With Us or Without Us: extended interviews

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On September 11th I was just leaving lunch at the Garrick Club with a political journalist when the very first news came through that an aeroplane had hit the World Trade Center in New York. It sounded like an accident. About 10 minutes later I got to Waterloo station - I was catching the Eurostar to Paris - and there in the waiting room on television screens were the first pictures coming up of what had happened. It clearly was not an accident. It was an awful shock. I got on the Eurostar to start to Paris and people kept me fed with information on mobile telephone calls. I remember the editor of one of London's large papers rang up and asked what on earth does all this mean. It was hard to comprehend, in fact, that matters had reached a point where people were prepared to fly fully laden airliners into a building. It was beyond all previous experience of terrorism. It's a different sort of terrorism.

Q. How quickly did you begin to have thoughts about what it all meant?

A. Well, it is very easy in hindsight to remember how beautifully rational, clear-minded and perceptive one was and how one reached all sorts of conclusions on the spot. It think it took a week or two really before both the full enormity of what had happened began to sink in, and also some of the longer term consequences - the degree to which this was going to impinge so deeply on the American consciousness, the degree to which this was going to start shaping their whole approach to international relations, that this was going to become the cause which had been missing since the end of the Cold War, the degree to which there would be an great international upsurge of sympathy and support for the US leading to the very rapid formation of the international coalition against terrorism. I think those began to take shape over a week or two, though I would like to think they were instantaneous.

Q. Did you come to see it as presenting diplomatic opportunities?

A. Europe, one should have been able to take for granted, and on the whole one did take for granted. Europe did rally and did so very respectably. Russia and China were the great interest. Russia's response was very prompt and it was very unlike the reaction one would have expected from the old Soviet Union. And I think in a way what happened on September 11 was a catalyst for Russia. Since the end of the Cold War and even under President Yeltsin the Russians couldn't quite make out what their overall strategy was. Were they going to reform a great strategic alliance with China, which would be directed against America and the West, even if non-aggressively, but nonetheless tilted against them? Would they put themselves at the head of a sort of loose coalition of rogue states - the Iraqs and the Irans of this world - with which they had very well-developed links? Or would they become much more pro-Western in their behaviour? And, I think, President Putin has taken a big jump since 11th September. I think he had become a Peter the Great figure. He is a Westerniser and he has thrown in his lot much more with the United States and Europe than one could have conceived of two years ago. And one has seen that in a myriad of ways: in the attitude to the American withdrawal of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, to their attitude to the expansion of Nato. China, a bit the same. China again responded with sympathy and support, and has not objected to American military action in Afghanistan. It didn't have much choice, but nevertheless it has

accepted the American presence in Central Asia which can't really be very welcome to China. So I think in both those two cases there have been very large consequences which we have yet to measure very fully.

Q. First direct involvement of you that we know of – you may have all sorts of intriguing secrets you want to tell us about as well – was your visit to Damascus? How did it come about that Number 10 thought of you for that role?

A. I have no idea why Number 10 thought of me to go to Damascus. That wasn't ever raised with me. I had been abroad, I had just got back. I was asked to go down to Number 10 and see the prime minister who said, "Look, I have been talking to President Assad on the telephone. We're keen to develop the dialogue, give it a bit of meat". He suggested sending some personal envoy down. I would be grateful if you'd go and how about tomorrow."

Q. But what made you the man to go rather than the British ambassador or someone from the Foreign Office?

A. Absolutely. It is a matter of principle really. I am in favour of using ambassadors wherever you possibly can. I think there are sometimes occasions when an outsider can add an extra dimension. Sometimes they prefer to deal outside the normal channels. Very often, you know, this is related to their own position internally. If they use a local ambassador, then they go through foreign ministries and procedures and everybody knows the details. A special envoy can go in and out without attracting much attention. Indeed, I don't think the media noticed me until about four or five weeks after the event, and that is a help when you want to do things quickly and confidentially. So that is certainly one aspect. Another is, I guess there may be some people by the fortunes of life who have had particular experience of dealing with heads of government and, I suppose, having worked for a very long time in Downing Street in the eighties with a prime minister - two prime ministers - and met face to face with many heads of government and heads of state, you just find it easier to deal with them than other people do.

Q. And when something like that happens what's the form? D'you go and have a chat with the foreign office, or do you forget about them altogether? What did you do? You just bought your plane tickets and just left?

A. I had a talk with the prime minister who told me about his thinking and the points he wanted conveyed to President Assad, and I saw a note of his own telephone discussion with President Assad, and I was provided with some detailed briefing written mostly - given the time factor - by the department and the Foreign Office. The idea that this was done behind the Foreign Office's back or without involving them is completely wrong. They were fully informed, extremely helpful, and indeed our local embassy on the spot were also very helpful and provided me with extra briefing and so on. I've always believed you have got to work very very closely with the Foreign Office even in exceptional situations, and I think this worked admirably in that sense.

Q. And what was the message that Tony Blair wanted you to convey?

A. Clearly I don't want to get into great detail because these were confidential discussions and they should remain so. But I think it is fair to say that, broadly, he wanted to see President Assad understand very clearly the aims of the great coalition that was forming against terrorism, and to ideally to become part of it. [He also want to] to explain the reasons why certain actions would be necessary, particularly against the al-Qaeda terrorist movement in Afghanistan, and to urge President Assad that where there are organisations in Damascus which themselves are terrorist, at least in our view, and that they should be very strictly controlled and prevented from taking any sort of

action which would make the situation even more difficult. Those, I would say, were the broad aims. [There was] behind it all a desire to reach out to Syria which has always been a rather difficult state to deal with, and to establish a dialogue with them in the hope that this would shape their actions into the future.

Q. There was all sorts of diplomacy going on at that stage, but I think I am right in saying that, in the question of Syria, Britain was taking the lead. Were you carrying an American message as well as a British message, do you think?

A. No, I wasn't carrying, an overt American message anyway. I am sure the thinking I was asked to convey also reflected American-thinking, but nobody said that. But I did take the sensible step, I think, of seeing the American ambassador in Damascus while I was down there, actually after I had seen President Assad, telling him exactly what we had discussed and comparing notes with him. It think it is very important in these sorts of situations to keep very close to your principal allies.

Q. And why was Britain chosen to do it, though? Why were you chosen to do it rather than somebody from the State Department or a similar figure in Washington?

A. No one has to see this as a British initiative - I don't think it was an American initiative - I certainly wouldn't imply that. I think this was the prime minister's own initiative. He was engaged in telephoning a number of world leaders - President Assad was among them. They had had this discussion though it is not easy to develop a discussion, especially with someone you don't know, on the telephone. He wanted, at President Assad's suggestion, to send somebody down who could explain his views rather more fully, listen to what President Assad had to say and report them back faithfully.

Q. Did you know President Assad? Had you met him?

A. I did not know President Assad at all well. I had come across him once.

Q. At that stage did you think that this crisis could present an opportunity to do something about the whole Middle East crisis really, as a lot of people thought at that time?

A. I think I had two thoughts on that. One is that the essential first step was to avoid anything which made the Middle East crisis even worse, and that could have happened had there been a very violent reaction to the steps which the United States and others were going to have to take vis-à-vis Afghanistan, the Taleban and al-Qaeda. After all it was very easy to present these as attacks on Muslims. The widespread view in the Arab world at that stage was that there was no proof at all that Bin Laden was responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center. That was believed, I think, by 80-90 per cent of people in the Arab world, that this was all an invention, that this was an Israeli plot, you name it, but it was anything but that. So there was a lot of scepticism, a lot of innate hostility in the Arab and Muslim world to the actions which were necessary. So the first step was to not to make it even worse in the Arab-Israel context. Beyond that I think there was a hope that the opportunity would be taken to try to get some momentum again into the discussions between Israel and the Palestinians. These had languished for quite a time. There had been the huge effort in the last months of President Clinton's presidency, which had produced the most far-reaching proposals for a settlement ever put forward. Very regrettably Arafat failed to grasp that great opportunity, and since then things had been on the back burner. The intifada had picked up and the situation was frankly pretty grim. Here was an excuse - a catalyst again if you like - which might have got the momentum moving, and I think an honest attempt was made by the United States to do that.

Q. You bought your message. What was the response?

A. The response was thoughtful. We had a long meeting, nearly two hours, just myself on our side, as it were, and President Assad and one of his most senior officials and an interpreter on the other. We spoke partly in English - his English is good - partly in Arabic when he wanted to explain more precise points and more complicated points. I think he is a rather remarkable man. He was not destined to be president of Syria, he had an elder brother who, I think, was probably more likely to have become president, but who was unfortunately killed in an accident. He was studying, himself, ophthalmology here in London, clearly set on another career path - rather like Rajiv Ghandi in India who had an elder brother who was always destined to be the politician of the family. He is relatively young. He has great problems in Syria - the Syrian economy is not in good shape. It's been hamstrung for years, locked in by a system of licences and permissions and so on. There is very little political freedom in Syria. It is a highly militarised society because of the confrontation with Israel. I believe he has very far reaching ambitions to change Syria, and as part of that to change its international image and be on better terms with many other countries. But inevitably it is not something you can do quickly - you are locked in by the old system. So his whole approach was one of, first of all, understanding the awful impact of September 11, and he made no bones about that, that his great sympathy was for the Americans for what had happened. Secondly, that everything the Taleban and Bin Laden stood for was a complete anathema to Syria. They, after all, had had their own problems with fundamentalists back in the 1980s, which his father had dealt with
rather severely. So, no sympathy at all with what they were doing. At the same time, [there was] obviously a feeling that he couldn't really just sign a blank cheque to the Americans to do whatever it was they wanted internationally. There was no United Nations resolution at that stage spelling out what needed to be done. I did remind him - and I don't think there is any harm in saying this - that the great benefits that had accrued to Syria from its role in the Gulf War ten years earlier, when it had been part of the international coalition which had fought against Iraq and that had enormously improved Syria's international profile… and I hoped that would very much be weighed in the balance. And he pointed out, very fairly, that it was rather different in this case. In 1990, there was a very clear United Nations resolution which said the coalition was authorised to go into Kuwait to eject Iraq and restore Kuwait to its legitimate rulers. Nothing of the sort existed this time. Was he expected to just sign up for anything. But behind that I think he was also keen to see some closer co-operation with the West on the terrorist issue. And, of course, you have to remember that he has a different definition of terrorism to the one we have. I mean clearly for anyone in the Middle East, [someone in an] organisation fighting in the occupied territories and occupied Palestine to eject the Israelis is not a terrorist, he is a freedom fighter. And he makes, very publicly, the analogy with the French resistance in the Second World War. These people were fighting for their rights, for their country. So there is no common definition of terrorism. Equally, I think he understood very well the need to prevent anything which would aggravate the situation further and certainly in my mind that means attacks by terrorist organisations in the area, from organisations based in Syria or with offices in Syria.

Q. Are there things that he felt he could say to you that he might not have been able to say through an ambassador? What made the meeting different?

A. I think what makes a special envoy different is that you can be sure that he will report directly to the prime minister. Other reports go through embassies, they get distributed through the Foreign Office, through Whitehall, often on the telegram system. Hundreds of people read them. If you have a special envoy, he is charged to go down there, talk on the prime minister's behalf, report back to the prime minister. What happens after that is not his business. That's it. So if you want this absolute guarantee that what you have to say is going to get through to the British prime minister, then this is a very good way of doing it.

Q. But you must have given him some guidance too? Did you, for example, say, "If you want to go to Damascus, that would probably be all right."

A. I have to say the whole question of a possible visit by the prime minister to Syria was never mentioned, before I went to Syria, during my visit there or on my return. It was not at the time on the books at all, as far as I know. It was never mentioned to me, it was not discussed with President Assad. It arose later some weeks later. I think there is a widespread hope that President Assad will come here at some point. I think it would be a very good thing indeed if he did.

Q. But that's very interesting. So you sort of filed and forgot. You gave your report and then left it?

A. Yes. I think that is what people used in that way are for. They aren't there to have a continuing role, they are there to do a specific mission if required to do so, and then when you have done it, that's it. I mean I am a businessman, I am a busy businessman. I don't go round looking for this sort of role.

Q. And did anybody come to you before the visit and say just, "We are thinking of this and…

A. I was certainly asked before the decision was taken to go to Syria, did I have a view on it, yes, and I thought it would be an excellent idea to go. You see I take the view that prime ministers shouldn't spend their time going round the world talking to people they agree with. They should go around talking to the hard cases. They should go around trying to persuade people to a different point of view, and quite clearly Syria is one of those countries which does have a different point of view. I think he was absolutely right to go, and I suspect that his discussions with President Assad were a good deal more useful than the rather infantile press conference which followed it would show.

Q. Infantile? Why do you say that?

A. Because it was a propaganda exercise.

Q. Just put on by the Syrians?

A. Well, I think it was the party line. It was done more for a Syrian audience than for anything else, and it was picked up by the British media and made into a great insult to Tony Blair. I just don't go with that sort of thing.

Q. Were you surprised by it, in the light of the conversations you'd had with President Assad.

A. To be honest I was quite surprised there was a press conference. I think it is unwise to have a press conference in those sorts of circumstances when you are not expecting to be in a position to announce detailed agreements or joint actions or something of that sort. You are down there for a first meeting with somebody who represents a government, which has had a very different view from yours in a highly volatile complex political situation. Better not to go for too much public exposure immediately afterwards.

Q. If you'd known that something like that had been going to happen, would you have recommended that he went?

A. Oh, I still think Tony Blair should have gone. Yes, I think he is brave to have gone and I think he was right to have gone. This is exactly the sort of thing you need to do. I

really do not go with all this stuff about designer diplomacy and prime ministers swanning round the world. For goodness sake, in a situation like this when you are facing a new and really dangerous threat, for a British prime minister to go and be criticised for taking an active role in trying to deal with it, that is shameful in my view. You see, it is particularly useful for the Americans. An American president cannot easily displace himself. We all know he has to take a thousand people with him and six large aircraft go ahead with armoured cars and ambulances and communications and a mini White House. It is an impossible situation. A British prime minister is a more modest figure, travels the world with a handful of people and can go at the drop of a hat, and I think, given that quite clearly the prime minister has formed a very close relationship with President Bush, understands his thinking, talks to him regularly, he is in a very good position to speak not just on behalf of Britain, but also on behalf of the United States.

Q. In that case, do you think that that visit achieved anything from America's perspective?

A. Yes I do. I think if you look at the subsequent record, I don't believe that organisations based in Syria have committed any acts of violence since September.

Q. So, despite what many people might see as a rather humiliating end to the whole episode, you think that the whole period, from the time when you went through to that press conference, was worthwhile?

A. I am sure it was worthwhile for the prime minister to meet President Assad, to establish a personal relationship with him. I don't think that everything is clear and settled. There are things which Syria ought to do in my view. I think it ought frankly to expel some of the organisations which it has for long hosted in Damascus, and I am sure the Americans will want them to do that so that there can be no question of organisations based in Syria organising and carrying out acts of violence in the area. So there are certainly steps which need to be taken. But I think there is a stability in the relationship with Syria, and that Syria has played a not unconstructive role in the last few months.

Q. At the time you went, there was some hope that this could be turned into an opportunity for doing something dramatic about the Middle East. It's fair to say that that's evaporated now, isn't it?

A. I am afraid the opportunity now for doing something dramatic in the Middle East has really got lost in the whole tragedy of the Intifada, the cycle of suicide bombings in Israel, of Israeli retaliation. Until that can be brought to a halt - and once or twice there have been signs that it was about to be, but it hasn't happened - there is no serious prospect of making any progress. I think that was clear again in Prime Minister Sharon's visit to Washington yesterday, that only when this repetitive violence finishes, is any political progress going to be made.

Q. Is there any truth in the analysis that says that part of the problem at the moment is that the Americans, having thought initially that they needed Arab support, were quite tough with Israel. But now that they have found that they can just win in Afghanistan and places like that without any trouble at all, they are acting much more unilaterally and aren't that bothered?

A. No, I don't think I agree with the fact that the Americans just couldn't care less about the Arabs. I don't believe that at all. But I do think they are genuinely despairing about how to initiate a political process when Arafat seems unable to bring organisations based in Palestine under any sort of discipline and stop them taking these actions against Israel. That is for me the basic reason. I think what happens is that President Bush was prepared to put significant pressure on Israel and Mr Sharon. But every time he was

about to do it, Arafat allowed some further atrocity to happen, which just made it impossible for the Americans to convincingly go to the Israelis and say, "You know, you have really got to put some effort into the peace process, to stop taking these defensive actions, to stop taking these sometimes rather provocative actions like raising houses and villages and so on." It is not unilaterism, it is a genuine impossibility of pursuing a peace process. There is no point in pretending you can do things. That, I'm afraid, is the European line. The Europeans have for my money encouraged Arafat far too much, supported him far too much without putting any significant pressure on him at all. The Europeans are not going to deliver peace in the Middle East. Their influence on Israel is precisely zero, and it simply makes the American task more difficult if the Europeans cuddle up to Arafat without really getting through to him what he needs to do.

Q. Let me put the same question in a slightly broader way. You presumably thought when you went to Syria that you were part of an effort to build a coalition against terrorism. Is that fair?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you think there really is a coalition now, or it is just America acting with the cloak of coalition support?

A. No, there is broad international support for the need to deal severely with terrorism and it extends right down to Asia, and Dr Mahatir in Malaysia has played a notable part in it. You see it in the Philippines. It extends largely across the Middle East. It is not a military coalition. It is not like the Gulf War when there was a number of countries involved in a temporary military alliance to take on Iraq and Kuwait. The Americans haven't sought that. It is not really necessary for the sort of operations being conducted in Afghanistan. What they needed was the broadest possible political support. If you think of all the predictions made - not least in the media - about how there was going to be a hysterical reaction on the Arab streets, the mobs would be out and embassies would be burnt down. There was a little trouble in Pakistan in the very early stages, but since then it has gone away. And I think most people in the Middle East realise that Bin Laden was responsible for this, that what he represents is a peculiarly nasty form of fundamentalism, that his terrorism is completely oblivious to the human cost of what he does. You see, you really have to understand that al-Qaeda is a different sort of terrorist movement. In the past we have dealt with terrorist groups who have negotiable objectives, whether it is the IRA wanting the British out of Northern Ireland or ETA wanting independence for the Basque provinces in Spain, or independence movements wanting the British out, or the French out, or whatever. There was something to negotiate about. There is nothing to negotiate about with al-Qaeda. They just want to destroy the United States. They want to destroy as many people as they can.

Q. How does it leave the diplomatic landscape in that case? You talked about the way Russia and China have come on board. Can America now do more or less anything it likes?

A. I think America feels that is has demonstrated in Afghanistan that it does still have the ability to act and act very decisively, largely on its own if necessary. And that is actually quite important when you think back to the effect of its botched operation in Somalia for instance, some years ago, and the widespread notion that the Americans were incapable of decisive action because they were too afraid of casualties. That is clearly no longer the case. They have acted decisively in Afghanistan, and I think a lot of governments around the world will be thinking very deeply about the implications of that, including some of the so-called 'rogue states', the "axis of evil" if you like. Some of those countries must be saying, "Right. Well they are prepared to do that in Afghanistan, perhaps they really are prepared to take military action against us." And I very much hope they are thinking that because, personally, I believe that the United States is in very determined

mood indeed, and perhaps in Europe we are little world- weary, a little cynical. We have got used to terrorism, we have never believed that you could stamp terrorism out. I don't think the Americans are like that. They are very can-do people and having now been fired up by what happened to them on the 11th September. They are going to go out there and when they say they are going to conduct a war on terrorism and root it out and decapitate it, they mean that. And if, in the process, they have to attack other countries which are giving shelter or weapons to terrorism , then they will do it.

Q. Is it wise that they should be quite so free from perhaps the counsel of other people who might say bombing Iran, for example, wasn't such a good idea?

A. They certainly won't be free from the counsel of other people. The Americans spend all their time talking to other people and they consult in NATO, they consult across with the European Union and they have a particularly close relationship with the UK. So they get plenty of advice. But what is clear is that their strategy has changed. They are not going to sit there, wait for further attacks on them. They are going to take the war to the enemy, if you like, and President Bush's phrase was, "Either we bring them to justice or we take justice to them", and people I think didn't take that seriously enough in Europe when they first heard these statements. They waved them away as just a bit more rhetoric. It is much more than that.

Q. Do you regard that as a wholly benign development? I mean you don't have any worries at all about it?

A. I think it is a good development. I think it does need to be dealt with very decisively because it will only get worse if the day of reckoning is put off. It is quite clear that several countries are trying to develop weapons of mass destruction. It is true of North Korea, we know it, it is true of Iran, we know it, it is true of Iraq - we know it there too. And if they develop those weapons, it will be harder to deal with them as countries, and there is the added risk that the technology, or in some cases even the weapons or the substances, will fall into the hands of terrorists, either deliberately or because they will be able to obtain them. And that will face us in 10 years time, or five years time, with an even more difficult situation. Of course it is tough, of course it is difficult, of course there are dangers in this, but there is a terrible tendency to over-estimate the dangers, always to wring one's hands and say, "Oh, we can't possibly do this, the reaction in the Middle East is going to be so terrible, the dangers are this, the dangers are that." We faced it in a way in the Gulf War too. There was uncertainty as to whether Iraq in the Gulf War would use chemical weapons against Israel, use chemical weapons against coalition forces, that striking Iraqi chemical and biological installations might simply let lose into the atmosphere dangerous agents which would damage us all. These are risks you have to face up to. I admire the Americans for facing up to the risks and being prepared to take them.

Q. In terms of the style of diplomacy in this new world, do you think there is more of a place now for the kind of personal envoy activity that you were going in for?

A. There are different ways of conducting diplomacy in different times. In the past in Britain we have had a tradition of appointing political ambassadors in some key posts. I can think of at least two or three in Washington. At the United Nations we have occasionally sent political ambassadors. That is one way of doing it. Using special envoys for special tasks is another way of doing it. I don't think it ought to be taken to any exaggerated lengths. I think we have an outstanding diplomatic service, they do a very good job, they are very professional. But just now and again there is a use. Actually, in a way you would expect their use to be rather less because with modern communications prime ministers and presidents can talk much more freely to each other by telephone, they can send each others messages, fax, e-mail, you name it, it is all there. So the

human envoy is less necessary, but now and again it helps to have a sort of face-to-face encounter.

Q. There was a school of thought in the early days that said that by becoming so active on the American's behalf, Tony Blair was buying a degree of influence in Washington, that, at some stage, would prove a restraining influence on George Bush, if necessary. D'you think it's worked like that, or have they just said, thanks very much for the support, we are going our own way.

A. No, I believe the Americans have listened very carefully to the prime minister whenever he has spoken to President Bush, and I believe he has been a factor in the policy discussions in Washington. People talk about a restraining influence as though the Americans were sort of barking mad and liable to be let of the leash and go and do extraordinary things. I don't think that is the case at all. It is a question of process, it is a question of timing. I believe there is unanimity in Washington that the problem of Iraq and Saddam Hussein has got to be dealt with, and a growing unanimity that Iran has also got to be dealt with. I think there is not unanimity yet on how it is to be dealt with, at what pace it is to be dealt with, and I think, in those sort of discussions our prime minister has a considerable influence. The idea that he is just extraneous to it is not right. I know it is not right. I have a lot of contacts in the highest levels of the American administration, dating back to the 1980s when people who are now in government were last in government in the time of President Reagan, in the time of the first President Bush, and I can assure you, from everything I hear from them, they find the prime minister's role valuable, useful and they take account of it.