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BBC HISTORY: SIR J.JOHNSTON

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THIS TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM AN RTU RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

RECORDING SERVICES (RADIO)
Tape Transcript by Radio Transcribing Unit

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT- Frank Gillard with Sir John Johnston

CASSETTE SUPPLIED Parts 1 and 2

IN CUE: The date is April 13th 1987, and this interview is with Sir John Johnston, and this is Frank Gillard speaking, and we are together at Sir John's home in Oxford, and this is the first cassette. Sir John, what were the dates of your membership of the Board?

JOHNSTON I was appointed at the end of 1978, but I didn't attend my first meeting until January '79. Then, after my five years, I was extended for two more years, so I finished on the 31st July 1986.

GILLARD You'd become known by then as the Senior Ordinary Governor. I remember that title. It was an informal title wasn't it? It was invented by Sir Robert Lusty twenty years earlier, but what did it mean?

JOHNSTON The only significance of it I think was that, of the Governors, the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman were obviously office holders; then there were the three national Governors, Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland. The rest were ordinary Governors, so to speak, and the senior of those was called the Senior Ordinary Governor. I didn't realise it had been invented by Lusty; I thought it was the invention of Roy Fuller who, because the Board of Governors

were sometimes called 'Bog', BOG, and the Board of Management were called 'BOM', Board of Management, he decided he ought to be called 'SOG'.

GILLARD Oh it's Bob Lusty who invented it. How does one become a Governor at the BBC, and what were the circumstances of your appointment? Did you apply for the job?

JOHNSTON No, it came as a complete surprise and out of the blue. There's always been, in the composition of the Board, someone with overseas experience, usually drawn from retired members of the Diplomatic Service. My predecessor on the Board was Sir Denis Greenhill, who had been head of the Diplomatic Service, so that the letter I got from the Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, said precisely that and would I be willing for my name to go forward as a successor to Denis Greenhill on the Board? This simply arrived through the letter box one morning. I was absolutely delighted. I'd just retired in May of '78, was looking for something useful to do. I hoped at that time I might find something which might supplement my pension a bit, but the letter from the Home Secretary said quite precisely, 'the remuneration of the Governors is £1,100 a year'. So I resisted the temptation to write back and say that I loved the job but I didn't know how I could manage the affluence, and said how welcome it was to me, as indeed it was, because I was brought up in a sort of public service tradition, and here was a chance to do something which was in the public service in an area which interested me very greatly.

GILLARD Did you know anything much about the

BBC at that time? Had you any special aspirations when you came on the Board?

JOHNSTON I think the key thing for me was that I grew up with the BBC. I mean the whole of the BBC has developed in my lifetime. I had a cat's whisker radio in the 1920's. I'd had a lot of peripheral contact with the BBC as a diplomat in posts abroad, so I already had a sense of the BBC, I think, and particularly of the BBC as an idea: because the idea of broadcasting in the public service, as established by the BBC, was, to my mind one of the great civilising ideas of this century, and it set a pattern and example for a lot of the rest of the world. It wasn't followed everywhere. But I had this feeling for the BBC. I don't think I came in with any preconceptions, though I do think I came in with my respect for the BBC sharpened by my last four years being in a North American post, exposed to a broadcasting system whose sole dynamic was to deliver an audience to the advertiser. I remember we had a television set in Canada with I think about twelve channels, and if you turned the knob round on all twelve channels, you could almost guarantee that on three, if not four, of them there'd be a policeman hiding behind a car and shooting at somebody. There was such trash, and the advertising even was so awful because it came in every ten minutes and it was rubbishy stuff. There wasn't the wit and intelligence applied to the advertising even that there is in this country. So that I was tremendously pro the BBC as an institution, and I also had absolutely no prejudice against the duopoly in the U.K. as it had been established,

because it seemed to me that it had worked admirably in the national interest, with competition a spur to both sides; and the system by which the commercial stations contracts were allocated by the IBA, in which the IBA wanted some evidence of a public service commitment from them, meant that they had to compete for quality as well as for audiences. I am in no doubt at all that the existence of Independent Television was a tremendous spur to the BBC and that Independent Television itself would be nothing like as good as it is if it wasn't that it had to compete with the BBC. So I was happy with the system. I started really with a clean sheet because I was quite out of touch with domestic broadcasting matters. I was well aware of the World Service because that had been my standby every morning in a large number of posts in different parts of the world where you really got an ordered sense of the importance of things that were happening in the world, as distinct from local broadcasting stations who simply gave you what was important to them at that point, and I'd been tremendously dependent on that. I had quite a lot of contact with BBC correspondents and with BBC staff abroad, and I had for a time in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office been the Under-Secretary in charge of the information side of the work, i.e., our own information work, the money that went to the British Council and the money that went to the External Services; and I had at that time absolutely defended the principle that the External Services' job was to tell the truth.

GILLARD Did you as a man with a great and distinguished diplomatic background have a writ to watch over

the External Services in any special way?

JOHNSTON No, not at all, and I think it's important to understand this about the Board, or certainly about the Board as it was in my time, in that apart from the three national Governors, each of whom obviously had a job concerned with their own national regions, none of the Governors was encouraged, or wanted to specialise in the sense that all Governors took a joint and collective responsibility for everything. So that while I had an interest in the External Services, I didn't pursue that as a sort of speciality and I rapidly realised once I became a Governor, that it was no good trying to add a fifth wheel to the coach. External Services had to deal with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office direct, and negotiate direct.

It's not the task of a Governor to try and get involved in those negotiations, and it would only have caused complexities and difficulties if I'd tried to.

GILLARD Now you were a Governor over a very crucial period in the BBC's history. I wonder if you'd talk to me about the public standing of the BBC as it was when you came in and what happened to it during your years?

JOHNSTON That is a very interesting subject, because I think I was there for a period which saw a complete change in that. When I joined the Board, I think the BBC was still regarded as a sort of immortal national institution, treated with a mixture of respect and affectionate lampoonery. It was "Auntie" and admired, respected and made fun of, and there was no sense of it being under public attack. It was at that time slightly drawing breath, because

the Annan Report had just been completed the previous year, and we'd narrowly avoided the imposition of Service Management Boards and various things which wouldn't have worked. But one had no sense of the BBC being under sectional or national attack of any kind. The big change came I think at the time of - when was it - the 1985 licence fee application; though I should jog back for a second and say that during my first years on the Board we came to the point where we went public about the licence fee application for the first time.

GILLARD What does that mean?

JOHNSTON Well I remember very well Michael Swann, who was Chairman at the time, saying "Look, hitherto the discussions about the level of the licence fee have been just between us and the Home Office and it's been decided by the Home Secretary of the day, and we haven't gone public about what we've asked for or anything". But by that time of course the BBC was tremendously feeling the inroads of inflation and we decided that we ought to make public what we felt the BBC needed to have to maintain the standard and variety of programmes. We did this without a great deal of razzmatazz in the first instance, but as the pressures on money developed, the licence fee campaign, I thought, really got a bit out of hand in a sense. It became a feature and quite a lot of resources were devoted to setting out before the public what we were asking for and why we felt we needed it, and this of course just put up aunt Sallies for people to throw at. I still feel it was right to, as it were, go to our shareholders and say "This is what we're trying

to do. This is what it will cost. Therefore this is why we are asking the Government for this." But, I thought it went too far. There were car stickers, there were endless sort of advertising gimmicks brought in, and slogans and all the rest of it, and I think we overdid that.

GILLARD It was a backlash.

JOHNSTON But it wasn't a backlash. What it did do was unlock a whole lot of latent and sometimes vested interest, hostile to the BBC. We had a Conservative Government in by that time, and I think it's an article of faith, with a lot of the Conservative Party, there's no doubt about it, that the BBC is vastly overstaffed, grossly extravagant, run by Pinkos, and all the rest of it. I am not saying <u>all</u> Conservatives, you know, but there's an element in the Conservative Party who think this about the BBC. And then the new and sinister thing that came in was an absolutely sustained, hostile campaign in the press against the BBC, starting with the notorious three leaders in THE TIMES which argued that the BBC really ought to be broken up and sold to private interests. No-one will convince me that Rupert Murdoch's ownership of THE TIMES did not influence that, whatever THE TIMES themselves say as to how they reach these conclusions quite independently, they were certainly common to the Murdoch papers, THE TIMES, THE NEWS OF THE WORLD, THE SUN. Once we started the licence fee campaign, I think those who were antipathetic to the BBC in terms of their own prejudice, or in terms of their calculations as a vested interest who would like to see the BBC broken up and sold off in its parts, felt they had free

rein. We'd gone public, so could they, and there was a most extraordinarily sustained campaign in various parts of the press in which every day something derogatory to the BBC would be found and published. I should add that it came at a time when the BBC was anyway under enormous pressure, because once we started the licence fee campaign the Government said 'You've got to prove the efficiency of your management', and Pete Marwick and Mitchell were invited in to do a value-for-money study of the BBC, and I wish I knew how many BBC man-hours that consumed; all senior staff, right through all the departments, were involved. The Government insisted on a review of the External Services, which went on at the same time. This, and the pressures of this hostile campaign, I think produced a sort of climate of mistrust, and confidence faltered and mistakes were made, undoubtedly, all of which added to the general sort of climate of mistrust; so that during the last part of my time in the BEEB, my last couple of years in the BBC, the climate was entirely different from that very happy atmosphere, and the happy Board I joined.

GILLARD Understood very well. Now you served on the Board under three Chairmen. I know you had a spell, did you not, with Michael Swann, Lord Swann, and then Lord Howard, George Howard, and then of course Stuart Young. Now all three of those have contributed to this archive at very considerable length, but it would be extraordinarily interesting if you would give us your comments about them. I mean how did you view those three up there, their respective styles of Chairmanship and leadership, and their attitudes

to, and what did they individually contribute if it can be defined?

JOHNSTON I am sure Michael Swann said when you interviewed him what Ted Heath had said to him when he invited him to be Chairman, i.e., that he thought managing a university must give you the sort of skills that would be useful in managing the BBC, and I think that was absolutely right. I think Michael's Edinburgh background - and he'd seen that university through the worst days of student unrest and all the rest of it, - was a great help to him in the business of chairing the BBC, where what you're concerned with is the management of creativity. Just as you are, really, in a university, it's a different kind of creativity, perhaps, but it's the same kind of thing and I thought he led the Board very skilfully and diplomatically. The thing is that in a situation like the BBC Board in which the Chairman is virtually full-time, and is in touch every day with everything that's going on, and the Governors are part-time, and the busy ones hardly in touch at all, then the Chairman really must know where he wants the Board to get to, and what outcome he wants to see, and he must put this to the Board and look to the Board to support him generally, or to be convinced by him. But he must lead to that extent. I know when I was appointed I wrote to Michael Swann, and said 'I realise that in this kind of situation an enormous amount devolves on the Chairman and not so much on the part-time members, who can't be as well informed as he is, and if I can be of help I just want you to know that I understand this and would like to help.' So Michael did

give that kind of leadership and he did it very skilfully I think, and with humour and it was certainly a very happy Board under him. I think I was very fortunate in that first Board. It was splendidly diverse, but at the same time it was remarkably harmonious and united and at the Board meetings each Thursday, it was a great pleasure to see them all again. We were all so vastly different, but friends; and we were all committed to the BBC. I think you couldn't say this of the Board in my later years, but perhaps we can come on to that since you wanted to talk about the Chairmen. Then Michael was succeeded by George Howard. George was a glorious Whig, I mean he was an 18th century Whig. But he had the same kind of leadership in the sense that he knew where he wanted the Board to go on a particular issue. He had a real knowledge of the way the BBC worked and of its staff. He was a constant visitor, a tremendous traveller, and he had an absolute commitment to the BBC's independence, and the sort of position in the country where he didn't give a damn for anybody you know. No-one was going to browbeat him or whatever, and he was fearless in defending the BBC's independence, because of the sort of independence he had himself from his own social standing, I think. I'm sure this earned him a great deal of respect in the BBC.

GILLARD It led to some blood on the floor when he went down at the time of the Falklands business to defend the PANORAMA programme before the information group of Tory MP's didn't it?

JOHNSTON Yes, but he <u>did it</u>, and was held in honour in the BBC for having done that. He was a very

visible Chairman. He was ready to take on the critics, and the press and so forth. He wasn't, despite what people have occasionally said, he wasn't an interventionist Chairman. He didn't tell the BBC how to run its business, but he was very well versed with how the business ran, and I think he felt that one thing he could do was stand up and take the knocks.

When he retired, for his retirement dinner I wrote a little masque and I've got it here, and I'll just quote four lines from it if I may, because this epitomised what I think we all felt about him. I said in the masque at one point, "Unto himself he took the shell and shot, of criticism, just or ill-begot: Firm for the faith of Reith and his descendants. And incandescent for our independence." And there was a sort of ripple , a sort of murmur of approval when those lines came out which underlay this great characteristic George brought. But he was somewhat idiosyncratic. He had his own ideas on things like architecture. It was George I think, who saddled us with, despite having taken it all through the Board, the most expensive architect there was for the rebuilding of the Langham, which eventually had to be abandoned because it was going to be hopelessly expensive and complicated to build on that site. And he was a bit unforgiving when he was offended.

I ought to record I suppose that this came out over the appointment of Controller BBC 1 during my time there, when the candidates were John Gau and Alan Hart, and certain actions John Gau had taken during the Carrickmore dispute had greatly offended George, and he wasn't going to have John Gau at any price. We had a situation in which

the firm recommendation from the professional side of the business, from the Director General and the Managing Director of television, was that John Gau should be appointed. I though I'd convinced the Board at that time that in a situation in which opinion might be divided, say equally, in the Board, then the unanimous opinion of the professionals, ought to swing the balance, and I know this is what the then Vice-Chairman thought. But George suddenly called for a vote on this in the presence of the Director General and the Managing Director of TV, and to my amazement, the vote came in favour of Alan Hart, and George said "Right, that's it. Go and tell him". And suddenly it was all over, because he wasn't going to have John Gau. I think that was a great mistake myself.

GILLARD Was the disagreement, the poor feeling? - I can't say ill feeling - between the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman, obvious and visible? I mean I can say this because he's put no restriction on it. Sir William Rees-Mogg says that he never got on with the Chairman. You were talking there about Mark Bonham-Carter I know.

JOHNSTON Yes.

GILLARD But later, you...

JOHNSTON But with which Chairman, with George or with....?

GILLARD With George.

JOHNSTON Yes.

GILLARD Was it obvious?

JOHNSTON It wasn't obvious, and it didn't run for a very long time, I don't think, that particular

partnership. I can't remember precisely when Mark left.

GILLARD Two or three years?

JOHNSTON Oh I don't think as long as that, because George was only...

GILLARD Three years.

JOHNSTON Chairman for three years, and certainly Mark was....

GILLARD Sir William came in in 1960 you see, 1980 I mean, well anyway there was a period during which they were not on good terms and I wondered if it was obvious to the Board and if it was detrimental to the BBC at all?

JOHNSTON It wasn't obvious to the Boards and I don't think it was detrimental to the BBC. I think they were absolutely chalk and cheese, and George lived in his own world of what was right, and he did some glorious things.

Has anyone told you about his visit to China?

GILLARD He has, at <u>enormous</u> length.

JOHNSTON Yes, and then having them stay at Castle Howard, and so forth. I think they were temperamentally incompatible, so to speak. But certainly the decencies were preserved and one was never conscious of, as it were, a sort of rift between them. I don't think George felt that William was someone with whom he could share his inmost thoughts, as it were. I don't think George shared his inmost thoughts with <u>anybody</u>.

GILLARD Well then, what about Stuart?

JOHNSTON Stuart brought to the Chairmanship a very fine financial mind and wide financial experience just at a time when the BBC needed it. He was at home in every

financial situation, so much so that there were times when management themselves tried to involve him in negotiations which strictly speaking they ought to have managed themselves. But he was so very good. I remember we got into great problems with Robert Maxwell over the printing of the RADIO TIMES at one point, and they'd been going to and fro on this and management came to see Stuart about it. Stuart settled it in one telephone call with Maxwell. And there was the whole business of the property side. Well to start with it was the financial side. There was the great enquiry by Pete Marwick and Mitchell, and all the rest of it. There was Stuart's own insistence that the BBC was well managed financially, and various things were introduced to improve this; and then there was the whole property side, the question of whether we replaced The Langham. He inherited the very grand and extremely modern architectural scheme which George had fathered, and which George very much wanted to see go through when a lot of us were very dubious about what it was going to cost, and indeed about the appropriateness of an ultra-modern headquarters being built on that site in what was Georgian and Regency London; but there is obviously room for more than one view about that. There was the opportunity to acquire Elstree which has been an absolute godsend, where EASTENDERS was immediately set up and has been the success it was. There was escaping, though at some cost, from the Langham commitment, which I'm <u>sure</u> was right. We'd have been in terrible trouble if we'd built a tremendously expensive building on that site. And there was the

opportunity to acquire the White City site, which solved almost all our problems. But it was Stuart who saw all these things very clearly; who saw the impossibility of continuing with this W1 village of BBC in expensive rented property, all round the most expensive part of London, and the need to get it all together, to move the staff, to get somewhere where they could effectively work. By the time staff are established in Elstree and Radio is established at White City, the saving will be tremendous and tremendously valuable. So that he contributed something unique there. He totally identified himself with the BBC. He was a great enthusiast. He worked very hard, he travelled. But I think it's fair to say that coming from the City, from the company of Accountants which he had founded and which he'd made into a great success, he was moving into what was a completely new world for him. He was moving on to the national scene, into a world with fairly substantial and subtle political dimensions, and it wasn't a scene in which he naturally played a major role or in which he occupied, of himself, a commanding position. If you think of people like Norman Brooke, who'd been Secretary to the Cabinet; George Howard, with all his landed background and so forth, they moved easily and naturally in the scene. I don't think he found it easy. I think the City as he had experienced it was a slightly enclosed world, and that he was a stranger a bit in the new one. He felt tremendously in need of advice and help, and perhaps because of this, though also because it was in his nature, he didn't lead the Board in the way his predecessors had, in the sense of knowing where he wanted the

Board to go and putting it before the Board with recommendations for what the Board should decide. His style of Chairmanship was very different. He approached the thing with the idea of drawing out the views of Governors and seeing what sort of a consensus or common view emerged. But as I mentioned earlier, when the Chairman's full time, and the members are part-time and in some cases very, very part-time, barely being able to fit in the Board meetings, you do need a Chairman who will identify the points of importance and the needs, and say "This is where I think we ought to go" and then lead an argument about it. He didn't do that, because it wasn't in his nature, and I think the Board suffered because of that. It was particularly visible at the time of the REAL LIVES controversy which I have spoken to you about separately. But I think it was true all through. He was not a man of great intellectual depth by upbringing and training, so that I think against the very splendid contributions he did make, must be set those aspects of it which made him a little different from his predecessors, and perhaps not so effective in leading the Board in questions of policy and stance on a whole lot of things.

GILLARD Yes, thank you. The Board as it stands is the Board as it was, way back in 1926 when the BBC was a small little organisation with a few hundred employees running a single radio network, and now its - what - twenty, thirty times that size, and its responsibilities have increased correspondingly. I sometimes wonder whether this type of Board is the right Board for the BBC. I particularly

wonder whether the appointment of Executive Board members might help to a better understanding. They might be better able to guide the other Governors. Would you have any comment on that? Am I quite crazy in even suggesting it?

JOHNSTON I take your point that the BBC is a very, very large organisation now. I am not sure that I would want to see the Board fundamentally changed. The idea of having Executive members i.e, having members of the Management of the BBC as part of the Board, as you would have in a commercial company where you have Executive Directors and non-Executive Directors, to my mind, doesn't lie very easily with the concept of a Board of Governors, however they are appointed who represent the public, and who because they represent the public, must distance themselves in a way from the executive decisions of the BBC, because they may have to sit in judgement on those decisions on behalf of the public.

GILLARD We are talking confidentially, and the new Chairman has said to me that he, he picks up a point you've made earlier in this conversation, that he feels that the remuneration of the Board is ridiculously low, and says that it's terribly important to get people of the right calibre on the Board, and I am sure you'd agree with that, and he says that in this day and age, you really don't get the right sort of people as non-Executive Directors unless you are going to offer them something like seven and a half, or up to ten thousand a year, and unless the BBC can do that, it'll never get a Board of the calibre that it needs. It'll pick up a few public spririted people like yourself, but for

the rest they will be not such high calibre people, time-servers.

JOHNSTON I am not at all sure that I agree with that. I think Governors should have a reasonable remuneration. I don't think the pay should be such that people want to be Governors of the BBC because of the pay, and I remember it's very interesting when I was first on the Board, we were talking about pay, and I said to Michael Swann that it was ridiculous that the pay of the Governors was only £100 more than it had been in 1936, when they got paid £1,000 a year, which was a lot of money in those days; it was £1,100 when I joined and Michael said "Yes, that's perfectly true and we must get something better done, but don't forget that people want to be Governors of the BBC, they don't want to do it for the money. They want to do it because there's a chance to contribute to this marvellous national asset and they would be delighted to be Governors of the BBC if they weren't paid at all." I don't think you can do it without paying people and I think they should be paid something reasonable; my thought is that you ought to get as a Governor of the BBC roughly what you'd get as a non-Executive Director of a company, which isn't all that huge a salary necessarily. But I think the actual composition of the Board is of tremendous importance. What you want above all is people who believe in the BBC and who feel identified with the BBC - identified with the endeavours of the staff, and who share in the chagrin of the staff when mistakes are made, but who feel a part of it. And it won't work if Governors are too busy, or too uninterested in the BBC as a

historical continuum, which is what it is in my mind, to understand how it works, to find out about it, and are content just to become sort of carping critics. They must feel a part of what is being criticised, and it won't work either if the Governors see themselves as a body issuing instructions or orders, or fiats. This is a contradiction in terms of what the BBC's about, because the dynamic energy of the BBC lies at a comparatively low level. It lies with the editors, the producers, the heads of departments, busy, as I said in a letter to a new Governor, trying to mine the creative strata in our society for some excellence of performance, or exposition, or whatever, which can then be turned into acceptable radio or television programmes. That's where it's all happening. The rest is sort of management, encouragement, and all the rest of it. You cannot do these things by fiat. You cannot say "let there be a hilarious 13-part series on this". You've got to find someone who wants to produce a 13-part series and has the ideas, and then say "OK, we like that. You can go ahead and make it". So that you can't have a Board issuing instructions, so to speak. I think that in a lot of ways the Board's function is quite like what used to be said of the monarchy, 'To advise, to encourage, and to warn'. It's more than that, but it's that kind of attitude: so that you've got to have people who believe in the BBC, who believe in the idea of public service broadcasting, and are prepared to identify themselves with it - warts and all - if you are going to have a Board that has the respect and trust of the staff and to whom the staff will listen and take

advice.

GILLARD You did more to define and codify the responsibilities and duties of the Governors than anybody else I've come across, and I imagine that in your letter to a new Governor which is quoted as the holy writ, isn't it in these matters, that you said much of this sort of thing. Is there anything else you said that we ought to get down on the record?

JOHNSTON Well the origins of this really lay in the thing I referred to just now where we had this contretemps, if you like, over the appointment of a new Controller of BBC 1, because you had absolutely unanimous solid professional opinion, which was in a sense brushed aside by the Board - because the Board must collectively take responsibility for all its acts - and which led to a feeling that perhaps we ought to redefine the relations between the Board and the Board of Management.

This came up at a time when we were planning one of what were at that time bi-annual Meetings, weekends where the Governors and the Board of Management took themselves away somewhere and had a sort of 'think-in'. We were going to meet at Leeds Castle in Kent, and I thought I would try and pre-empt what could have been a slightly acrimonious discussion about whose rights were what rights, by doing a paper for it. I did it in the form of a letter that one might send to a new Governor, saying 'This is what the BBC is about. This is how it works. This is how the Board of Management and Board of Governors should work together. This is where the Governors' powers are. This is

what the Governors do. This is what they don't do', and so forth, including a section on appointments. I wrote this, and tried it out on some of the Governors, and on some of the senior management, so that it was virtually acceptable when it was circulated. Everyone said "This is fine" and a copy of it has been sent to every Governor appointed since, I think. We sent copies to the Home Office etc. and no-one has dissented from it as a general statement of how the Board should work.

GILLARD And it was on the lines of the exposition you gave us a little earlier?

JOHNSTON Yes. I tried to put in it an explanation, particularly of the point I just made of the unusual nature of the BBC where the dynamic is at the bottom of a sort of pyramid, because that's where the real dynamic is. Because the organisation is so large, you've got to have an enormous degree of delegation. No little group of people could supervise or monitor the output of two television networks, local radio, four radio channels, and the external services, if they sat for 24 hours a day. You've got to delegate the making of it and you've got to delegate the editorial decision, i.e., the decision to put it out and because of this, you can only run the BBC by retrospective review. You develop in this way a kind of inspired hindsight really, an anthology of hindsight if you like, from which you can draw for the future. I pointed out in the thing too, that as a public service broadcasting organisation, you've got a quite remarkable market. You are serving the nation in all its enormous diversity of

tastes and interests, the rich, the poor, the geographic parts of it, the different ethnic strands in it, and its for that diversity the Governors have to speak. CUT.

IDENT. THE ORAL HISTORY OF THE BBC SIR JOHN JOHNSTON'S CONTRIBUTION AND THIS IS THE SECOND SIDE OF THE CASSETTE.

JOHNSTON I did the make the point in this letter, and it's important to mention this, that the Board of Governors legally is the British Broadcasting Corporation. That is how it appears in the Charter. And I mention this because in later years this did get picked up slightly by one of two Governors out of context, who in an argument would say "But the Governors are the BBC". And that is nonsense. The point I made in the thing was that while the Board of Governors was legally the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC employed a staff of some 27,000 and that conceptually, what the Board had done was to make a single huge act of delegation in handing over to this staff, under the Director General, the responsibility for carrying out the purposes for which the Corporation was set up. And that wasn't just an academic concept: it was important in that it established that the Board and the staff were parts of a whole, that they weren't sort of countervailing, but they were complementary and had to live in partnership. I went on I think in this letter, to say that there were really four areas of vigilance for Governors, the disposition of the BBC's resources, the standards and balance of its programmes, the catholicity of its output and the defence of its independence. And then the means by which they did this,

were their power to appoint the senior staff, their power to authorise expenditure and their general power to call to account, and I went on to say how all that worked. But I did deal with, and it became accepted I think as the basis, this particular matter of appointments, because I said it was more than symbolic that the Governors made the senior appointments - because by agreement the Governors make the top sixty, I think it is, appointments in the BBC - because as far as the public's concerned that is a guarantee of the Board's accountability; and as far as the staff are concerned, it's a sort of visible committal of trust, and a public demonstration of the Board's confidence in them. It's a process to which the Governors can perhaps bring a certain detachment and perspective, but at the same time, I made the point that the participation in this process of the Director General and his staff was absolutely essential, because they have an intimate knowledge acquired over years of the qualities and performance of candidates for a job, and the professional assessment they contribute is obviously of the greatest importance. And it's of course fundamental that the holder of a senior post musn't just have the confidence of the Board, he's got to have the confidence of his professional chiefs. If they have no confidence in him, well, it's no good putting him into the appointment. So that while the decisions are made by the Board, it was accepted that the appointments procedures for the senior posts were joint affairs, and after that we worked out several arrangements of what sort of Boards would be constituted for different

appointments, who would chair them, and who would sit on them as Governors and so forth, because most of the senior appointments are made by Boards on which some Governors, some staff sit. I think it's only the Director General's appointment which is made by the whole Board acting as a Committee, but we settled that and it's worked fairly smoothly I think since then. Of course I pointed out in the letter that relationships with the staff were of crucial importance to the smooth running; and I said at that time, if I can remember the phrase accurately "One of the pleasures of being a Governor is the informality and fraternity of the relationship". That exactly reflected my experience in my early years on the Board when we thrashed out policies and decision in searching consultation and discussions, but as partners in an enterprise, so to speak. Also the letter obviously had to say that you must be clear what Governors are not. That Governors are not editors, and that if you are going to sit in judgement on the BBC's editorial decisions, on behalf of the public, then you can't be part of the decision. And they're not managers. They can call the management to account for how it's managed, but they mustn't get involved in negotiations with trade unions and all the rest of it. Then I went on to say how important it was to get to know as wide a possible spectrum of the professional staff, and all the ways in which this could be done; and I made various suggestions about a sort of introductory series of visits and calls that Governors might make. I made one point in this letter which I don't think we ever got satisfactorily settled, and that was in relation to

Governor's comments on programmes. When I joined the Board - you don't mind if I go on a little about this, because it's a very interesting aspect of it all I think, - when I joined the Board, just post-Annan, the Board had for the first time set up some Committees, one to deal with finance and property matters, and one to concern itself with the appointment of all the members of our sixty-odd advisory bodies, of one kind or another - local radio, specialist advisory bodies, regional, national ones, and those Committees would meet on a Wednesday evening before the Board on the Thursday and report to the Board. The Thursday morning meetings of the Board we divided into two then, and the Board constituted itself a Programme Policy Committee for the first part, with the heads of various programme strands there; and then the second part would be an ordinary Board meeting with the general business of the board. The Programme Policy Committees - there were two originally, a radio one and a television one, but they later got merged - I felt were very unsatisfactory at the beginning because after the general exchange of information, the Chairman would simply go round the Governors and ask for any programme comments. And you found yourself, or I found myself, and I know others did saying "Oh Lord, I haven't got any special comments this week, but I must say something or it would look as if I hadn't been watching or listening" and you got a whole series of interventions. Occasionally people made very good points, but everyone felt they had to say something, and I felt this wasn't very constructive, so I put into this letter that Governor's comments must address themselves to those aspects

of the programmes which had a bearing on the general policy or the standing of the Corporation, and by that I mean questions of taste or ethics, or standards of quality, matters of balance, impartiality: those were all subjects for discussion in terms of public interest and expectation: but that in terms of personal satisfaction or displeasure, Governors had no right to think their views were any more important than those of anyone else. We all pay the same licence fee, and they're licence fee payers in this respect. It was very difficult to get Governors to see this. They often felt very strongly about various things. We gradually tried to organise this side of it so that the staff suggested programmes ahead which were of particular interest or possibly of controversy, so that Governors were alert to them, but one or two people, particularly John Boyd, our Trade Union member, took this as sort of homework and produced at great length a series of entirely personal comments on each of these programmes. I was very unhappy about the way we never did get it quite right because no sooner had you introduced some new method of handling it, then you would start producing paper, and its the last thing you wanted. I made some recommendations at the time I left the BBC which I would very much have liked to have seen followed out, which have slightly been, but I don't think which were wholly adopted. I said that - this was in the wake of the sort of tension there was between the Board and Bom after the Real Lives issue - that I didn't think the Board knew the processes and knew the people as well as they should. What the BBC was about was

programmes. What broadcasting is about is programmes, and I suggested they had a rather different approach to the Programme Policy Committee; that you had a short period in which the Governors could raise such points of public concern on programmes as occurred to them, but that the Board should stop inviting outside guests to lunch after its Board meeting on Thursdays - which was the standard and very useful practice - for at least a year, and that for the second half of the Programme Policy Committee, a particular strand of broadcasting - documentaries, light entertainment, drama or whatever, should be considered and that you would have there the Head of that particular bit, and one or two of his staff, who would make an <u>oral</u> statement about their plans, problems, what they were at at the moment. You would have a short period of questioning on that, and then you would carry on with the Board Meeting. But after the Board Meeting, those people and a few more of their staff from that particular broadcasting strand, should have lunch with the Board, at little tables, so that they were spread out amongst the Board, and there was a chance for talking. People from the Board could pick up points that had been made in the discussion and pursue them and so forth, and I reckoned if you took a year of this, and worked your way through everything from children's broadcasting through the radio strands and so forth, at the end of the year you would have a Board who were very much better informed about how programmes were made, with a very much better awareness of the people making them, and of the obvious fliers they were going to have to consider in a year or two's time, coming up to the

top. And this was partly adopted, but I don't think it has been completely.

GILLARD Well now, I'd like to move on to management considerations. Are you ready to do that?

JOHNSTON Yes.

GILLARD You, your term, you saw two Directors General of course. You had Ian Trethowan, then you had Alasdair. Let's talk about Ian first. How did you find Ian as Director General? He was there when you came in I take it?

JOHNSTON He was there when I came in, and Ian drew a pretty short straw really in the Director General lottery in that he became Director General at a time when the BBC was just being involved in the Annan Enquiry. I don't think anyone who's not worked at the BBC will know the sort of work that produces. You know, <u>everybody</u> is involved, all the time, and it's a tremendous distraction. He was plunged into that and barely was that over before he was plunged into the worst series of cuts we had had to make in the BBC for a long time, because we didn't get the licence fee money we wanted and we had to carve millions off not only the capital programme, but off actual programmes, and he had to oversee that. You can understand the difficulties of apportioning cuts in that situation. So he had a pretty rough ride I thought, and then in the middle of it of course he had a heart attack which took him out of action. He was out of action at the time of the Carrickmore business. Ian managed his relations with the Board and, I think, with the different sections of the BBC fairly smoothly and

diplomatically, but I don't think he was a strong and incisive kind of leader and I find it hard to say what distinctive contribution he made during his time. Though one must allow, as I said at the start, for the circumstances which he had to cope with, and cope with cuts, and towards the end certainly he was reluctant to grasp issues. He would say "Well I think that's rather for my successor" a year before he was due to retire, and I know the Chairman found this, not quite what he wanted. I mean he was an extremely charming chap. I don't....I'm not trying to say he did a bad job, but I don't think he did a great job. He wasn't a great Director General.

GILLARD He did say both at the outset and right the way through that there were the two things he could do. There was the licence fee settlement and there was the renewal of the Charter. He felt that having pulled those two off he really had made his contribution so to speak, but of course they were big achievements, but there's much more isn't there?

JOHNSTON They were big achievements, but they weren't as it were, individual achievements by the Director General. They were achievements in which the Chairman was involved too, and at that time you know we had a Chairman who was a close personal friend of the Home Secretary, which counted for a certain amount.

GILLARD Let's move on. Ian went, and then you had to make a new one, a new appointment. Did you have a range of candidates now?

JOHNSTON Oh yes.

GILLARD Internal and external?

JOHNSTON Internal and external. We decided we must advertise the post, which we did. We had a lot of applications. We whittled these down to a short list, and I am quite clear myself that Alasdair was undoubtedly the outstanding character.

GILLARD This is Alasdair Milne.

JOHNSTON Alasdair Milne was the outstanding candidate, on that I had no doubt at all. And Alasdair had many brilliant qualities. I think he was very much respected as M.D. Tel. where he seemed to me to exercise a crisp authority. He'd shown himself not afraid to ban a programme if it was the right thing to do. He banned SCUM, he banned another ghastly programme which had a pickled penis in a jar as part of the mise en scène, and the people producing these programmes didn't like it, but Alasdair said "No". And he also was not afraid to say "We made a balls of that" or "We got it wrong". He didn't say this all too often, but he was not afraid to say it when it happened, and he was to my mind undoubtedly the best candidate for the job. He'd been the heir apparent for quite a while. I think everyone hoped that he would grow into this job, because it's a very different job from any of the Managing Director jobs. But he didn't seem to grow into it in the way that had been hoped for, or learn to operate effectively in the external relations of the BBC, with the press and the politicians and so forth. It was in Alasdair's nature, I think, that he was combative and assertive in situations which really called for diplomatic skill and a little patient

explanation. I wasn't there, but I believe it's the case that when the Peacock Commission were sitting, and Alasdair and others were before them, Peacock said to Alasdair "Now what part of the output do you regard as Public Service broadcasting?" To which Alasdair said "All of it". It was perfectly true, but in that situation what you needed was a very patient explanation of the whole concept of public service broadcasting. That the needs of people are different. What you try to do is meet the needs of different sections of the community, whether it's those who want to learn Spanish, whether it's those who want to be relaxed by a stupid entertainment programme, whether it's those who want classical music. You try to meet all these because you're serving the nation, and because the nation is made up of all these different groups of people, and that is why the whole of what we're doing really we think of as Public Service broadcasting. That kind of exposition was wanted, I think he lacked something there and after he was retired.

Someone writing, I've forgotten who it was now, writing, I think it was a piece in THE LISTENER, said the difficulty was Alasdair was a very private person in a very public appointment, and I think this is very much at the heart of it. I know the Board felt that somehow he didn't keep them informed and they weren't aware what was in his mind. They didn't feel he always took full responsibility for what happened. Papers came up from Board of Management which had not really been thrashed out in Board of Management. The Board of Management argument took place in front of Board of Governors, whereas Alasdair should have

had that all tied up. And he was unlucky too in that so often - and you know how little things can give impressions out of all proportion to them - but on several occasions, something would happen and Alasdair would be on holiday. It happened several times, and I think the Board got the impression that as far as he was concerned, his holidays took precedence over...well, he wasn't going to put his holiday off because so and so had happened, and in a way, that was perfectly fair. The BBC ought not to be dependent on one person. But at the same time, he didn't become the commanding figure, and by that I mean commanding in all sorts of senses, including commanding the respect of his staff. I think he lost that a bit after he became Director General, and I think he gradually lost the confidence of the Board because they felt they weren't informed, that they didn't really know what he was thinking and you know how it ended. But it was sad really because he is a man of enormous experience and capacity. But he seems to have peaked at M.D. Tel.

GILLARD What about some of these other people. I am thinking of Singer and Francis and Cotton and Wenham, and well you know Muggeridge, and of course we'll come on to Checkland and Protheroe later. But have you anything to say about any of them? I mean you don't necessarily have to deal with them all, just pick out any that you feel that you want to say a word about.

JOHNSTON Well Aubrey Singer of course was one of the candidates for being Director General when Alasdair was appointed, but Aubrey is a larger than life figure

brimming with ideas and energy but quite unpredictable, and needing someone to hang on to his coat-tails the whole time. And he had a very short fuse too, and relations with staff weren't always good. He could have rows with people and he was idiosyncratic in the way he ran things. You never knew what he was going to come up with and all the rest of it, so that I think the Board felt at any time that if.... of course he was for a time the next senior to Alasdair, so that if Alasdair was away, he acted as Director General. I think the Board felt a little uncertain what would happen if Aubrey, despite all his tremendous qualities, was in charge. He was O.K. in Radio because he had Douglas Muggeridge as his No.2 hanging on to his coat-tails, to ensure he was not doing anything silly, and using all this tremendous creativity and output of ideas.

We made him Managing Director of Television with Bill Cotton as his No.2, knowing how good Bill was with all the staff, and hoping this would prove a combination; Aubrey's great creativeness and talents in that direction, Bill's great capacity for keeping people happy and making the whole thing work. But it didn't work, I'm afraid, and one simply wasn't sure, nor were the staff, what Aubrey would do in any particular circumstance. As you know he eventually had to move out of that job and I think that move was right.

GILLARD Dick Francis?

JOHNSTON Well Dick Francis was a very able man, but I think he gave the Board the impression of being a bit self-important, and certainly concerned more with

whatever particular BBC responsibility he had at that time and advancing his ideas about it than with the Corporation as a whole. He was a bit of intriguer really, because if he had a point he wanted to get established or agreed, he had no hesitation in ringing up Governors or trying to nobble them about it, even if it was something in which he was in opposition to his own superiors. It was extraordinary that he would could think that this wouldn't be seen through, because it was very transparent at times.

This whole business of trying to build a replacement for Radio broadcasting out of the Langham site, he went absolutely overboard for it, and fought against it being given up when it was quite clear that as far as the Corporation was concerned, we could not go on with it, but he fought last ditch battle after last ditch battle for it, and he kept the Working Parties going when they ought to have been shut up long before. And he didn't agree with the regional reorganisation which was agreed the last year I was on the Board and I gather was very obstructive and difficult about that. So that although he worked very hard at his job and did a very good job in many ways, he didn't enjoy the full confidence of the board I don't think.

GILLARD Yes, and his departure was rather sad too, wasn't it really in a way, a sad matter. I mean a man who about whom you may feel rather differently, dating from the earlier part of your term, Gerry Mansell.

JOHNSTON Oh Gerry was a much respected man. I wasn't on the Board of course when Ian Trethowan was appointed but the choice was between Ian Trethowan and Gerry,

and I think it was a very hard choice to make, because he was papabile. He was bright as a button, very level headed, did a splendid job in external, and I think enjoyed everybody's respect.

GILLARD What about the man whose future seems to be in doubt as we speak, Brian Wenham?

JOHNSTON Brian's another chap of great ability and with the reputation of being the intellectual on the Board of Management he undoubtedly has very substantial intellectual gifts, gifts of analysis, and exposition, and is highly articulate For a long time I think he was thought of as the heir apparent to Alasdair. He is not a sort of pushing man, but I think he was ambitious. I don't think everybody had total trust in him, though I am not quite sure why not. He was certainly as it were being groomed for stardom, though I don't think he advanced his cause very much when he turned down one or two jobs that were offered to him because it was not the way he saw his career going. I think his move to radio was a move to enlarge his understanding and experience and he is still very young.

I am not sure how his age compares with that of the present Director General, but they're about the same I think, but that's because of the youth of both. That is not to say the present Director General will want to do it until he retires, so that we may not have heard the last of Brian on this, but certainly a man of substantial ability.

GILLARD Bill Cotton?

JOHNSTON Bill is a marvellous old trouper. I mean everybody's darling, Bill. You couldn't not like Bill.

A great fixer in the sense of taking tensions out of situations. A great encourager of people. Much loved throughout the Corporation. I don't think he'd have ever made a Director General because there are qualities that Bill hasn't got that you really need if you are doing the ideal specification for that job. But a lovely man, and a very sound and solid supporter of the Corporation in all its aspects.

GILLARD You, I think have already probably deal with this question, but there was this deterioration was there not, in relations between the Board of Management and the Board of Governors in the later part of your time, a breach there that's not yet been healed. Is there anything more you'd like to say about that?

JOHNSTON I can't comment on what it is now so to speak, because you say it hasn't really been healed, because it's now nearly two years since - it was the summer of '85 - I left the Board, '86, '87. Yes. So it's nearly two years since I left the Board and it only got to that kind of, in fact, adversarial situation between the Board of Management and the Board of Governors at the time of, and after, the REAL LIVES business. But it wasn't just the REAL LIVES business I think. I think I have to make a contrast between the Board as it was when I joined and the Board as it wass when I left. I mentioned earlier what a diverse and harmonious Board it was. It was full of absolutely splendid people, all quite different with a common denominator of a genuine belief in, and a dedication to the BBC. and all of them people who in one way or another, were able to spend

time on being a Governor. Some, I mean George Howard while he was a Governor, Stella Clarke, Bea Serota, Christopher Longuet-Higgins, Lucy Faulkner, Jocelyn Barrow - they all found time, or had time, to do a tremendous amount of travelling. Lucy Faulkner, who was Northern Ireland Governor, really her time was her own, she had no other commitments other than family things, and I think she visited almost every local radio station in the British Isles. She would come over from Ireland for a meeting and then would add on some visit such as to a network production centre. Everybody loved her.

Stella Clarke was another one who gave tremendous time to it. She and George together did a sort of a review of local radio in its earlier days, but Stella was a great visitor all over the place, to different sections of the BBC, and because of this they were listened to with great respect in the Board, because they weren't expressing opinions conceived in the train coming up. They'd been round, they knew what was involved. Their commitment was known and I think towards the latter day there were a number of appointments to the Board of people who really were very, very busy people and who hardly had time to do this sort of groundwork. It's no good I think having Governors who read the papers in the train or over breakfast that morning, and come to quick conclusions about it. There were some people of great standing, Daphne Park for example, the Principal of Somerville, which is a very busy job, and Chairing some Government enquiry at the same time: she is a very hard person sometimes even to get to meetings. Lord Harewood has

tremendous commitments. He had to go off to Australia for several months soon after joining the Board. In a sense Willie Rees-Mogg as Vice-Chairman had his Chairmanship of the Arts Council, his own book business which he runs and so forth, and various others I think were not visible moving around the Corporation so to speak; appearing for a Board meeting and as it were not being seen again.

GILLARD Are you saying this had a bearing on Board of Governors/Board of Management relations?

JOHNSTON I think it had in the sense that unless Governors have taken the trouble to understand all the processes and to know something about the people involved, and to have won their confidence, then you don't get that rapport which is essential. I remember one time the feeling of the staff was that the Board Meetings were just simply sessions of criticism. The Board had nothing to say but to criticise what was being done, and if you come up to each Board Meeting and you say "Oh, why is so-and-so done? You made a mess of that. What was wrong with that?" They were thought to be simply critical, without identifying themselves - standing at arm's length and saying "No, we don't agree with that. We don't like that. You shouldn't have done that" or whatever. It's that lack of commitment to the idea of the BBC, and it may be for all I know that there were Governors appointed who didn't really believe in the BBC, who didn't like the BBC very much, I don't know. But...

GILLARD Did that show up at all then?

JOHNSTON Not to my mind. Not to me, but I

just don't exclude it as a possibility. But I know in latter days, one or two Governors would sort of grumble about things in corners. This was only in my last few months, and I'd say "Well you must say this at the Board", but it didn't come up at the Board. They just sort of grumbled and it was very different from what it was when I started. I think part of it was the atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust that was created by this tremendous anti-BBC campaign in the press and amongst various political groups and so forth, plus the fact that Management did hiccup on various things in the pressures they were under. But certainly there wasn't when I left, the kind of rapport and sense of understanding, a sense of being part of a team. If you're part of a cricket team, you can say to one of your colleagues if you've both been playing in the same match, "You were an idiot to hit out at that one outside the off stump, you know. What were you thinking of?" And the chap will say "Well I was, you know, and if only I'd realised I was going to give a catch". But you don't give offence by that, because you are part of the same team, and you've got to have that sense of being part of the same team. The Management want criticism from the Board, but they want criticism from an informed Board who know what they're talking about, and who aren't speaking from prejudice or anything, but just from commitment to this great concept of public service broadcasting the BBC represents.

GILLARD You've already mentioned several times the licence fee campaigns and the outcomes and so forth. Is there anything more you want to say about them? I

mean the financial restraints that came in, and I don't want any details about it, because of course they're all on the record anyway. What about the Eltham Hall for example? I don't even know what Eltham Hall really wall all about. Could you start with that one?

JOHNSTON Well I am not sure I can give you a very clear account of that because I didn't keep any of my papers when I left the BBC, and that is now two years ago! But it was one of the regular weekend meetings of the Board of Management and the Board of Governors to thrash out the next steps and to have a real think-in without the pressure of immediate business.

We'd had the previous one at Leeds Castle, the previous two at Leeds Castle, but Leeds Castle was a little expensive and so we decided no, no, this won't do. We must do it more economically. Eltham Hall was a hotel were we could be accommodated much more cheaply and have our meetings.

But we had, as we had for the last three or four years, financial problems and economies to be made, and organisational problems, and the Director General had set up a little Commission of three to do a report on these.

GILLARD Checkland?

JOHNSTON Mike Checkland, the then Director of ...

GILLARD Buck.

JOHNSTON Geoff Buck, who turned out to be a splendid Director of Finance, having been No.2 in the shadow of his predecessor for a long time. He was splendid Geoff,

and a lovely man.

GILLARD Michael Aldis, no. (OFF MIC COMMENTS) We'll just have those three names again then.

JOHNSTON Mike Checkland, Geoff Buck - Director of Finance, and Gerraint Stanley Jones, who had been Controller Wales, and who to my mind was an absolutely super man in the sense of one of those people who everybody likes, who's a keen mind, but a gentle approach without enemies, and the three of them produced I think one of the crispest reports I've seen produced by the BBC. There weren't volumes and volumes of verbiage, but a very crisp analysis of the subjects they'd been given, and very crisp recommendations, which included various recommendations for cutbacks, for resource allocation for regional organisation and so forth. These were all gone through by the Board and Bom together, and they were by and large agreed with slight variants at Eltham Hall. They then had to be put into effect, and the putting into effect is all post-me really. I left soon after that.

GILLARD One of the proposals I remember was that Radio 2 should be abandoned. Ah, you've forgotten that. Never mind, we needn't pursue it. It's something that I took up with William Rees-Mogg because he was the great supporter of Radio 2, and reckons he saved it. You've forgotten that, never mind. Let's forget it.

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RECORDING SERVICES, RADIO.
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FRANK GILLARD INTERVIEW WITH SIR JOHN JOHNSTON

SIDE THREE

GILLARD: We're now on side three of the cassette. Before we push onto anything else, we were talking about the economies and the licence fee reductions or failure to achieve the degree of financing of the BBC that we'd hoped for. I just want you tell us about the one economy that you were responsible for, namely the smokers. The smokers' restriction.

JOHNSTON: Well it wasn't a smokers' restriction. It was just that it had been the habit, as it had been for years, that for Board lunches and so on, the catering side of the BBC produced a box of cigars after lunch and these would go round and people helped themselves very plentifully. You know, they stuck one in their pocket if they didn't want to smoke it then. And being appalled by the price of proper Havana cigars, I said "For goodness sake if we are cutting ourselves very severely in a whole lot of directions, how can we possibly go on handing out these extremely expensive cigars or lunches etc."

And so it was agreed that in future, no more cigars. I only did it, not so much for the actual cost although that is substantial over a year, but simply because it was symbolic. A Corporation that's really trying to economise as hard as it can, shouldn't be handing out free cigars.

GILLARD: Right. It's a good story. Now when Alasdair, was appointed, Alasdair Milne was appointed as Director-General, you made a new appointment there of the post of Assistant Director General and you put in Alan Protheroe, could you say a word or two about that?

JOHNSTON: This was very much Alasdair's own wish because he wanted, when he started off, to be Chief Executive and professional head of the service and Editor in Chief because Editor in Chief was part of his responsibilities. He didn't want to do this through the kind of news and current affairs organisation that there was at that time. He wanted to have someone, as it were, in the next room so that they were in constant contact, and so that the person doing this would be reflecting him and speaking for him in editorial matters across the news and current affairs field. And so he said he'd like this appointment made. It was to be Assistant Director General and that post would give him the right to speak for the DG in these matters. And to Alan Protheroe's surprise he was appointed. Alasdair wanted him and he was appointed. I don't think it worked quite as Alasdair had meant it to. Alan Protheroe is of course a

tremendous eager beaver, a tremendous hard worker, night and day there was nothing he loved more than being rung up in the middle of a dinner party and called out to the telephone. A very hard worker, a very emotional man. And I think his emotions clouded his judgement from time to time. But he had a bad ride over Princess Michael in two respects because you know the incident ...

GILLARD: No I think you'd better just say a word about the incident if you don't mind. You know when it was....

JOHNSTON: The casus belli so to speak was very simple, TV AM had an interview with Princess Michael which was absolutely exclusive, which we recorded and used ourselves without their permission. There is no question about it, it was wrong. Alan Protheroe certainly knew about it because he defended it, and this was the great mistake. If he'd said, "I'm terribly sorry we did this, we made a mistake. I apologised to TV AM", but he conjured up Jesuitical reasons why it wasn't in this case a wrong thing to do. The Board were very upset by this and this is where he was rather let down by Alasdair. We don't know how much Alasdair knew about this, but I think he knew a little about it. It had been going on the previous day. At the meeting, The Board meeting, which was a programme policy committee in fact, this subject was brought up and Alan Protheroe was arraigned by the Board on this: and Alasdair sat absolutely silent through the meeting. He didn't say "Well I'm really responsible, I'm Editor-in-Chief, I will discuss this with

Mr Protheroe in the light of your views and I'll report back to you," or whatever. He just let Alan Protheroe take a real caning and Alan, instead of saying "You're absolutely right; it was stupid on my part to have done this," deluged the Governors with pages and pages of duplicated explanations of why exactly what had happened, at what minute and at what time and why it was alright.

And it wasn't alright and he knew it wasn't alright. I think that more than anything injured his standing with the Board who felt he was so emotional about it and so unwilling to say that he'd been wrong.

GILLARD: This was the Board meeting at Elstree, the famous Board meeting wasn't it, and there was pretty well blood on the floor there I understand because the Board ...this information was sprung on the board, wasn't it? And indeed it was in the morning newspapers and that's where most of the Board members had first seen it.

JOHNSTON: Yes, we knew something was afoot. The ones of us who'd been at the GAC Meeting the day before had known that there was to-ing and fro-ing and there was something afoot but we only got a report of it that morning. You couldn't have had one earlier because it only happened the day before. The Board couldn't have been informed about it before. But it was...it was a sad occasion really yes.

GILLARD: He's of course still in the post as we speak, as ADG and yet somebody else seems to have been appointed to take over his reponsibilities. Doesn't seem to be a lot of future for him?

JOHNSTON: I can't answer that you know because my connections are severed. I must say this for Alan, his devotion to the BBC is absolutely unequalled. He believes passionately in it all. And he believes passionately in the need for the BBC to report fearlessly, frankly, the truth as it sees it. But I don't believe his judgement has been all that marvellous and I have the feeling that over the last few years, BBC journalism as a whole has been taken down a notch. If you compare it...I've always felt that in terms of journalism the BBC had to be THE TIMES as it were, the journal of record, sober, and ....sensible and proportionate in its approach. I feel over the last few years, it's slipped down to be - I won't say what, it's not down to the dreadfuls but it's something less than the highest quality. If you look at the order of events in the news bulletin, it can't resist the temptation of putting first the stories which are not of greatest importance but which are sensational or they're full of human drama or whatever. And this has been my sadness about the news and current affairs over the last year or two.

GILLARD: You know the Secretary to the BBC David Holmes, was a distinguished member of the BBC's journalistic staff, he was our parliamentary editor. David was so grieved at the attitude of the Board towards the BBC's journalists and the Board's failure to understand the journalistic side of the BBC's work, that...which culminated in the REAL LIVES disaster, that he couldn't any longer continue and he had to retire prematurely. I mean simply because he simply could no longer work for a Board which

failed in his view so completely to understand the true nature of BBC journalism. And that was his attitude I'm sure it must have been an attitude reflected much lower down in the ranks of journalists. Do you make any comment on that?

JOHNSTON: I understand the way David felt. I think it was because he found himself in a situation in which he was at the focus of all these pressures and disagreements as Secretary, that he felt he really couldn't carry on. I think he was greatly affected by the REAL LIVES problem, and the failure.. and I'm deeply affected by it. I mean I feel I ought to have seen more clearly that the real importance of the REAL LIVES thing was in terms of the BBC's independence. Though in fact I don't believe it harmed the BBC's independence, it underlined it.

GILLARD: But David felt the Board despised the BBC's journalists?

JOHNSTON: I think this is partly a reflection of this atmosphere that I mentioned to you that management got to feel that the Board was simply there as a panel of critics, and was not identified with the BBC in the way the Board always used to be. I think it's another aspect of the same thing.

GILLARD: Yes, I understand. Now let's talk about the creation of another post which you were involved in and this is not the Assistant Director General but the Deputy Director General, tell us about that.

JOHNSTON: This was the product I think of two things. First the tremendous pressure on the BBC to economise in all directions to make sure that there was sufficient

money in every part of its operations. And to see the whole thing was run on a very tight rein. And secondly, because that kind of task was not one for which the Director General himself, in the form of Alasdair Milne, was temperamentally or otherwise really supremely qualified. It was one for Mike Checkland, who had everyone's confidence from his days as Director of Resources. He did an absolutely marvellous job on the management of the BBC's resources. The suggestion was made, and I'm not sure by whom, that there ought to be a deputy who could oversee all that side of the BBC's activities, the whole complicated financial pattern and report to the Board and keep the DG in touch with all this. I think Alasdair resisted this at first. He didn't want a deputy. But he finally came to see that there would be merit in this and certainly before long Alasdair was ensuring that Michael Checkland was with him at all Board meetings so there was...

GILLARD: Alan Protheroe was with him?

JOHNSTON: It was a recommendation I made to the Board when I left that the DG should have the Assistant DG with him at Board Meetings ....

GILLARD: But not the deputy DG

JOHNSTON: Sorry I beg your pardon...

GILLARD: Ah now we'll start again then...Alasdair insisted on having the DDG with him...

JOHNSTON: Yes. Alasdair started to have the DDG with him so that he had at his elbow, through all the Board meetings someone whose absolute mastery of the whole organisation, the financial situation, was

unquestioned. And I think this was very much welcomed by the Board.

GILLARD: And of course it was a very good training for the man who was going to become the next Director General?

JOHNSTON: Absolutely, and it is the case I'm told by my friends who are still on the Board, that having been put into the job, he's grown into it wonderfully and is getting better and better every day so to speak.

GILLARD: Yes, I confirm that. Major crises - now all sorts of people have talked to us about these and I wouldn't ask you to go into them in detail, only if you feel you've something special you want to say about them. I mean Michael Swann has talked about them for example, the INLA Incident, the Carrickmore Incident. Carrickmore has been described to us by everybody from the bottom to the top, I mean through Mansell who had to handle it all and so forth. Do you wish to say anything about those particular matters?

JOHNSTON: Not particularly, I think they have probably been dealt with. If I were to say anything it might be about Carrickmore which was the most extraordinary business. I mean it was a crisis that never happened. What it illustrated for me was the rapidity which the politicians of all parties were prepared because of their inbuilt prejudices to believe anything bad about the BBC. What happened, as you know, was that a young reporter got a tip off, something worth seeing, but he didn't have enough time to consult about it and rushed off, only to find that he'd run into a set-up thing. He took some film but it was never

used. The Board Meeting was on the Thursday morning. The first that the Controller of Northern Ireland heard about it was at dinner at the Home Office the night before. The press picked up there had been some BBC filming of the IRA or something. Instantly in Parliament that day there was a denunciation of this and how frightful it was. Nobody stopped to ask what had happened. The Board of course, meeting on Thursday morning, was absolutely in the dark. All we knew was that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition were thumping the table about this. It hadn't been referred up through the channels at all. Controller Northern Ireland knew about it, having heard about it from the Home Office the night before, but the film hadn't been used, it hadn't been shown, it was never put out as a programme. What the governors said was "Well this is the first we've heard about it: something has gone wrong in the system of referral, because nobody knows anything about this." And because they didn't instantly get up and say..."Well we've only just heard about this but you can be confident that anything a BBC journalist does is right. We back the journalists." This upset the journalists and a lot of them protested, particularly John Gau, in rather unmeasured terms. But it was a very stupid affair, because it was about nothing. About a bit of film was never even contemplated being shown.

GILLARD: Yet incredibly it has gone down into history and is dragged up at every opportunity. What about the Doctor Gee Libel Case, were you involved in that?

JOHNSTON: I was there certainly, but I wasn't involved in the case. What it seemed to me awful about this is what it says about the system of justice in this country. I'm in no doubt that we could have won eventually in the Gee Case, but the cost of doing so was such that...you have to say to yourself 'Well this has already cost a million pounds or whatever it is' because it's the sort of case in which it was possible for the defence to keep putting it off, keep extending it, to keep doing this that and the other. You open the stopcock on the finances and they run out, as fast as maybe. And we simply had to say stop in the Gee case. Whether we ought ever to have gone on with it, in the sense of knowing what the costs were likely to be, I don't know I think everyone was so convinced of the rightness of the case they felt we can't not defend this. But to me it reflects partly on the BBC but much more on this thing which one's constantly coming across that when you get questions of this kind, the cost of securing justice, makes it almost impossible to do so.

GILLARD: It did lead partly to the undoing of the Director General, it rankles with the Board still I find.

JOHNSTON: Yes it did because they felt they should have not been confronted with a situation in which already huge sums of money had been spent, but brought in at an earlier stage to say "Well look, we've had to spend this, it's likely to cost that, do we go on with it?" And I think they felt that Alasdair had not in fact been in touch with it. And it was one of a series of things that rankled.

GILLARD: You were ...presided over

the...advisory structure to a considerable degree, didn't you? Tell us about that.

JOHNSTON: Well it was fascinating. When I joined the Board, they had just set up, in the wake of Annan, this committee, because until then the appointments to all the advisory bodies, run by the BBC were made by the Board. They always have been, but they were really done on the nod in a Board Meeting without the time for real consideration of them, and so one of the decisions taken in the wake of Annan was to set up a Committee of the Board to handle these things: to go into the appointments with greater care than the full Board had been able to, and simply next day to make its recommendations at the Board. So we set up this Committee and I was asked by Michael Swann if I'd sit on it, to begin with, and then when Stella Clark retired, who had been chairman of it, I was asked if I would chair it and I did for the next five years or so, in the course of which we were able I think to streamline the procedures a bit and to get established what we were looking for. It's a fascinating business, appointing representative bodies so to speak; if you take simply the advisory committee of a local radio station, what you want is an advisory committee which is balanced, as between men and women; as between young and old; if it's Oxfordshire, as between the North of the County and the South of the County; and on which the major employments and industries of the place are represented - Cowley for example - and on which any other particular local interests are represented...

GILLARD: Do politics come in?

JOHNSTON: Politics don't come into it, no.

GILLARD: But municipal representation?

JOHNSTON: No, no. No, we've never gone in for that. We may have appointed a councillor here and there, not because they were a councillor but because we needed someone from that area, with that kind of background, because you didn't want all professional people. It was very easy to find when you look down the list, teacher, doctor, teacher, university professor, teacher; and the constant cry was "Where are the weekly wage earners?" Because you want that sort of social spread. It got to be quite a fine art - you're almost at the point of saying "Well what is needed in this situation is a left handed Welsh speaking milkman". But we did get it down to a very fine art that way because we developed forms on which the recommendations were made, from which it was instantly visible, the number of men, the number of women, the age bracket in which they fell, the social bracket in which they fell; so that you had a spread from the teachers and the retired bank managers, and the workers by hand and eye, so that they were all there. And I think it produced some very entertaining little committees for people to chair. We had to do this of course on a national scale for the GAC - you've got to represent every part of the country, almost every interest, you know from...architecture to horse riding...ages, sexes, social classes, and I think we achieved a pretty good system of doing it. And we produced some pretty good advisory bodies.

GILLARD: But over and above all that, this

advisory structure is very costly, and isn't it slightly bogus I mean would the BBC suffer if the whole thing were swept away tomorrow?

JOHNSTON: Yes, is my short answer to that. But to answer at greater length I think you've got to divide it into segments. Let's start at the bottom with local radio. I think it's very important for the chap running a local radio station who has one of the best jobs in the BBC: he's like a naval officer who's given command of a frigate for the first time. He's a mini director-general, runs the whole thing - I think he needs someone on his back as it were, who listens to the programmes and says "We were appalled by what you were doing over so and so." And explain why. And at that range, you've got to do something about it. I think it's essential that he has someone to whom he's accountable like that. If you take the specialist advisory committees... take the agricultural committee; absolutely marvellous. It's got the best farmers, and the scientists, and it's a dialogue between them and the agricultural producers. These chaps say to the producers, "You got it all wrong last week. What on earth are you doing making programmes like this, this is what you should be doing." And they go away and make them because they are talking to the experts. So I think all the specialist ones have a very, very valuable function. I think the regional ones in a sense are probably one of the most difficult ones to justify. But you can justify them I think, in terms of the posture of the BBC in

that region. And in fact we publicise that there is this advisory body; that people who would like to be on it can write in and if you've got points you want to raise, that you can write to the advisory body. If you're unhappy you can get in touch with them. And so there is someone, as it were vice a very distant Board of Governors to whom the chap running the region or whatever has got to justify what he's doing and has got to meet. He's got to meet them every quarter or every fortnight or whenever they meet and they are going to say to him, why have you started doing this? And he's got to justify it. So that it's an important discipline for him I think. And it's valuable to involve people as we do because most of these appointments are for four years. And we stagger them, so that the thing changes every year, the membership. You're gradually drawing in people to feel they've a sense of responsibility for the BBC and what it's doing. I think the one most difficult to justify perhaps is the General Advisory Council. Because there you're dealing with the whole country and the whole range of output, what I do think is of advantage to the BBC is that on particular occasions, the Advisory Council very often can speak up for the BBC, on some question. It's also valuable in that from time to time, well, as a regular thing, the General Advisory Council, which has its own steering committee will say, e'd like to have a look at the BBC's treatment of-whatever you like...ethnic problems, unemployment, whatever - could we have a paper on that?" And that will cause that section of the BBC to go back and write a paper in which they think out and justify or fail to

justify exactly the way they are approaching these problems. That imposes a discipline on them. And quite a lot of these papers have been of such quality that the general advisory council has said afterwards...." we think this paper should be published." And it is published. So that I do think the whole system, apart from having its input for programmes - and that's difficult to quantify in the sense that nobody leaps up and does a completely different series of programmes because of criticisms but they feed in and they're absorbed. It's a kind of osmosis, and future programming is conditioned by what these bodies say to greater or smaller degree but they impose a very valuable discipline on everybody connected with them, I think.

GILLARD: Did you include the School Broadcasting Council and the continuing education people in your committee?

JOHNSTON: Not the School Broadcasting Council, because as you probably know that has a separate constitution in which....sorry I beg your pardon - we included part of them. The School Broadcasting Council has its own constitution in which quite a large number of its members are ex-officio. They're as it were representatives of various bits of the educational machine, but there are certain members who are appointed by the BBC and we did make those appointments. There was a point in which George Howard thought this very odd, to have one broadcasting council, which was quite unlike all the others, and of which the BBC didn't appoint all its members, and that perhaps this ought to be brought into line. And he asked me to do a little

study of this I went away and talked to everybody concerned, but it was quite clear to me after talking to everyone that if you said We're going to abolish this agreement we have - because it has a charter - we're going to give notice to end this charter and have a committee that's appointed entirely by the BBC, you'd have to appoint almost exactly the same people but would you create a tremendous ruckus in the educational world by saying you wanted to cancel this charter. In a sense the fact that the educationational people have these places reserved to them, is an endorsement of the whole system from their point of view. The BBC can't muck about with it, there they are. So I finished my analysis of all this by saying my recommendation is "Let sleeping anomalies lie." And they all liked that and they agreed.

GILLARD: Yes. What about the BBC's PR, the advisory bodies are one aspect of it, I suppose, what about those public meetings, what about PR at large generally? Was it good?

JOHNSTON: Some of it's good. As I said I think the BBC went overboard in the licence fee campaigns, and got carried away with slogans and car stickers and all the rest of it. The public meetings are very interesting. I don't myself believe that they made a great deal of difference to the BBC because you know the way they worked - you decide you'll have a public meeting, in Coventry say. You put notices on the local radio, in the paper etc saying IT'S YOUR BBC - we'll have a panel of the top BBC people here on such and such a night, if you want to come and

fire questions at them, or say anything you like to them about the BBC programmes, you're free to come, admittance by ticket, apply to so and so for tickets. You got almost the same audience, all over the place. They were the people who really loved the BBC, and they came along to say the same things, they came along to say, "We think the sports commentators are terrible." "We don't think you give enough time for brass bands." You could almost predict 50% of the questions which would be asked because the people who chose to come were people who minded about the BBC and who loved it. So they were pretty much on your side. I remember in the run up to one licence fee thing when I went to several meetings, we tried them out and said to people, "Would you mind if the licence fee went up by so and so in order to provide you with this, that and the other?" And the general reaction was "No, no, no. We're not worried about the licence fee." But it's Governments who think that the licence fee is going to make them win or lose elections and things.

GILLARD: I was very impressed by Leon Brittan over the REAL LIVES thing, I interviewed him for the archives twice, and he said that the Government is always surprised that the BBC doesn't recognise that it's a thoroughly well dug in, highly respected, national institution and therefore it's got to take the rough with the smooth and he's got to learn to ride with the punches and not to get all het up every time an issue comes up in the public press, like this REAL LIVES affair, and so on. The BBC is so powerful and so strong it can over-ride all that. Now this is all a matter

of public relations really isn't it. What do you think about his comment and what do you think about the BBC's PR in relation to the deterioration of the public standing of the BBC that you've already mentioned over the last few years. Can that be contradicted by good PR do you think?

JOHNSTON: Well you raise a number of points there....starting with Leon Brittan. I am surprised at those remarks really about an occasion on which he wrote to the BBC trying to tell them what to do, from a political point of view; that he should be surprised that on an issue which brought the BBC's independence into question, there was a reaction so strong that the BBC staff went on strike over it. I mean it's a failing on his part not to see that that was the sort of fire he was playing with because if there is one thing the BBC absolutely believes in it's independence. And it's all very well to say "Well I wasn't really messing about with the independence" "You bloody well were mate" is the answer to that. He shouldn't be surprised at the strength of the reaction. You say the BBC is falling out of favour or whatever, it depends who you're talking to.

I still believe that the central mass of sensible citizens in this country value the BBC and know its worth.

GILLARD: You called it the silent majority the last time I was here.

JOHNSTON: The silent majority yes. And I absolutely believe that. And this is why I disagree with what Leon Brittan is saying, if ever, the independence of the BBC or the external services or whatever comes into question there will be an instant public reaction

and the great silent majority, will stand behind the BBC. That's why when I'm in the Post Office and I see dear old people drawing their pension saying "Two TV licence stamps please": they want it, so that it means something to them. The BBC has served this country in peace and war in the most marvellous way for 60 years and I think people aren't your central core, your silent majority aren't panicked by Murdoch wanting to see it split up so that he can buy some, or the Peacock Committee saying we ought to sell off a bit of it. Though how do you do that? What have you got to sell? A bit of Broadcasting House? The staff? The Programmes? I mean it's crazy.

GILLARD: It's a good note to end on really but what do you have to say about the future?

JOHNSTON: Well...have you got plenty of tape?

GILLARD: I'll give you five seconds!

JOHNSTON: Broadcasting is about programmes. The number of programmes you can broadcast or the kinds of programmes you broadcast is absolutely finite. There is no new dimension of programming available from extra money or extra channels or anything. You've got a certain array of programmes now; drama, series, documentaries, chat shows, game shows, farces, educative programmes, that's all there are, so that what you've got to look for, it seems to me, for the future, is the maintenance and improvement of quality. That's why I think our system is so good, as I've said before because I think it's so contrived that a premium exists on quality. And that's why I think North American broadcasting is so appalling, in that it doesn't exist to make programmes, it

exists to deliver audiences to advertisers. So that if one's looking at the future, it seems to me that you have got to continue to have a public service broadcasting organisation which is committed to making programmes of quality and doesn't have to compete for the money to do so. I think the absolute disaster would be to have broadcasters in this country competing for the same money because we'd then go the American way and quality goes out of the window. So, I therefore believe there has to be a BBC - I personally don't see any other way of financing it, save by contributions exacted from the populus. The licence fee is a very unpopular way of doing it, partly because unless you buy the stamps you have to pay it in one lump. Partly because people view it as a sort of regressive tax and so on. Other people do it other ways. In Germany you pay it on the telephone bill and I believe if there is a will to find another way of doing it, that could be done, by instalments as it were and in some other context. If for example, local rates were reorganised so that they became, not what they are now, but a sort of tax on everybody in a locality, you could then make them the vehicle for levying the broadcasting tax. I would like to see it taken out of the political arena. I think it's not good that the level of the broadcasting fee or whatever it's called, should be decided by politicians with an eye on the electorate, an eye on elections, an eye on popularity and so forth. It doesn't seem to me a sound basis to do it on. It could be done in different ways, if there was a will to do it differently. The politicians won't want to give it

up, because for a variety of reasons they obviously don't like giving up these things but the fixing of the licence fee could be put into commission of some kind, without detracting from the BBC's responsibility to report to Parliament and to represent the public. And be responsible through Parliament to the public.

GILLARD: One more minute.

JOHNSTON: What sort of BBC? I think it must continue to contain the creative mass. You might be able to drop a few things, but I think most of the present functions ought to be there, feeding and nourishing each other. Local Radio for example, the ground roots of all our news and current affairs, anything that comes up, there's a BBC man on the spot to give you direct news. A training ground for the networks, dozens of cases but Libby Purves for example started with Radio Oxford. For so many people their introduction and their first training is in local radio, for which they go on to the networks. I think you need that big mass and I can't think of any alternatives to the Board of Governors. But I can think of alternatives to their selection. I think somehow their selection ought not to be directly in political hands, as it is at the moment. I think you could contemplate for example - because they are appointed by the Privy Council, by the Queen in Council - you could contemplate a Privy Council Committee, on which Government and Opposition and Parties in Parliament were so represented that no one had a predominant voice, and which could have an entirely independent chairman, which met to decide on and appoint Governors of the BBC so that there was an absolute guarantee

that people could not say people had been appointed because they were Conservative, because they were Labour or whatever. I think you could improve that.

We're not into the new technology yet, and nor are we going to be for a long time, and when we are, there can be no differences, the same kind of programmes only more often. What we want is an organisation that's producing them for quality and I think something very like the present BBC is the only way of doing that.

GILLARD: Thank you Sir John.

JOHNSTON: Thanks very much.