why the Foreign Office found Robin so difficult. Some of my colleagues in Private Office managed to rub along with him very well.

I'm afraid it didn't work for me. I think that's partly my own temperament. This is not the moment for a kind of psychological exegesis. But in less than two years, not to put too fine a point on it, I had got to the stage when it just became too difficult for me to carry on. Robin could see that too.

In a way, the die was cast before I started. I was on holiday in France, coming back to London, when we saw in the local garage the front page of the Times. The story was that Robin had been going on holiday with his wife, Margaret, and he’d had a call from Alastair Campbell saying that the press had got the story about him and Gaynor and that he was going to have to take a decision. He stopped the car and told Margaret that their marriage was over and went back to London. This happened before I started. And I think, rightly or wrongly, it probably turned the media against him and set the media on his trail.

Then, there was a combination of three or four things, which I think are appropriate to mention, because they provide colour for the historical record. First of all, Robin and the Office didn't gel in terms of process. (I think the Office was also at fault here, by the way). But the Office had had many, many years of very able, but also extremely meticulous and bureaucratic, Foreign Secretaries who did their boxes every night. This was a completely foreign concept to Robin. But the Office and the whole machine depended on that. It worked brilliantly as a system. But it was a system rather like a very highly tuned sports car: it hadn’t got any tolerance to things going wrong. There's a lot to be said about Robin's boxes. I won’t say most of it. At one point, all six red boxes were at 1 Carlton Gardens, completely full and untouched and had been for several weeks. So the system didn't work. Now, I know what we should have done. But none of us did it. We should have rebooted our system. I or the

PUS should have called a meeting to discuss why the red boxes didn't work. All that poisoned the relationship between the Office and Robin.

Then, during my first few months, we had two disastrous foreign visits. The visit to India is well documented. Basically, Robin and I went to Islamabad, he then had a private meeting with (I imagine) his Pakistani opposite number. Robin liked to meet without officials, including his Private Secretary, present! Then when we were travelling – and I'll also come back to the point – the Pakistan foreign ministry issued a press release based on that meeting making certain claims which suggested that Robin was favouring Pakistan over India on Kashmir, which was, of course, electric in India. The press release came out roughly the time the Queen was landing on a state visit. So it was a catastrophe, an absolute catastrophe. The relevant point in terms of process is that there was no record of that meeting, because I wasn't in the meeting!

Something different but similar happened on a visit to Israel, six months later. Netanyahu cancelled a dinner and the British press reported another disastrous visit by Robin Cook. There were these sorts of high profile disasters.

Then there was the whole Sandline episode which gets a lot of airtime in John Kerr's account. I hardly know where to start on Sandline, because it dominated my own life in a funny sort of way, from the time it broke in May 1998 until I left the Private Office. No sooner did I think it was safe to go back in the water and then something else happened! It was all completely unnecessary: it was a classic process problem. It's very like the Nicola Sturgeon/Alex Salmond thing and only happened because Tony Lloyd said one thing to a committee and then Robin stood up in the House of Commons and said no minister knew anything about Sandline episode.

SR: And then promised to resign if that wasn't true, didn't he?

JG: John Kerr then gave Robin the impression that John was too loyal to officials in front of the committee. So that upset Robin. It just went from bad, bad, bad, to worse, worse, worse ... And then, when it was all dying away, we managed to make another mistake: we got completely obsessed about responding to a Foreign Affairs Committee report on the Foreign Office's handling of Sandline which came after many other reports. There'd been an independent report by Tom Legge. There'd been an investigation by HMRC. But we were obsessed by the FAC report, so obsessed by the issue of Robin's

“reputation”. We had a leaked copy of the report, which was of course quite wrong, but it never really occurred to me at the time. It seemed to me that all was fair in love and war really, because it was a kind of war between Robin and the Foreign Affairs Committee. The result was that when the Select Committee published their report, we had our answers ready. We were out there briefing the media within an hour. When you think about it, it was absolutely obvious that we had a leaked copy of the report. So that then became a *cause de guerre*. We got into the business of who knew what when, what documents arrived where when, what had been said to the House, what Robin had said, all that kind of thing. I felt very uncomfortable about one aspect of all that and it really got to me. Wisely, I left slightly before my time and Sherard arrived slightly before his time, a much better fit all round.

Two months later, I, a guy called John Williams, who was from News Department and Andrew Hood, a special adviser, were in front of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, answering questions about these blasted leaked reports. You might ask yourself why officials were in front of this pre-eminently political committee answering questions of that sort? I didn't feel I should have been there. But there I was. And that was basically the end of it.

I would just make three high level points about all of this. Quite a lot of Robin's idiosyncrasies are already quite well documented. But this also shows how important it is to find the personality fit between certain politicians and their immediate team civil servants: I would have liked working for Tony Blair. I saw quite a lot of him in one way or another. I would have liked working for Jack Straw. We got along very well. I really didn't like working for Robin, but some of that is down to the way I am, because other people could work for him.

I think there are two broader points about the Cook era that are worthy of note. First of all – and this is also very well documented already – Robin fell out with John Kerr as PUS. I don't think the full falling out has ever been documented in detail. But there was one period when I think they hadn't spoken or met for probably six or seven weeks. That was down to Robin repeatedly cancelling meetings.

This was perverse of Robin. The only other person I can think of who had the same combination of policy grasp and political nous that John Kerr had was Jeremy Heywood. John's ability to see the political dimension, including the domestic and parliamentary political dimension of a policy issue, was quite extraordinary. My point is the self-destructive bit of Robin Cook. Robin Cook's reputation before Sandline broke was rock bottom. He'd sacked his Diary Secretary, left his wife, destroyed the Queen's

state visit to India and fallen out with Netanyahu, and was the butt of relentlessly negative media coverage. He had as PUS the man who could have, without doubt, taken his political reputation and burnished it and made it a vehicle for great policy success. But he was unable to see where his political interest lay. If Robin had gone to John and said, 'John, I need some help, I'm worried about my reputation. I want to come out of this job in the history books, for all the best reasons. Help me!' I am clear that there's nobody I can think of who'd have been more able to do that than John. It's a strange omission, and says quite a lot.

My other point is that this was a man with the most exceptional intellectual gifts. There he was, at a time of enormous opportunity for British foreign policy. And when I say opportunity, what I mean was the agenda was wide open. There was no Cold War, there was no war on terror. China was clearly on the rise, but not yet risen. Russia was, as it were, shapeless – it hadn't taken the shape it's taken now. We were in the process of enlargement. There were some real problems in the former Yugoslavia. Tony Blair and British foreign policy were admired and loved all around the world. I think you could argue that there's never been a Foreign Secretary who had a stage so available to him to make grand strategic foreign policy. And I'm not saying he was a failure as Foreign Secretary. I've seen a list somewhere of the things he did: East Timor, Kosovo, controls on arms exports. But all that brainpower could have done so much more. On the list, these are not unimportant topics, but they are not right at the heart of long-term British strategic foreign policy interests. I do think this is very, very sad. Instead of grinding his teeth at the Foreign Office – and the Office machine is very irritating and sometimes very self-satisfied and in those days we all looked and dressed the same, but we were also quite good! – if he'd sat down and said – 'Okay, guys, I can see a world out there. I want to sit down and work out with you what we're going to do, and then I will decide, and then we'll do it' - I think an awful lot of exceptionally good things could have been done. It's a tragedy that we spent a lot of time worrying about trivia – the Office signed off in one day 14 different PQs about the fine detail of the dismissal of Robin Cook's FCO Diary Secretary – what a waste!

So that's my big picture point about Robin. It's a massive missed opportunity. And it saddens me that I was part of missing that opportunity, but there we are.

British Ambassador, Stockholm, 1999–2003

So then I went off to Stockholm. It was a wonderful time. My wife is Swedish and our children were with us. I speak Swedish. It was very agreeable, with lots to do but not particularly stressful – I did need a change!

What did I do? I built a network, a broad, lively one. I organised a British design season, we had a Scotland in Sweden season and we were very active. We had a lot of visitors, of course, lots of New Labour ministers. I got to know a lot of them and it was all very agreeable. And there was a certain amount of pure representational work: flying the flag. It was all really fun. One of the things I've enjoyed very much about the career is that it's so multichrome, isn't it? It couldn't have been more different as a role from UKREP or the Private Office. And as a job, the demands, the expectations, what you needed to do couldn't have been more different to what I'd done before. So, it's that variety that makes the Service, still such an exceptional career.

Stockholm was wonderful, from my personal point of view. And after one failed attempt I skied a famous 90km cross country course. It took me 10 and a half hours, but I did get to the end and that did me no harm with Swedish contacts either, although I did it for the personal satisfaction not as a professional duty!

I did do one thing, though, which was unpopular in the Service. I abolished the role of my Head of Chancery. I had a Head of Chancery who had left, Martin Raven. It was not true to say that I wasn't busy, but I didn't see why I needed somebody as a Chief Operating Officer (which is what it is called in the private sector) in a relatively small Embassy. Sweden, for many reasons, is an important country to the UK. But, in policy terms, it's quite a placid environment. So I then proposed to somebody in the administration that we should cut the job of Head of Chancery and Political Counsellor. I could do that with the people in Chancery. But we should upgrade the Management Officer, so he or she could take on all the admin that the Head of Chancery did in a sort of Chief Operating Officer role, then the Chancery could work directly to me.

I didn't realise how much this would infuriate many of my colleagues, because they saw a whole layer of career opportunities disappear. I never actually got any hate mail but I was told subsequently that I almost did! But it was the right thing to do. It also created more opportunity for the people underneath.

UK Permanent Representative to the EU, 2003–07

SR: And then it was back to Brussels again. How many years did you spend in Brussels in all?

JG: About 13. I did four jobs. After I'd first got to Brussels, if somebody had told me how one day I would be PermRep, I wouldn't have believed them. Then when I'd been there for a bit, I thought, 'Well, maybe just ...' It became for me the zenith. There I was!

Now, it's quite difficult to talk about UKREP, because there's so much and so much of it is quite geeky, technical. But I'll try to summarise those years 2003 to 2007, it's very hard because so much was always going on.

When I arrived in Brussels, I think there were two or three things happening at the macro level. First of all, we had a Prime Minister, and indeed a government, which was forward leaning and positive about Europe in a different way to, for instance, John Major, who was positive about Europe, but he wasn't really. He was what in this country we might call a reluctant Remainer: we have to be in it, therefore we have to make the best of it. However, alongside that pro-Europeanism, there was also a feeling – and this is maybe a bit underplayed now – that we had, in the UK, found the perfect blend of progressive policymaking with free enterprise for Europe as whole. Not to put too fine a point on it, there was a real arrogance in London that our so-called pro-reform, deregulatory, pro-business agenda (after all, the British economy was going gangbusters at that time) was the new third way. And we were really quite sniffy about old Europe. I choose the expression deliberately because, of course, on Iraq, first of all, there was a massive and deep schism in the European Union between the old Europe, as we liked to call it in London, which was France, Germany and, as it were, the former founding fathers of the European Union plus a few others who were against the invasion of Iraq, didn't support the Americans and were still quite committed to what was seen in London as a sort of non-progressive economic policymaking – too much regulation, the dead hand of regulation etc. etc. It was a big theme.

We were sitting in Brussels, trying to push forward the progressive, pro-business, light touch regulation regime, in a context where there was a fundamental disagreement with the other two big players in the European Union. Make no mistake about it, we were one of the three key players at that point, partly thanks to Tony Blair, partly thanks to just being very good at it. All of those separate contexts set the context for what we were trying to do and some of the things that then happened. The final thing to add to that is there was, of course, a big treaty negotiation going on, for what was originally the Constitution

and turned into the Treaty of Lisbon. That was ongoing when I arrived. So those are the big themes, I think.

What was it like? Well, it was very helter-skelter. COREPER had changed. And actually, I was the first PermRep who only experienced the enormous COREPER that came with enlargement. By the time I turned up, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were sitting in the room as observers, so they didn't speak, but we were still in an enormous room.

Other PermReps have talked eloquently of what COREPER was like when it was 12 and how it changed quite a lot when it went from to 15. I have a whole theory of the dynamics of committees: when you go above 12, everything changes. So, even with the nice Swedes and the nice Austrians, everything changed in the room. That was my experience of Working Groups as well. But, nevertheless, the shift to 25 made committee work in Brussels much less productive, because it just became a set of table rounds.

Nevertheless, COREPER met every week. We had always very crowded agendas. We still had the Friday morning meetings in London. We had endless drama, starting with the first European Council of my time, the set piece European Council, which was the central European Council under the Italian Presidency. It fell apart in disarray with Berlusconi trying to broker agreement on a treaty and the French and Germans walking away from it.

SR: What about some of the personalities?

JG: When Peter (Mandelson) arrived in Brussels the first time, we didn't get on at all because he said to me, 'I suppose you were part of the Foreign Office clique that was against me?' He obviously thought the Foreign Office had been plotting against him to get some other Commissioner nominated (whose name I can't remember). I hadn't been part of that clique. With hindsight, I should have been rather hurt, but I wasn't. But anyway, Peter arrived and I like to think that I did get on with him during his tenure in Brussels. Simon Fraser was his Chef de Cabinet. We didn't meet super frequently as he was travelling a lot. I was very busy. But, to use a current fashionable word, we were very aligned very quickly. And he was, of course, brilliant at operating in the Brussels system, extremely influential with President Barroso who took over as President of the Commission in the summer of 2004 and shaped the

agenda of that Commission very effectively. So I am a great fan. And I think Brussels was a perfect environment for him – it's a pity he didn't stay longer, actually.

Just to refer back to this big picture question of how we were going to move forward a British agenda in Europe. The big overhanging question has always been how we can get Europe to pursue a British agenda. We've always said we did. And in some respects, we did – the Single Market, for instance. But it wasn't British enough, was it? That's what we subsequently discovered. I think there is a whole set of reasons for that which is probably outside the scope of this discussion.

There were a lot of big moments. One was the succession to Romano Prodi as President of the Commission in 2004. This was, in my view, a fork in the road: with an enlarged Europe, the person who holds the pen, which is usually the Commission, nearly always the Commission, the power of the Commission was bound to increase. The fact that business has moved away from the institutions, the formal institutions, means that in other ways the power of the Commission over the last 20 years has decreased. But, in that way, it was always going to increase. So my argument had always been to London that whoever was going to be President of the Commission was the most important question. And I was a tad anxious that Guy Verhofstadt, who seemed to me to be wholly representative of what in London was regarded as the old Europe – a little bit too much regulation, too much emphasis on the institutions, not enough emphasis on business, not enough embrace of the United States – seemed to me to personify all those things. Verhofstadt was the favourite, the French and Germans liked him. If it was him, the chances of delivering the so-called British agenda would reduce. It was quite difficult to get Tony Blair to focus on this issue. And of course, he had an increasingly poor relationship with Chirac and Schröder because of Iraq. The other thing is that the Prime Minister wasn't always the best person at giving people unwelcome messages. It was quite possible to walk out of a meeting with Tony Blair thinking that he agreed with you, when in fact he didn't at all. So Guy Verhofstadt was the favourite.

We got closer and closer to the European Council in June 2004, when this decision was supposed to be taken, we didn't have a full plan, but I was hoping that when everybody turned up, we'd be able to do something about it. I was giving my press briefing to the British press before the European Council. I was generally quite cautious with the British press. But, at the very end, the Reuters correspondent said, 'Does Tony Blair support the Guy Verhofstadt as the next President of the European Commission?' I

remember thinking to myself, 'I have not prepared an answer to this question. I have no lines. I have a choice. I can either bat it away, in which case it will be taken as a yes and Reuters will run the story. It will be over because it will become a *fait accompli*. Or I can ...' And I said, 'No'. This guy said, 'Why?' And I replied, 'Because the Prime Minister doesn't think Guy Verhofstadt is the right person to be President of the European Commission.' Now, this was not agreed with Stephen Wall or the Prime Minister at all. It caused quite a row and I felt supremely uncomfortable for about 72 hours. I'm not sure the Prime Minister was terribly pleased to see me when he arrived in Brussels, but he blocked Guy Verhofstadt in very difficult circumstances. Brilliantly, actually. And we then got Barroso appointed. I think it would have been very difficult if we'd had Verhofstadt. Barroso was a very comfortable President of the Commission for the UK. So that was quite a moment.

That puts me in mind of something else, which relates back actually to the mid-90s. This is a question about British commitment to, interest in and support for enlargement. It's not true that Britain as a whole has always been unanimously favourable towards enlargement. The Foreign Office was always favourable, because we wrongly thought it would make the European Union more comfortable for us. It did in some ways, but in other crucial ways it made it less comfortable, as we have discovered. There were members of the Cabinet arguing against enlargement on a number of grounds: whether the European Union was ready, actually, to take in countries with a different level of political maturity to our own (look at Hungary and Poland today); significantly on reasons of cost, because we were net contributors to the budget and our net contribution was already massively controversial; and there were a number of strategic geopolitical questions about whether we wanted to be offering quasi-security guarantees to, for instance, Lithuania.

The reason this is important is that I was going to talk about the future financing negotiations of 2004 - 2005, the regular seven-year cycle of the EU framework for spending, not the annual budget but the envelope for the seven-year period. Most of the money in the EU budget is spent on the CAP and the structural cohesion funds which are just a sort of redistribution within the European Union. Richer to poorer, really, both of them very bad for us. Not a very efficient, good use of money generally. Widely recognised, but part of the set of complicated political compromises that allow the European Union, the Single Market and everything else to function. So we started a negotiation, I guess it must have been in late 2004. A lot of that negotiation took place under the Luxembourg Presidency in the first half of 2005, ahead of a British Presidency in the second half of 2005.

Enlargement, which we had championed, was of course going to make our net contribution to the EU budget larger, because those countries were so relatively poor. Gordon Brown decided that he wanted a wholesale root and branch reform of the budget which was completely unrealistic (along with one or two other of Gordon Brown's views on the European Union which I'll come back to, perhaps, because I think they are interesting both anecdotally and big picture). So, for three or four months, my instructions in COREPER and our instructions in the relevant Working Group were to simply say we disagreed with everything. We disagreed with the Commission's proposal and we were not prepared to negotiate on it. Meanwhile, in COREPER and in the Working Group, there was a negotiation among all the other member states about the new budget, where people who were natural allies – the net contributors – were negotiating. As I said, this was the first new financial framework under enlargement, thus widening the disparities between the wealth of the new member states but also leading to very, very large capital flows to those new member states because they were so poor. So it was increasing the net contribution of the net contributors.

Let's see if I can make sense of this in simple terms. We had, as you will recall, a rebate negotiated by Margaret Thatcher, which meant that we got back roughly speaking two thirds of our net contribution. Under the proposals that the Commission put forward, our net contribution was going to be adjusted in ways that were massively disadvantageous to the UK. Other people also got a rebate, the net contributors, and it was going to be much more equalised with them. It was going to be very, very expensive for us. We just said no. Gordon Brown just kept saying he would block it forever. I think probably what was in his mind was 'doing a Maggie'. This would have been a good plan if Tony Blair hadn't been Prime Minister and also, actually, if the main losers from 'Let's block everything' hadn't been the countries of Central and Eastern Europe who supported us over Iraq and who thought they were our friends.

We get very close to the June 2005, European Council. The Luxembourg Presidency is running the dossier. We send various signals to the Luxembourg Presidency at official level saying we won't agree and at Prime Ministerial levels saying not much, really. ('Yeah, I'll take a look at it' tended to be what the Prime Minister said). Anyway, we got to the European Council and we agreed that we'd have to block it, which was a surprise to everybody, even though I'd told everybody that we were going to block it. But we had never told anybody at the political level. Massive crisis as the records will show! We managed to persuade the Prime Minister who understood that he had to block it, in the end, though he

didn't like it very much. Block it, he did. He simply could not have gone back to the UK and presented agreement to the proposal on the table.

It was very chaotic and ill judged, because of course we were never going to get through our own Presidency, with the personalities involved, and get an outcome which could be presented in the UK as a win. Why weren't we going to win? Because we had been the key proponent of enlargement, more enthusiastic than anybody. It was enlargement that was increasing our net contribution and the net contribution of everybody else, particularly the French, who were lukewarm about enlargement. They were never going to allow us to keep our full rebate for the whole EU budget, something that nobody in London had really accepted.

Let me just take five minutes to talk about the British Presidency of 2005. During that Presidency, we were tasked with the business of resolving this blockage over the budget, and trying to open accession negotiations with Turkey. At that point, we were not sure what was going to happen to the question of the Treaty. Tony Blair had already called a referendum on the Constitution, which then we didn't have because the French and the Dutch voted it down. But there we were, holding the Presidency, with an EU budget crisis and with the other key member states signalling to us that they weren't prepared to do business on anything else with us, unless they believed that the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was ready to find a solution on the budget. And they really meant it. At one point, I had to ask Kim Darroch, who was in Number 10, to come over to a COREPER lunch and give an assurance to all the COREPER Ambassadors around the table that the Prime Minister was committed to finding a solution on the budget before they were, for instance, prepared to agree to something called the Hampton Court Summit, which we held in October 2005 in the UK to try and discuss the big picture issues for the European Union.

The story of that EU budget negotiation would take me far too long to talk through. Gordon Brown never signed up to it. We did a deal in the end which kept the British rebate for spending in the existing 15 member states but, of course, didn't keep it in the new member states. Tony Blair was criticized for it, but was very resolute about it – having agreed well before the event that he had to find a compromise – and very nice to me about it, as was Jack Straw actually. In the end, the Presidency finished really quite well. It was certainly the high point of my career, by any stretch of the imagination: chairing COREPER and running UKREP through a six-month UK Presidency.

The point I wanted to make about Gordon Brown was that, unlike Robin Cook, he did actually go away and think about strategic issues and then try and put them into practice. The trouble is that in the European Union, they were big issues where he'd reached his conclusions independently of the views of representatives of all the other EU member states! He had, for instance, a very clear vision that authority and political power in the EU should rest with national governments, rather than with institutions like the Commission and the European Parliament and, indeed, the Council of Ministers. And, indeed, the UK Permanent Representation. So he was always saying no to everything and then turning up in Brussels for five minutes, blocking decisions, and then going and briefing the press afterwards for domestic political effect. In a way, of course, he wasn't wrong from a British point of view about the inter-governmental point. But this is now jumping to the point about the slight double thinking in the UK approach to Europe, which may be partly one of the reasons why we are where we are today. Gordon Brown, for instance, in the run up to the referendum was a very strong proponent of remaining in the European Union. But, if you look at the way he approached the European Union throughout his time as Chancellor, it was a combination of disdain, indifference and a preoccupation with change in the European Union which was completely unrealistic.

And so, in a way, it's not surprising, if the standard bearers for British membership of the European Union have that kind of view, that the British people looked at it all and said, 'Well, mmm ...' There are a lot of other threads of that period under that Labour government and, indeed, the Foreign Office's approach to Europe which foreshadow the debates about Europe that we've had in the last ten years and the final Brexit vote. Vignette after vignette of FCO, Whitehall or indeed Labour government reluctance to participate fully in Europe, so that the reluctant Remainer position became the default. Issue by issue, they may have been right in a narrow, spreadsheet based definition of the national interest. But macro-wise, we end up with a tenor and a tone to our overall relationship which leaves the electors feeling that membership of the EU is a necessary evil. That's not the basis for winning hearts and minds, and certainly not for winning a referendum. I'd except Tony Blair and some others from this. But it's very widespread and the main reason, I feel, that David Cameron didn't have the stomach to lead on this issue and felt it necessary to put membership to a referendum – he was another 'reluctant Remainer'.

At the end of 2006, still in UKREP, I took the decision to leave the Service. I went on a high. I loved UKREP. I really loved it. It's slightly attenuated now, but for very many years afterwards, I woke up every day wishing I was going to COREPER!

Did I leave the Service reluctantly? Yes and no, actually. I was very reluctant to leave the community of friends and colleagues.

SR: Had you reached 60 by then?

JG: No, no, I was 52.

SR: You could well have gone on to something else.

JG: Yes. I could have gone to Number 10, perhaps. Simon Macdonald took the job that he and I were both potential candidates for. I remember Simon coming to see me in Brussels during that period. I did tell him that I really was leaving, and the job was his.

Going back to personalities, I knew Gordon Brown. I got on quite well with the people around Gordon. The difference between Gordon Brown and Robin Cook and the way they work with officials ... very interesting. Gordon had very, very able people close to him, Jon Cunliffe for example. The recorder can't see my fingers indicating a close relationship! But I don't think that I would have been a good foreign affairs adviser to Gordon Brown, partly for the same reason I wasn't very good as Private Secretary to Robin, and partly because I just disagreed with Gordon on Europe.

I might have had another job overseas. There were one or two available at the time where I might have fitted in. I don't know. If you were to say to me now, 'It was a brave decision', with hindsight it was absolutely mad! It turned out okay, because I managed to get jobs in the private sector, some of which I really enjoyed. We still had children in education, and one of the best things about it was that we were in the UK as they finished education and entered the world of work. I am very glad I was in the same country as them when that happened. Of course, there were moments when I regretted leaving. But, overall, from this vantage point, if it was December 2006 again and I was thinking what to do, I think I would still make the same choice

SR: John, that's a good note on which to finish. Thank you very much.