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Summary

Bridget Kendall, interviewed by David Hendy at the Master's Lodge, Peterhouse, Cambridge, talks about her 30 years working at the BBC.

Initially, Kendall talks about her upbringing in Cambridge and the reason she chose to study Russian language and literature at Oxford. She then describes at length her growing interest in Russian art and politics and how changes in the Russian political landscape influenced her choice to apply to the BBC.

She reminisces about her childhood experience of listening to the radio and her parents' first television set.

Kendall explains how she was rejected by the two BBC training schemes that she applied for and how this led to two offers – one for training at BBC External Services, which she accepted, and one for working on a BBC TV documentary on the Soviet Union. She describes the difference at that time between news and current affairs at the External Services and how she worked on current affairs before moving to BBC Newsnight as a newsreader for six months.

Kendall talks at length about working at Bush House, and how the building's architecture clashed with the ethos of the External Services trying to communicate with the world. She talks about the other staff in Bush House and how stimulating she found it.

Kendal describes in detail her work for the World Service programme '24 Hours' before listing the positions she held and some of the topics covered during her work at the World Service until 1989. She reminisces about covering the 1985 Geneva Summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev and the Reykjavik Summit in 1986. She explains that this led to her visiting Georgia to make a radio documentary about changes in the Soviet Union and how this led to a joint World Service/Radio 4 documentary about Perestroika.

She explains the changing role of the BBC Moscow correspondent from the 1960s onwards and how the focus changed from the Soviet Union's external to internal relations, and how this led to her, along with other Russian speakers, being sent to Moscow to represent news outlets.

Kendall describes in detail the structure and methodology of the Moscow radio bureau. She tells an anecdote about meeting a miner in a park and learning of their plans to hold a strike as an example of how things were opening up and people were able to speak to the BBC. She describes in great depth news gathering in the new reality, including from information shared by the Foreign Ministry and the debates in the Congress of People's

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Deputies. Kendall stresses the advantages of speaking Russian which enabled her to understand the debates in the Congress and to travel alone. To explain the VIP status of foreigners, she tells an anecdote about a visit to Chechnya where she was given a local bodyguard to protect her whilst many Russians were fleeing the region.

Kendall describes how gender played a role in how officials reacted to her but states that the linguistic and journalistic quality of female members of the press pack shone through.

Kendall tells the story of Hungary opening its borders with Austria and how the Soviet spokesperson, Gennadi Gerasimov, told her that there would be no Soviet intervention. She goes on to describe the visit of Gorbachev to Berlin and her role in spreading his message to the East German people via West German television.

Kendall describes at great length the unfolding events that led to the breakup of the Soviet Union and explains the challenges of providing the World Service and Radio 4 with sufficient output. She provides an assessment of how well BBC radio did in the Soviet Union during this period, pointing out what was done well and what could have been done better.

She then explains at length what happened during the attempted coup in August 1991, how she came to hear of the event, and how she covered it. She notes that Gorbachev said that he listened to the BBC during the coup attempt.

Kendall considers the influence of the BBC on the Soviet Union and later on Putin's Russia and reminisces about people confirming to her that they had been listening to the BBC Russian Service. She tells a story about covering the parliamentary vote for the independence of Latvia and getting prime use of the international telephone line to file her report from Riga.

She tells an anecdote about the fallout from her interview with Yeltsin's Vice President, Alexander Rutskoy and goes on to talk about the BBC's relationship with Vladimir Putin and how it was at one time an important vehicle for him.

Kendall gives her views on changes in the BBC under John Birt with technological advances and the merging of content as things were streamed digitally with rolling news. She explains some of the choices that must be taken when deciding whether to film an interview and mentions the problems of feeding several television and radio channels.

Kendall reflects on her time working with the BBC and concludes that she never wanted to work for anyone else. She ends with some words on her new position as Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge.

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Transcript

Q: [0:00:14] Okay, so we're in the Master's Lodge, is that right term?

A: [0:00:18] Yes.

Q: [0:00:22] At Peterhouse--, it's not Peterhouse College—

A: [0:00:22] It's Peterhouse.

Q: [0:00:23] It's Peterhouse, Cambridge. It's Wednesday the 12 June 2019. And can I ask you to introduce yourself.

A: [0:00:31] Okay, my name is Bridget Kendall. Currently, I'm Master of Peterhouse, which is Cambridge's oldest and one of its smallest colleges. I've been here nearly three years. And before that I was a BBC correspondent, which is a job I did for decades in various guises, as Moscow correspondent, Washington correspondent, diplomatic correspondent. And after over a 30-year career at the BBC, I decided to come here.

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Q: [0:00:58 Well, we're going to talk a lot about your BBC career. But can I start, before the BBC, with your sort of earlier life, as it were. Can you just sort of paint a bit of a picture of what your sort of family life was? Where you lived? What kind of, you know, family life it was?

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A: [0:01:19] Well, actually, I grew up here in Cambridge. My father was an academic and we moved here when I was 6. And I was number two in a family of six children and went to a local day school and lived in this lovely city. And my parents' priority was always education. And all six of us went onto university. I went to Oxford, the other place, to get away from my parents, of course, where I studied Russian language and literature. And my childhood, growing up, probably did inform the subject I chose. I love languages, I still do. But also, my father, as a mathematician was very interested in mathematicians the other side of the Iron Curtain, particularly in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union. And he would go to conferences there, because at that time, the Cold War, they couldn't easily get a visa to get out. And occasionally they came to visit and we'd have them home. And so I had a sort of personal taste of life, and very human life, beyond the Iron Curtain, and that intrigued me. And I think, also, being in a sort of quiet academic family in a lovely, but provincial town in England, I always had a yearning to travel. And you have to remember--, so I was brought up in the '60s and early '70s as a schoolgirl, we didn't have the money to go abroad. People didn't go abroad. And just felt like there's a big world out there I wasn't seeing. And studying languages, and especially an exotic a language as Russian, seemed like a good way to do it. And it was a good choice. It really was a good way to do it.

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Q: [0:03:04] You were interested in languages, were you also interested in the kind of culture, arts, literature, what was it--, or was it that more than politics at that stage?

A: [0:03:16] It definitely was. My interests were very much on the arts and humanities side. In fact to study Russian at O-Level, I gave up physics

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and chemistry after one year. The only science I did for O-Level was biology. I mean, since I've hosted BBC programmes, so I've had to find out about quantum physics and biochemistry and had to work really hard to make up for the gap in my early education. But it was very focused on the humanities. I played quite a lot of musical instruments. I sang in choirs here. I did loads of drama. I nearly went to art school. I was always focused on language and literature and that was my--, the first appeal of Russian, beyond the fascinating language and the alphabet, once I'd found out what an amazing literature it had, then I wanted to read it, especially the poetry. And my interest in politics came later, really, through literature, because when I was at university I realised that although the flowering of Russian literature was in the 19th century with Pushkin and Dostoevsky and Chekhov and so on, I realised the 20th century was just as interesting. Even though quite a lot of it was not published or even acknowledged in the Soviet Union. And then as time when on in my studies I became more fascinated with the intersection between politics and literature and how living in a repressive political environment affects how a writer writes. When you have no editor, when you're writing for the [drawer 0:04:45] how do you know when your work of art is ready? And that was actually what led me into my area of research, I suppose, graduate afterwards, studying a novelist from the early Soviet period, precisely for this reason. Although I must admit, that was also partly--, I went into research, because I couldn't bear to give up studying Russian. I'd spent a year in the Soviet Union by then on a British Council scholarship, and I could see doing more research work was a way I could go back. So I took two years out to go to Harvard on a scholarship to broaden myself and learn about politics and history in the Russian, Soviet environment, which I hadn't got from my language and literature degree. And then I went back to Moscow for another year in the early 1980s, just before Brezhnev died, actually. And that was the point at which I realised, this

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place is on the cusp of change, and took the decision which was to change my life, which was to apply to the BBC.

Q: [0:05:42] And what was it about that visit that kind of stimulated that interest? So there was the sense in which, you know, it was the dying days of the Brezhnev era, so it was a country changing, is that essentially what shifted you towards journalism more specifically?

A: [0:06:02] Well, I think it was erm, I mean, there's a lot of different things. I mean, the sort of person I am, I think, which is, I am quite academic and I love ideas and books. I've got lots of them. I'm very happy back here in Cambridge. But I think I'm quite a practical person who likes to be out and about, travelling and meeting people. And so I had, if you like, constructed an early academic career that allowed me to do that, you know, Russia, Harvard, back to Russia. And so now I was reaching the end of the road, and had to decide, well, what actually did I want with my life? And I do remember feeling quite strongly being aware of the political situation there and that, whatever happened, and a lot of us thought that the Soviet Union would become a terrible place that they'd clamp the lid down on, and it would become quite a frightening place, but fascinating. And I thought, I don't want to be an academic who's reading about this in books in libraries years later. If it's possible, I'd like to be tracking it, moment by moment. I remember, I had a friend whose father was quite well placed in Moscow in the--, he knew a lot of people in the Central Committee, and he knew what was going on. We knew Brezhnev was ill. We knew the country was in real economic problems. I remember, in May that year, 1982, the food minister went on television to say, either he said there was a crisis or there wasn't a crisis. But the very fact he went on television to even mention the word crisis was unknown in the Soviet Union. Where

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normally they just talked about the glorious grain harvest and how it was better than last year. And I remember going down a street in the provincial town I'd been in before, several years before as an undergraduate, and it had always been at the bottom of the distribution list and had very poor food, you had to queue for everything. And they'd run out of eggs and butter. And everyone was furious because Easter was coming and Russian families like to prepare special Easter cake and cream and they couldn't do it. And down this road came this big, black official limousine, and these two old ladies walked out onto the middle of the road and just shook their fists and it and forced it to swerve past them. And I realised, also, then that this was unprecedented and that there was a feeling things just couldn't go on like this. So I think I felt that this was a moment. And this father of my friend took me for a walk just before I left and--, that's what one did in those days, you took people for a walk so that nobody could overhear you through bugs in the walls, and he said, "We know Brezhnev's going to die, and a lot of people high up are very worried that there'll be a crack-down. And it could go back to being like it was in the late 1930s with the Great Terror, when Stalin arrested and killed or sent to the camps lots of people." And he said, "This may be about to happen again. So it's very important that you young people, like you and my daughter, stay in touch because that may be the only way that the west will know what's happening here." And it really sent a chill down my neck. But it did reinforce the feeling that this was a place on the cusp of something about to happen. And when I got back to the UK after this amazing year in Moscow, I remember thinking, well, what am I going to do? I mean, it would be quite hard to find an academic job, and also I wasn't sure that I wanted to. And then the father of a friend of mine said, "Why don't you apply to the BBC? You speak fluent Russian, you know the place, you know, it's such an important subject for the BBC, you should give it a go." So I hired a colour television,

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bought the Radio Times every week, set about studying it in order to prepare myself for--, and applied for all the training schemes, well, most of the training schemes and, you know, so I'd be in a good position if I was called to interview, to, you know, show that I was serious about joining. And it worked.

Q: [0:09:54] And, in terms of the BBC, I mean, I just want to kind of go back a little bit, really, to kind of get some sense of the BBC in your life. When you were growing up and when you were learning languages and living at home and so on, was the BBC part of your life then? I mean, what did you watch? What did you listen to? What were your kind of broadcasting influences, as it were?

A: [0:10:16] I didn't really listen to the radio so much except for early children's dramas. I remember them being absolutely captivating. So we're going back to the early '60s, the Hobbit and the Box of Delights by John Masefield. Absolutely wonderful, inventive children's books to hear on the radio. My parents bought a television when I was 7 because my brother and I lobbied them hard because of Dr Who, which we'd heard about at school and wanted to see. And they relented and bought a television. But I remember television for me was a chance to watch entertainment, drama, you know, whatever the classic was on Sunday, Dr Who, The Man From Uncle, that sort of thing. I didn't really focus on the news, on either radio or television, which is ironic when I ended up spending a lot of my career working for it. But my interest in news and current affairs didn't come till later, and really came through the Russia track.

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Q: [0:11:18] So 1982, you'd been to Russia, this was a moment of decision and it sounds as if you were kind of quite determined to try the BBC in terms of this looking at the--,

A: [0:11:30] Well, I wanted to give it my best shot. There was a training scheme--, there were three training schemes. One was a general trainee, which was a sort of fast track to management, which I applied for. There was television production, which I applied for, and then there was journalism. Which I didn't apply for because at university I'd done mainly lots of drama. I used to design costumes for theatrical productions for OUDS, the Oxford University Dramatic Society. But I hadn't really done any journalism. I'd done some at school. So I thought, well, there's no point applying because they won't look at me. I had done some student radio. Anyway, you know, again it's ironic that I didn't apply for the training scheme and yet I ended up as a BBC journalist. It just shows that you can't entirely plan your future [laughs].

Q: [0:12:16] So when you--, you got in then as a radio production--, on the radio production scheme?

A: [0:12:21] Yes, in fact what happened was, I got to the final interviews for the two schemes I applied for. So I think I was the final ten or dozen for six places in each. So that seemed quite good odds. And then they both didn't give me a place, because they said I was 26 and I was too old. Which I don't think people would think that now. But in those days, I think the BBC felt it had to get people early in order to sort of shape them into thinking in the BBC way, I don't know. Anyway, I was very downcast, of course, and was just thinking, well, what do I do now? And then two letters arrived in the post. And one was from someone who'd been on the board of the general traineeship, who

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was the managing director of what was then called External Services, now it would be called the World Service, Austen Kark, and he said, "I thought we should have given you a place, and I found some money and I'd like to give you a year's training scheme, if you'd like it, at Bush House." And the other one was from the Head of Documentaries, he'd been on the television scheme. And he said, "Sorry you didn't get on the scheme, but we're about to have a very big television project of a series of documentaries about real lives in the Soviet Union, and we're looking for a researcher. Would you like to come and talk to me about it?" So, although I didn't get on the schemes, I was then left with this lovely choice of, which of these two options did I go for? In the end I went for Bush House because I thought it would be--, it was going to train me rather than just use my knowledge about Russia. And it was a good choice. It was a really great stepping stone for a career in the BBC.

Q: [0:13:59] And did you have any sort of ongoing dealings with Austen Kark? I mean, was he very much a mentor? Because John Tusa was around then as well then, I think.

A: [0:14:09] Yes, John Tusa had moved off to Newsnight, by then. He'd been a presenter at the World Service in the department which I joined, which was current affairs. In those days, in the World Service, there was a very clear line between news, which was done in the newsroom, which was the eight or nine or ten minute bulletin at the top of the hour, and any current affairs, which was done by a separate department, where you took items that were in the news and then explored them, the background, or you might speculate or get someone who was involved to comment. And the idea was that one was giving you the facts and the other was then giving you opinion,

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which might be coloured and not just be fact. It's quite interesting today in the context of fake news, where part of the whole idea about fake news is that it's about the fact that these two categories are no longer separate, you know, opinion and fact get merged. And then when is one fabricated and when is one clearly the case. Anyway, in those days it was a very clear divide. So I was in the current affairs department and didn't have so much to do with the newsroom, except, of course, that we were the recipient of their news. And I think you have to remember, this is before computers. So we were really reliant on the newsroom to tell us what the news was. So what were their four--, what their four headlines were or what the stories were in their bulletin, was the guide for the current affairs programmes to decide what might be the topics that we'd explore in our programmes. So that's what I did when I arrived. And I didn't really have so much to do with Austen Kark. I mean, I went to see him and I knew him, but he was, you know, he was very, very, senior, I was just a little junior trainee. But it just so happened that after I'd been there six months, I had the opportunity to go to Newsnight for six months on a sort of--, a kind of attachment, we would call it now. It was specially--, it wasn't quite an attachment, but--, and weirdly, actually, I ended up reading the news. So I got very early training in autocue. I was a bit too young and a bit too inexperienced to be on camera, actually, if I look back on it, but it was very useful to be trained so young in that role. And there I did meet John Tusa because I worked alongside him. And we stayed in touch. And then only a couple of years later, or maybe less than that, he came back to Bush House as Managing Director, so then I knew him quite well. And I always admired very much what he did on Newsnight and, yeah, I would say he was someone I looked up to as a model.

Q: [0:16:51] You've talked a bit about the difference between news and current affairs, and I just wanted to kind of get some sort of snapshot,

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really, of what your first impressions were of Bush House as a sort of place as well. I mean, I don't know if you can remember literally your first day, but those sort of first impressions. Having really wanted to work for the BBC, and then you arrive, what was your first kind of sense of this as a sort of institution, as a place, as an environment?

A: [0:17:22] Well, let's say that, at that time the BBC in London existed in three places. So there was Bush House in the Aldwych, the home of external services. There was Broadcasting House in Portland Place, which was the domestic radio services, Radio 4. And then there was Television Centre over in West London, which was where all television happened. Actually, Newsnight happened down the road in Lime Grove Studios. So they felt very separate. They were geographically separate and they had different ethos's, different people worked in them. Pre-computer age, you had to pick up a phone or go across London to talk to somebody. So there was much less intercommunication between these different parts than there would be today, where you just pick up an iPhone and text or email someone. So there was Bush House. It's at the bottom of the Aldwych, it's a very tall, imposing building. Sense of history. Nation shall speak unto nation, huge statues, very vertical, very kind of 1930s feel about it. So you really felt the history of the BBC and everything that had gone before, the Empire Service, the role in the second world war, its long reputation for different crises around the world in the years that followed, the '50s, the '60s, the '70s. When I arrived the Falklands War had just ended. So that had been a big moment for the BBC, and especially the external services, because Britain hadn't kind of been to war in anger for a very long time. And the Government hadn't been that happy by how the BBC had covered it, in not being patriotic, but in trying to be even-handed about the war. So that was talked about a lot by different people. In fact our department ran a little

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programme called Calling the Falklands, which during the Falklands war of course had been massively important because it was the voice of the Falklanders, or broadcasting to the Falklanders. So you immediately had a sense of--, although in London, and even in terms of the BBC, this was a bit of a backwater, actually, this wasn't a backwater. This was one of the ways that Britain talked to the world. And, when you went in, apart from all this imposing architecture which said that to you, the way the whole place was run and what it did, when you got to know it, that was reinforced all the time. So it's a bit odd to have such a vertical building for an organisation that's trying to communicate to the world and within itself, because you've got different programmes doing things, there's a newsroom, there are all the languages, several dozen languages. And yet when you've got tall lifts going up to eight floors and different floors with offices off them, nothing open plan, except the newsroom was, but nothing else was, actually, the geography sort of fought the concept a bit. But where it all came together and where it really worked was, if you took the lift right down to the basement, where there was a huge canteen which covered the whole of the bottom of the main building, and there everyone came together. And you'd be sitting there and people would be talking Russian and Polish and Vietnamese and Spanish and Chinese, and when you got to know them all, a lot of these people were émigrés who couldn't live in their own country any more, say, you know, people who were broadcasting in Russian, these were all émigrés without, you know, there's nobody there who could cross the divide because of the way the Soviet Union was in those days, the Cold War enemy. But even people, say, in the Vietnamese service or the Chinese service, Eastern Europe, these were people who had left their country, for one reason or another, and were not going back. But often, therefore, they were incredibly eminent. They were important poets, they were important political thinkers, and the level of

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conversation down in the basement in Bush House was extraordinary. And it really was like entering the world. It was like a mini United Nations, except not with bureaucrats and politicians, but people with a very broad hinterland, particularly culturally. And that was amazingly exciting. And it was also, for me, a wonderful education for someone who'd come from, you know, this quiet town of Cambridge and then, okay, had broadened myself to study Russia and Soviet studies and I had been to the States, but I didn't know the rest of the world very well. And very quickly you would be meeting and talking to people about Turkish politics or what was going on in Iran or, you know, places you didn't know anything about at all. Parts of Africa, I really didn't know, you know, the difference between the politics of what was happening in Nigeria and Kenya and so on. And these were real people you could talk to about all of this. So it was just fantastic.

Q: [0:22:35] And can I just clarify your own sort of status and role within this sort of environment? You weren't working at this for the Russian service of the BBC--,

A: [0:22:45] No, I wasn't working for the Russian service, no.

Q: [0:22:46] You were working for the English language sort of--,

A: [0:22:47] At this point, so I joined in 1983, and Brezhnev had died and Andropov, who was the former KGB chief, had taken over. But it was still very much the Soviet Union. In fact relations got rather worse. Reagan came in as President and there was sort of new ratcheting up of the Cold War. And I felt quite strongly. I didn't want to become ghettoised in working for the BBC Russian service, because I was afraid I

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would never be able to go back to the Soviet Union again. So I was pleased to be working for the current affairs department in English, servicing the BBC World Service, which was in English, but with my work, you know, or the sort of things I was collaborating on might be translated or used by any language service, including the Russian service. But I didn't really want to get caught up in just Russian things. I wanted a broader education as a broadcaster and a journalist. And where I was was a good place to do that. I mean, I remember, I was given, I don't know, three or four weeks training of how to make radio, very intensive training with people from all over the BBC. And then came back to Bush House, they said, "Right, you'll be on 24 Hours." Which was the current affairs programme that came after the news. So a sort of 20 to 25 minute programme, four times a day at about one o'clock and another one at eight in the evening and then two in the early hours of the morning. And as an assistant producer my job was, I was the lowest of the low, but still, because this was Bush House and they were small teams, so everyone was given a lot of responsibility early, I had to come in at six in the morning, sit down, work through the papers and whatever the output, the newsroom output was, and then ring the editor and say, "I think these are the four subjects we should do and these are the treatments we should give them, and here are the people who I might get to do interviews." And the editor would say, "Yes, no, have you thought about this?" And then you'd have six hours, or a bit less, actually, to fix the interviews for these different items, or maybe get reports written or a talk, brief the presenter, record the interviews or arrange to have them on live. And then output the programme, live, onto the BBC World Service, to the world. And, you know, and like two months before you were sitting in an Oxford library and suddenly here you are doing this. For the first two weeks I just didn't sleep at all. I was just absolutely terrified. And then I decided I loved it. And that was that. But we were given responsibility so early. I

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remember, I'd only been there a month or two, and someone had fixed for the programme to interview the Prime Minister of Turkey. And it fell to me to do it. So I was on the evening shift preparing things for overnight, and they said, "So, Bridget, you're to interview the Turkish Prime Minister." You think, oh my God, I don't know anything about Turkey. So, well, you know, you just had to do your homework very quickly and check with someone else and, you know, do the best you could. But it was a very steep learning curve.

Q: [0:26:06] So how long did you stay with 24 Hours for, or what came next?

A: [0:26:13] So it was on--, there was a rotation through the department of several programmes. 24 Hours was this daily turnaround. There was another programme called The World Today, which was a 15 minute daily programme, which was the background on one item. So 15 minutes, it never is 15 minutes in broadcasting, it's 13 minutes 50 or something like that, to fit the slot. And on that programme you took a subject, you researched it, you found three people to interview, you interviewed them, you cut it together into a mini documentary, which you voiced. And you'd do one a week, or possibly two. So also demanding, but not quite so seat of pants as having to do it in six hours. And then there was another daily programme, which was a magazine programme called Outlet, which had more human interest stories. A bit longer, a bit more complicated, a bit more creative in the sense that it wasn't just about the--, it wasn't just about news and politics. It could be--, you know, you could bring in music and literature. I mean, I enjoyed that a lot. But it was also, in its own way, demanding because it was technically more complicated. So you'd rotate through these programmes and spend a couple of months on

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one and then go to another. And there were some other programmes as well you could do. So I wasn't just sitting in 24 Hours. But nonetheless, after six months I did get this opportunity to go to Newsnight, and spent six months there. And that was a very different story. And I realise this, I think what often happens in television, or maybe other bits of the BBC, that people see you and think, everybody knew I knew about Russia. So if anything came up to do with Russia, then they wanted to make use of my expertise. So I think that's always the case in television, actually. They're more likely to look to see how they can use you than, necessarily, always think how they could broaden you to kind of, you know, train you up to be a kind of, a resource to use later. And then I went back to Bush House and stayed there until--, that was my home until 1989, And I went through a series of promotions, from the lowliest assistant producer, to a producer, senior producer, and then an executive producer on various programmes. And along the way I did lots of great things. I mean, when you're working for a global broadcaster, broadcasting to the world, the subject matter is global. So, if I had been in Radio 4, there might have been lots of programmes about, you know, pollution in the south west or the fishing industry in East Anglia or whatever, but when you're in the World Service, it's about, "Well, I think now we need a programme on the Greek elections, Bridget. Would you go off and cover the Greek elections, please?" Or, "It's the 40th anniversary since VE Day in Berlin, and we want a special programme from East and West Berlin. And since you know about communists, could you go and do that, please?" And these were extraordinary opportunities, I mean, scary because you're going off with your, in those days it was a Uher, this huge sort of handbag-sized, quarter inch tape recorder which just took reels of 14, 15 minutes, which was what you recorded your programmes on. But the World Service never had--, didn't have really producers, you just went on your own as a reporter. But that

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programme in Berlin, for example, I'd been at the BBC no more than three years, possibly less, and there I was going around East and West Berlin. I found an officer who'd been part of the officers' plot against Hitler and then hidden in Berlin until the end of the war, and described VE Day when he came out. And a little Jewish woman who'd been hidden away, a bit like Anne Frank, by Germans in Berlin until the end of the war. I mean, it was absolutely wonderful to have the opportunity to do this sort of living history. And because the world was your canvas it was an opportunity to go to all sorts of different places. So that dream I'd had as a young girl, when I wanted to go and see the world, you know, there I was, living it. It was really great.

Q: [0:30:35] So, I mean, you've been very clear that you didn't want to be kind of boxed in to only being interested in Russia. But during this period, of course, we've moved through Andropov and Chernenko and Gorbachev has arrived in 1985.

A: [0:30:49] Yes, Gorbachev arrived 1985, yes.

Q: [0:30:52] So presumably, kind of you've got half an eye on what's happening in Russia.

A: [0:30:58] Yeah, no, Russia came up. So when I was in Newsnight, they wanted to go out and see about doing a series of programmes there. And I and a more senior producer were sent out to talk to the Russians. And they were really difficult discussions, actually, because the producer, a Newsnight producer had the sort of expectations that you weren't making a programme in France or Britain or America. And, you know, "Can we do this? Can we do that? Can we film from here?

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Can we do...?" And the Russians would just say, "Nyet, nyet." And I think he came back and reached the conclusion we probably couldn't make a series of TV programmes there. But I went along with him because I knew about Russia. And then, when Gorbachev came along, then of course the agenda of the main newrooms, in all parts of the BBC, changed and everyone was very focused on this new Russian leader. And there began to be superpower summits. The first one was in Geneva in, I think, December 1985. I didn't go to that. No one was really sure about Gorbachev. It was probably quite important historically. Nothing much came out of it, but I think everyone was a bit antagonistic about whether it would be meaningful or not. But by the time the next summits came along, then the BBC was saying, "Well, you know, Bridget, why don't you go along? You may be a junior producer in the current affairs department, but you know Russian. So maybe you might be able to get a couple of Russian interviews for us. That would be great to balance the interviews we'll got from the Americans." And, actually, because Gorbachev was on a charm offensive against the West, it was incredibly easy to get Russian interviews. And I found, you know, I'd get to know the Russian delegation, and say, "Can I have an interview?" And they all said yes. And they sent English speakers, you know, hoards of sort of loyal academics from Moscow, precisely to give interviews to the West. So it was an open door. So that was very satisfying. I went to Reykjavik in 1986, with Reagan and Gorbachev. Quite a challenge technically, in a pre-digital age, to--, I remember our deputy foreign news editor from Radio 4 went out and he basically, he sort of bought up Radio Iceland and all the circuits. So you had to have circuits to broadcast in those days. So, yeah, so, you know, I'd go out and find my Russian and record him on my Uher, come into the Radio Iceland and they'd slam it on the deck and send it back to London to go out on this or that bit of the output. It was very exciting.

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Q: [0:33:35] And there's a kind of, just a gradually increasing sense that, actually, something significant really is changing with this person Gorbachev [both talking at once].

A: [0:33:44] Yeah, so there were two things. I think probably the sense was in, say, London, or any other western capital, that there really was something interesting going on here in international relations. There were these summits, and then they started talking about arms cuts. And I remember, was it 1987, maybe, by then, yeah, I mean, Reykjavik, if I remember rightly, on the agenda was always human rights as well as arms controls, "Well, you want arms controls but we want human rights, you know. You still have political prisoners. What about Ira Ratushinskaya, the poet, she's still in prison? What about censorship?" But actually, I seem to remember that between the summit, which I think was November '86, and the end of the year, they released Sakharov. And basically they released all political prisoners. So they kind of--, Gorbachev gave in to the West's agenda. And then you're sort of thinking, okay, you know, the old way we were looking at this, which was, alright, the Russians wanted to do a bit on arms control, but of course this is still the Soviet Union, it's repressive. There's a human rights problem. There's another agenda there which they're never going to budge on, because why would they? Well, actually, they are budging on it and extraordinary things are being published. And around that time, my bosses at the current affairs department in Bush House said, "Bridget, I think you should go and make a documentary in Russia, you know. I mean, it's fine to cover the Greek elections and go to Berlin, but we need something--, we need to get a sense of what's going on there." I was a bit worried about it because I wasn't sure how much I'd get, given this visit I'd done with Newsnight where they just said no, admittedly in a pre-Gorbachev era. But I went out on my own with my tape recorder, and I made one programme about Perestroika

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in Moscow, trying to reach people who were advisors to Gorbachev to explain why they were doing what they were doing--,

Q: [0:35:38] This must--, 1987 by now?

A: [0:35:41] I think '86, '87. I think it might have been '86, actually. So it might have been even before the Reykjavik summit. And then I went down to Georgia, because I knew Georgia. I'd been there and I knew it was a bit more relaxed and I thought I'd get better access. And I made a programme about Georgia and their aspirations and what they wanted from reform. And, you know, looking back now, the programmes were very cautious and people said rather limited things about reform. And what Gorbachev was hoping for was simply to make the system more efficient. But of course just the very fact that I was able to go there and talk to people and have them talk about politics, was groundbreaking. And for me it was important because it showed you could go back, and, you know, I had lots of friends. I'd always kept my journalistic and my private contacts in Russia separate because I was worried for my friends. And I could feel it was all getting more relaxed. And then on the back of that, Radio 4, in fact, heard about these two documentaries I did and they got re-broadcast on Radio 4 and picked up. And before I knew it I was being asked to go back and do a series of three documentaries, radio documentaries for Radio 4, with veteran broadcaster Gordon Clough, who was a former Moscow correspondent from the 1960s and spoke Russian. And they sent us off together to make, jointly, actually, these three, much bigger documentaries about what was happening in Perestroika. And we each--, we divided up the interviews, and he did some and I did some. And I went to Kiev, I remember. And then we pulled all the material together. And then [laughs] I remember, we put it all together in

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Manchester, and I said to Gordon, "So how are we going to write the script?" And he said, "Well, I'll write the first sentence at the typewriter. And then I'll get up and you write the second one." And that's how we did it. And, actually, it worked quite well. And then we voiced it, you know. He said his sentence, I said mine. So it was a sort of double act. But what was interesting about that--, so this is, by now, 1987, was that things were moving so fast in Russia, in the Soviet Union, that as we were collecting material new stuff was happening. And so even the original concept we had when we started it, and it took a few weeks or a couple of months to make it, by the end, you know, you were having to adapt it because things were changing. And they continued to snowball. And then Gordon and I would, by now we knew each other pretty well, and I would say to him, "Gordon, there's a really interesting thing coming up in Moscow. I'm going to ask the World Service to send me." And they would because they're very hungry for material. And then Gordon would ask Radio 4, and he would go out and broadcast for PM and I would go out and broadcast for the World Service. And so we, more and more, started covering internal events in Russia. So what had started out as being an exciting arena for arms control and international relations, we as Russian speakers were beginning to say to our BBC, separate BBC bosses, "No, no, no, the big story's internal." And of course we were completely right. It was all about the dismantling of communist power, that was now beginning to happen. And, yeah, it was fascinating. I was very lucky, at that point, to have as my--, by then the Head of the current affairs department, World Service current affairs, was a man called Sam Younger, who went on to be Head of the World Service for a time, a fantastic journalist. And I remember going to Sam and saying, you know, "I think I need to go back." I'd just been there for a summit. Reagan had gone to Moscow and I came back and said, "Sam, Reagan was there, and that was a great story, but the biggest story is what's happening to the Communist Party. I

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need to go back." He said, "Bridget, just go." And he completely understood that this was the story of the world, really, and that we should try and cover it as much as possible.

Q: [0:39:39] So how did the Moscow correspondent role come about? Just take us through the sort of--, the process of that cropping up and starting.

A: [0:39:50] Okay. So, just to back track a bit, BBC Moscow correspondent, I mean, there'd been one there since the 1960s. In fact it was always very interesting to talk to Gordon about his experience being BBC Moscow correspondent in the 1960s. How you would write your script on your typewriter and go down to the central telegraph office on Gorky Street, where there'd be a little okoshko, a little window, and you'd put your script through the window for the censor and sit and wait until it came back, with all the things you weren't allowed to say struck out in blue pencil. And then you'd go back to your BBC Moscow flat, and I guess they would broadcast down the telephone and read it out. So of course the Soviet Union was always very attentive to what the foreign broadcasters, and particularly the BBC, were saying from their resident correspondents. A later correspondent in the 1970s was Kevin Ruane, who later made his name as Warsaw correspondent covering Solidarity. But he decided that it was very boring to have to take all these official strictures, and he spent a lot of his time meeting dissidents and reporting on them, to some effect. And by the 1980s, so the BBC was sending in correspondents, they were often not Russian speakers, and so they were relying on the agency wires and on TASS and, you know, maybe what their translator would translate from the newspapers or off television. So it's quite an official view of what the Soviet Union was saying about itself and, say,

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arms control. And I remember from the--, about the time I became a BBC employee, meeting one of the--, whoever was Moscow correspondent at that point, not a Russian speaker, who said, "I don't really see it as my role to cover internal events in the Soviet Union. I mean, that would be like being a local reporter, that's local news. I just deal with international news, with their relations with the United States, with arms control and so on." So by the end of the '80s, of course, that had kind of changed, as I was saying, because the big story, although there was a big Cold War international story still rumbling along, that was becoming, you know, arms control cuts were no longer a surprise, people were expecting them. And what was much more interesting and surprising was what was happening internally. And the BBC realised that to get at this they probably needed correspondents who spoke Russian. In fact that was happening across the press corps. Lots of newspapers were reaching the same conclusion. And I was not the only person who had their big break because they spoke Russian. There were quite a lot of other, quite young, reporters and, incidentally, quite often women, who were sent out to Moscow even though they weren't the most experienced correspondent in the newsroom and even though they were women, because everybody realised you needed someone who spoke the language to kind of get at the stuff under the surface. So after this series of three radio documentaries I'd done with Gordon Clough, I knew the editors at Radio 4, the news editors team, and they had decided that they needed to have a second correspondent. There was a radio correspondent, there was a television correspondent, who had just actually been appointed, and he was a Russian speaker, Martin Sixsmith. But they decided they needed a second radio person, and I was invited to apply. And by now I was thinking, well, you know, okay, I'd always been worried about being a journalist based in Moscow, because how would that affect my friends? You have to remember that in the height of the

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Soviet era diplomats and foreign journalists were sort of treated as spies, and ordinary Russians couldn't really know them. They lived in special compounds, there was a policeman in a booth at the door who would take, confiscate the passport of anyone who tried to come and talk to them. And so people were, you know, kind of warned off having relations with these sorts of people. But by now we're moving towards the end of the '80s and things are unravelling so fast. I thought, this is possible. I can actually have ordinary contacts in this city as well as representing something like the BBC. It's because the Cold War essentially was winding up. And so I applied and I got the job. And, I mean, I remember the interview, they said--, one of the tests was, "Okay, Gennadi Gerasimov", at that time, Foreign Ministry spokesman, "has just died. You're on air and you have to do a one minute obituary, starting now. Start." Which was a pretty tough test, so, you know, you have to dredge up from your memory and then extemporise for a minute, hopefully relatively fluently, about this person who--, you know, without any warning. So, of course for me that wasn't that difficult because I knew him well and I had, you know, spending a lot of time there. So, anyway, the interesting thing was that, I got the job I think in about, I don't know, February or something 1989, and I was to go out to join the radio correspondent, who was Jeremy Harris. And in between that period, so I handed in my notice at Bush House and was trained up a bit to be a correspondent. And was sent to Poland in June 1989 for the first Solidarity elections. So, you know, got a taste of things happening in other parts of eastern Europe. And then there was--, the way of these things, that you think the trajectory is towards relations warming up between the West and the Soviet Union, but actually, there suddenly broke out a huge spy row. And in Britain they kicked out quite a lot of Soviet diplomats. And so the Soviets did the same, even though we're supposed to be warming up relations. And they kicked out some diplomats and they kicked out some

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correspondents, and among them was Jeremy Harris, BBC correspondent. Who, of course, was not a spy and, anyway, would never have had time to be a spy. He was far too busy being a BBC correspondent. But it did mean that when I went out to Moscow, I went out to look after the--, I mean, there was no radio correspondent, I was there on my own. So that was a bit challenging, but, you know, interesting.

Q: [0:46:44] I wonder if you can sort of paint a bit of a portrait of the Moscow Bureau. What's the sort of operation there? How does it work? What's the sort of daily routines that you--,

A: [0:46:57] Okay, so there are two offices, just like in London. There was a radio office in one end of the town and there was a television office at the other end. And each has got a driver and each has an office assistant who can sort of translate. And the television one also had, obviously, a cameraman and, plus, I think, a soundman. I can't remember what they had. The radio office had been there a long time. Probably Gordon Clough was there in the 1960s, I don't know. And it had originally been a little flat in a compound belonging to the Foreign Ministry--, well, a subsection of the Foreign Ministry called [inaudible 0:47:42] which ran accommodation for foreigners. And in those days that was the only place that you could rent from. You weren't allowed to go on the open market. I mean, let's not forget, private enterprise was banned in the Soviet Union. There were no private landlords. So you had to rent from the Foreign Ministry in these compounds. This is quite a nice compound. It was on the Moscow ring road, but quite close to the centre, I mean, you could walk to Red Square in 20 minutes. And [inaudible 0:48:12] was the name of the road and the compound was therefore known as Sad Sam. And there

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was an entrance with a little policeman's box where a grey uniformed Soviet policeman would be, and if any, as I've said, if any Russian came and wanted to go in, he'd ask who they were, look at their passport, might take it away while they were inside. And, ostensibly the Soviets also said, "This is to make sure that you're protected from criminals and theft." And so on, which is probably, to some extent, true. And then you went through a big archway into this courtyard with all the diplomats and correspondents' cars with their plates. So K001 for correspondent, I think diplomat might have been D001. Britain was 001 because we had early diplomatic relations with the new Soviet Government in the 1920s. And there were, eight storeys high, probably about five entrances and you'd go in and there'd be a lift, and on each floor there'd be two or three flats, depending on the size of them. We were on the seventh floor and it was a lovely big flat. This is where I lived, with a huge room, which was great for entertaining and, I think, two or three bedrooms and a kitchen. Which for the Soviet Union was massive luxury in a country where, if you were a family in one room, that was lucky. You might be in a communal apartment and have a curtained off bit of a room and share a bathroom and kitchen. And then, that was the first entrance, and then along four entrances there was another entrance, and on the third floor was the office. And this had been a small flat, which had now become an office. It was one big space--, well, it wasn't a big space, it was a smallish space and there was a little partitioned office for me and another one for--, well, it had been Jeremy but he wasn't there any more. There was a tiny kitchen area and there was an area for broadcast. There was a huge telex machine, enormous, half the size of a piano, chattering away the whole time. And then there were four rolls of ticker tape, one for Reuters, one for AFP, one for AP and one for TASS. Oh, and another one for TASS in Russian, because that came out half an hour earlier. And they would roll out day and night. And there would be four pieces

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of thin paper, one blue, one pink, one yellow, one white. We kept the white, the 'Los Angeles Times' had the yellow one, the 'Christian Science Monitor' had one of the other colours, and the 'Telegraph' had them. And in a pre-internet era, this is how you got your information. And they would have periodically, during the day, these people would, 'Christian Science Telegraph', 'Los Angeles Times', also had offices in the same compound and they would come and collect their reams of paper to take back and scroll through it and look for--, There were huge filing cabinets. I was meticulous about filing news stories. So if something turned up on TASS that said, you know, in Magadan there had been a huge explosion or something, you know, I would tear it out and put it in my file for Siberia. So, if down the line there was a follow-up on that story, you could look back and find it. Because you couldn't store anything digitally, it didn't exist. So every evening I was forever cutting up this stuff and filing it away. So we had a driver, [inaudible 0:51:54] and you had to have a driver because the post service didn't work. So the only way that you could get communications to, say, the Foreign Ministry to ask for an application for a visa to visit Kiev, because as a foreigner you were not allowed to leave the city limits, was if your driver--, you wrote a letter and signed it, or at least--, and your driver would literally take it, by hand, and drive it to the Foreign Ministry and hand it to somebody. Because otherwise it would get lost, or they would claim it had got lost, and then you just couldn't do anything. All bank transactions were done in this way. I'd send the driver off and say, "Look, we need more cash, can you go to the Vnesheconombank Bank", the foreign trade bank, "and get a certain amount of money out of our account for us and bring it back." So, if you were going to--, if you wanted to invite someone for dinner, you had to send him off, literally to hand the invitation to someone. You couldn't use the postal service. And anything that came from London would probably be hand couriered through British Airways, and

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he would go to the airport and pick it up. That's how I got tapes back to London. If I cut a piece for the Today programme, I'd literally cut it, put it in a packet, and [inaudible 0:53:01] would hare off to the airport to hand it to a British Airways hostess, who'd take it on the plane and then there'd be a bike in London to bike it back into the Today programme in London.

Q: [0:53:10] And, just the clarify, so there wasn't a sort of a permanently available circuit for sending [both talking at once]?

A: [0:53:17] No, when I first arrived, communications, there was one direct dial phone. I remember it. It was white plastic, punch button. And you could punch the buttons and get straight through to the newsroom in London. And there were, I think, three other phones, also plastic, one was purple, one was green, I can't remember the other one, and they were local dial. So you could dial in London, but you couldn't dial London. If you wanted to dial London you'd have to phone through to the operator and book a call. And that was one of the reasons we had the telex machine, because if the direct dial phone went down, there was no way you could call London. They could possibly call you on the other phones but you couldn't call them. So the only way to communicate would have been--, was to send them a telex message. And the telex machine was chattering away, sending us reports from BBC Monitoring, Caversham, where they had a very active Russian service especially, but global, and they--, so this was a way of getting extra reports of things that were being reported by Moscow Radio or TV that Caversham was picking up. So we were aware of all that. On occasions that direct dial phone would go down, especially if you're having a conversation and used a word that somebody didn't like, you know, Sakharov or something like that. This was in the early days. And

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then there was no way of contacting London except the telex machine. So you'd go, "Oh well, you know, I'll go off and have a walk in the park or something." Later, I think by about 1990, London had decided that the story was so big that this didn't suit their purposes because you could only broadcast live into a programme on a telephone line, everything else had to shipped via British--, by aeroplane. And London invested in a circuit which was laid literally across Europe through, you know, Warsaw and East Germany and Belarus, presumably, to Moscow. And then we had a--, it must have cost them an arm and a leg, and we had a permanent set-up. Which made a huge difference to our output because you could then just come up and broadcast live and you could update. And you could also feed feature materials straight back without having to send things to the airport. And that really came into its own, especially when things got really hairy and began to move very fast towards the last year, before the Soviet Union disappeared. The other thing to say is that, I remember when I first arrived--, so I was on my own and I had a driver and I had a translator, who was also provided by the Foreign Ministry, Victor, who'd been a translator there for some years. He spoke English, he didn't speak English that well, he was a rotten translator and he was incredibly lazy. And I fired him after about a month because I didn't need him. And he put round the word that he'd left because he couldn't stand working for a woman. So for a little while it was a bit tough because I was on my own, I didn't have another correspondent and I didn't have a translator. But then I asked them to send me someone else, and they sent me a very young man, who did speak English, not terribly well. He was no more than 20 or 21, and he had worked in the airport for [Interist 0:56:37] and, actually, he didn't know anything about journalism, but he was a fantastically good fixer. And he very soon found a role for himself in being an officer manager, and he ran the office. So I didn't use him to translate much at all. I'd get

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him to look through the papers, but he didn't do so much that was journalistic. But he was very good at organising everything. I remember the first Christmas he was there, he came to me and he said, "Bridget, new year's coming and we need to have gifts ready for our contacts at the Foreign Ministry and at the airport, the customs people who help us bring in equipment and things." And I said, "So what do mean, exactly, Misha?" He said, "Well, I think it's a bottle of whisky for the Foreign Ministry, and two bottles of whisky for the airport." etc, etc [laughs]. I remember I put them down on the office expenses as absolutely necessary office expenditure.

Q: [0:57:22] And there are other aspects to kind of how easy it was to do journalism there. So you've talked a little bit about things like the circuits and the translators and the fixers and the sort of functioning of the office. Presumably, it is getting easier to talk to people, and for people to talk to you. I mean, is it still awkward, is it...?

A: [0:57:47] So I arrived July 1989, and people were getting a bit braver about getting in touch with the office. And sometimes they called, so, "Is that BBC Moscow office?" Sometimes they would turn up, get past the policeman, dare to get past the policeman. And I remember, one of the early people who called me was a miner, as in a coal miner. And he was calling from North Russia, from Vorkuta, which is in the far north, in the Arctic, big coal basin. And he said, "I'm coming to Moscow in a few days' time, I'd like to meet you. But I don't actually want to meet you in the office because I don't want to give my documents. Can we meet in a nearby park?" So I met him in a nearby park. I used that park quite a lot to meet people in that way, and we would walk around and talk as we walked. And he'd come to tell me they were about to go out on strike, which actually was the beginning

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of quite an important moment of pressure on the already beleaguered communist Government of Gorbachev, that the very proletariat that they were supposed to represent were going on strike against them. So that was interesting. I remember that walk in the park. But there were other people who turned up who didn't seem to be afraid. So you began to get a sense of society easing up. Some of them were complete loonies.

Q: [0:59:09] [Laughs] Presumably the KGB were still keeping an eye on what you were doing?

A: [0:59:13] They must have been, yes, I mean, people used to say that the top floor, we were on the seventh, but on the eight, or we were on the eight and there was a ninth, I can't remember, there was a floor--, the lift would go higher and no one lived there. That was where they kept all the spools and tapes. And I did meet a diplomat in another compound, a Brit, who told me that they were going down in the lift one day and this man came down from the floor above with his suitcase, briefcase, and the briefcase had somehow opened in the courtyard and all these spools of tapes had come out. So I guess it's true. I think, we think probably they never went through everything. So how much they were really listening hard, I don't know.

Q: [0:59:49] But presumably you were conscious of having to be careful for the sake of the people that you were speaking to?

A: [0:59:56] To some extent, yes. I mean, I was always careful about my private friends. And they, way back from when I was a student they were careful. My Soviet friends when I was--, that year in Moscow, in

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'81, when they talked about me on the phone to other friends, you know, "Shall we meet up with…?" They would say Rita, not Bridget, because they were worried that Bridget was such a foreign name that the authorities would know who I was. But I became, as a correspondent, I think there was just so much happening and it was, you know, censorship had sort of disappeared. And there were no political prisoners any more. And there were so many more foreigners that you didn't really feel that you needed to be quite so careful. Although, actually, in retrospect, when the whole thing finally ended, you realised you always were looking at bit over your shoulder. And, I mean, I wasn't aware in the late Soviet period of anyone trying to co-opt me. You know, when I was a student there would always be people saying, "I can get you tickets to the Bolshoi." You know, and you'd sort of know these are KGB people whose job it is to try and make advances to any foreigners, even foreign students. But that wasn't happening by then. So it was becoming much easier to meet people. And even the political activities were more normal. So there were press conferences, never used to be press conferences. The foreign--, the Soviet Foreign Ministry would, everyday, have a briefing in the afternoon. And Gennadi Gerasimov, this Foreign Ministry spokesman who spoke good English, very often that was where you had the most interesting things, because the Foreign Ministry, even though it had this tit for tat spy expulsion thing in 1989, was very progressive under Shevardnadze, and Gerasimov would often tell us things, even about internal politics. Or sometimes the whole subject of the press conference would be about internal politics. He'd invite somebody from the Interior Ministry to come and talk to us. So we always sent to that, I always went, and usually it was in the afternoon. So the World at One was on air at four o'clock, and if I rushed I could be back in time to report live into the World at One or just in time to file for the news, whatever the breaking story was from that output. Also,

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before very long, in late 198-- but I hadn't been there, yeah, by the time the autumn came round there was a new congress of people's deputies, a big parliament that Gorbachev set up to sort of counter the Communist Party, and some seats were reserved for communists, but some of them were quite enlightened. And others were allocated and people were elected, including from republics. So suddenly you had all these exciting people from the Baltics, from Leningrad, as it was still called then, from Georgia, from Siberia, artistic luminaries, dissidents like [Sarkharov inaudible 01:02:58] he was a delegate. And they were able to stand up and make speeches, Gorbachev was the chairman of the Presidium running the whole thing. And what you were watching was, when it was in session, was the whole workings, the political workings of the Soviet Union exploring--, I mean, it was like endless Prime Minister's Question Time, it was just seeing it all happen in front of you. Because this was where they interacted with each other, and we as the foreign press had access to go there. And when the session--, they met twice a year, and out of those, when those big sessions weren't happening, then a smaller Supreme Soviet, which was a sort of subset of them, would meet every morning. And I took to going every morning because Gorbachev was always there in the chair, often his ministers were there and would be summoned to speak. And some of the deputies were very outspoken, and it was the business of Government and you could find out what was happening. Because you were there. I mean, it's like our parliamentary correspondents going to parliamentary committees. You were there hearing it before it was, you know, even reported as news. I can always remember, one morning I was sitting there and Kryuchkov who was the KGB chief was--, a lot of the ministers were there, and they obviously had to do all their ministerial duties, so you had this huge pile of papers like that, and he just sat there on the top row of the Presidium and he would sign, put it to one side, sign, put it--, and you just had this feeling the KGB chief

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said, "Off to Siberia, off to Siberia." [Laughs]. I mean, I know that wasn't happening then, but you could see this KGB, the man running the KGB is signing who knows what bit of paper in front of you as he did the business of his committee of the KGB. But it also involved, by then, in the business of Government. So it was very busy. And we were given total access as foreign correspondents to be there along with the Russians. And they would have breaks for coffee and for having a smoke, and in the breaks you could go up to these ministers and interview them with your tape recorder. It was amazing access. So from it having been an almost impossible place to report on, by 1989, 1990 it was in ferment and, actually, because from top down, from Gorbachev down they'd decided to open up, and we the foreign correspondent cohort, which was still quite small, were given, really, the same access as our Soviet counterparts. There was an enormous amount that we could do.

Q: [1:05:37] Was there any sense in which as a woman there, that that made things easier or harder?

A: [1:05:45] So I think the most important thing was that I spoke Russian. So a) I knew the place and the hinterland and I'd studied it a lot. So I wasn't on a learning curve, I knew it already. And, secondly, speaking the language meant, you know, these parliamentary sessions were all in Russian, so the only people who would go along day after day were a few of us who were Russian speakers, for whom all this was intensely interesting. But for other people it was just a bit opaque. You'd have had to sit through with a translator. So I always felt that was my main weapon. And, indeed, when I travelled, I used to travel on my own because I was doing radio, and so I didn't take a translator, just me and my tape recorder. And I liked that because I could be a bit

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incognito. And where I needed orientation I got in touch with the local journalist. And I always felt, I suppose, two things, one was, I spoke the language, I knew how to make connections with people. And that meant I could do my job, but also I could sort of be fairly sure I knew where I was. But I think, also, at that time, so 1989, 1990, '91, even into the early '90s, sorry, '89, '90, yeah, after the Soviet Union collapsed, foreigners were still VIPs. And whereas in the Soviet era we had been VIPs who, therefore, you shouldn't approach because you'd get into trouble with the Party or the KGB, there was still a feeling that we were a rare species and an opportunity to have contact with the outside world. So especially if you travelled to slightly dodgy places, Caucasus, for example, Chechnya, Georgia, people would look after you, you'd be an honoured guest. And people would actually come and say, "I want to talk to you, I have, you know, I have a message." I was in Chechnya, this is now '92, rolling forward a bit, I was on my own, but it was all very chaotic. I arrived at the airport and the Russian [Interist 01:07:54] team--, they have teams who are supposed to deal with foreigners, said, "We're all leaving." I said, "What?" He said, "No, we're out of here. All the Russians are leaving." And I said, "I've just arrived." "Who are you?" "I'm the BBC." "Oh, I'll tell the thugs who are running the airport to look after you." So I sat there thinking, well, what's going to happen? And eventually a young man in a black jacket with a Kalashnikov over his shoulder and a grenade stuck in his belt, said, "Are you the BBC?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm your bodyguard for the week." So you felt, you know, you were protected. And, indeed, during that week some man knocked on my hotel door, and said, "I'm from the University of Grozny and I would like you to take this letter to give to your ambassador, to give to her Majesty, the Queen, because I think I might be related." So you had all sorts of, you know, people who were slightly off their head, were therefore approaching you because you were a link with the outside world. So I think on that score being a

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woman didn't matter, you were first and foremost a foreigner, and a foreigner who spoke Russian. But there were occasions, sometimes, where, you know, being a woman you were made to be aware of it. At the Foreign Ministry press conferences sometimes some of the slightly less sophisticated officials who ran it, they would give the first questions to the Soviet journalists, who would ask very polite questions along the lines of, "What would you like me to ask you, Mr Minister." And then there would be the big people from the New York Times or, you know, the Times of London or wherever, often men. And then they would say, "And now let's give a question to our dear lady journalists." But quite a lot of the women journalists were quite feisty and knowledgeable, as I say, often Russian speakers, and they would lob journalists questions back, which, you know, really sharp and pointed, hit below the gut, and you could sort of see them slightly reeling because they hadn't expected women to be able to operate in such an aggressive fashion as a journalist. So there were one or two other occasions when--, there was once a Russian deputy prime minister who at the end of the interview, he tried to kiss me, I remember. So I sort of dodged him and then went back to my office to digest it, and think, you know, what has gone on? But I think, you know, he just misjudged it. He didn't realise that that's a really bad idea to do with the BBC correspondent, you never know how they might report it. I had a bit of antagonism from some colleagues in the newsroom in London, in Bush House newsroom. I think that was as much to do with the fact that I came from current affairs and hadn't cut my teeth in the newsroom. But there really weren't very many women correspondents. I think there'd been Diana Goodman in Bonn and Susannah Ross in Latin America. So I think I was only the third in the BBC. And I think they thought, she won't be able to cope. So, you know, there was a bit of that.

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Q: [1:11:02] So I want to start just tracing through some of the sort of political developments in the Soviet Union as it still was at that stage. But, before I do, I wanted to just kind of linger on the Berlin Wall [laughs]. And if I'm right you were in Berlin at the same time as Gorbachev?

A: [1:11:23] Yes.

Q: [1:11:25] At some stage, this is before the wall comes down, I'm not quite sure what the date was--,

A: [1:11:28] Yes, that's right.

Q: [1:11:29] But I wonder if you could take us back to that moment, and some assessment of whether or not it was an indication of the way things were going.

A: [1:11:38] So, June '89, Polish round table elections when Solidarity sweeps the board, and you suddenly realise Poland is out of the communist orbit. I arrived in Moscow. Through the summer it becomes clear that, in the Baltics, they're beginning to become more restive. They're only asking for equal language rights or citizens' rights. They're not asking to break away at this point. And then Ukraine also begins to open up unexpectedly, because it had had the lid very firmly clamped down on it. And these popular fronts, which are nationalist movements in the Soviet Republic, so beginning to make themselves heard. In Germany there are beginning to grow these big protest movements, in East Germany, in places like Dresden and Leipzig, and also in Berlin. And the first indication that I had that Gorbachev's Politburo was not

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going to behave the way that the Politburo had in 1968, where they'd clamped down on attempts to ease up in Czechoslovakia, with the Prague Spring, and then they'd sent the tanks in, was when Hungary opened its borders with Austria. And lots of these Germans who'd gone on holiday to Hungary were able to drive across the border, and then from Austria make their way up into West Germany. So, basically, the wall had been breached. And I remember going to a Foreign Ministry press conference and asking the question, "Well, what's your reaction to this?" Of Gennadi Gerasimov, the spokesman, and he said, "Well, each of these countries has to decide their own policy. We shouldn't intervene, it's up to them." And I said, "But isn't this a threat to the Warsaw Pact, and you have an agreement that if one member of the Warsaw Pact is threatened, that everyone should, you know, come to their rescue, that was the basis of the invasion in 1968." And he said, "No, no, no, every country has to decide for themselves." And I thought, hmm.

Q: [1:13:47] So this was the sort of, the moment in which the sort of the end of the Brezhnev doctrine, if you like, was articulated?

A: [1:13:53] Yeah, but, I mean, it was only articulated in a press conference, by a press spokesman, as a justification for why they did nothing about this border between Hungary and Austria. But of course if Gorbachev had at that point ordered Warsaw Pact tanks in, that would have brought to the end all the arms control talks and everything else, as indeed the invasion of Czechoslovakia significantly worsened East-West relations in 1968. So he was sort of caught. So you kind of thought, well, you know, they're just looking for a justification in order not to act because they've got other things going on, other things at stake. But there were these big protests in East Germany and

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it wasn't clear where they were going. And the East German leadership was known to be pretty hard line. And there were these anniversary celebrations coming up of 40 years of the DDR, of the East German Republic, and Gorbachev was to go. So I travelled with him, as did quite a lot of other foreign correspondents in Moscow, along with the Moscow press pack, and met up with my BBC colleagues in East Berlin. So there were two stories going on. There was the Gorbachev visit to Honecker. And they would stand on the podium, and Honecker would say, "We'll be here another 40 years." And they had that famous kiss, which is now a picture on the Berlin--, someone's done a big, blow-up painting which is on the Berlin--, what remains on the Berlin Wall now. And Gorbachev would have sort of slightly oblique things to say about how we must move with history, or whatever. But the most interesting thing--, and the other story were the protests. And I remember walking down Unter den Linden with tens of thousands of young protestors and being frogmarched by the Stasi off the street. Me being frog marched with my Uher. And so, you know, this is very dramatic, that there was this visit going on, but there was this huge protest going on, even in Unter den Linden, in the middle of East Berlin. And I remember, at some point, maybe day two or three, Gorbachev--, we'd suddenly got word that Gorbachev had gone walkabout. He would do this. Go out into the crowds and talk. And he went into a park and he went up to some Germans who were out, you know, walking in the park, and he began talking to them, and talking about how, "It's up to you to decide, historic choice." It was--, the theme, I can't remember exactly what he said, but it was along the lines of the same thing, that every country has to decide what to do, "And you must decide your future, and it's up to you to decide." And lots of western journalists, including, of course, a lot of West German television, because he'd come over from West Berlin. And then he left. And then all these West Germans said, "So what did he say?" Because he was

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talking Russian. Of course, East Germans all learn Russian at school, so people in the park, he could assume that they would understand him, but the West German journalists didn't. And I remember, I said to them, "Well, you know, I speak Russian. I've come from Moscow." And they sat me down on a park bench with one of their television cameras and wound it back and got me to translate for them what he'd said so that they could then go off to West Berlin and do their reports. You know, I went back to our BBC headquarters and I did my report. But what Gorbachev was doing, of course, was that he was absolutely aware that the West German camp was there, and they would record him and it would be on their evening news, one of the top stories, and be beamed straight back into the whole of East Germany. And it would be a second message, beyond the one on the podium with Honecker to the East German people. So circumventing them, you know, like Donald Trump does nowadays with his tweets. Circumventing the whole machine to get to the people, to say what he wanted to say. And therefore when--, in fact Honecker resigned very shortly after that visit and then, really, only a matter of days or just a couple, less than, weeks afterwards there was the decision late at night in a press conference, an East German official said, "Well, the wall's, you know, will be opened." And then everyone took that as a sign they could go over it and the border guards didn't hold them back. And, lo and behold, the whole thing was breached. You know, I could see how the groundwork--, you know, you could see from the things that I was seeing, that Gorbachev and his officials were doing, that they were building up to that. The Foreign Ministry spokesman, Gennadi Gerasimov, had a little ditty, which was, he said, "It's the Frank Sinatra doctrine, you know, you do it your way." And the whole theme was, each country has to decide for themselves what they do. And Gorbachev's idea was that communist officials should put themselves up for election and be such good politicians people would vote for

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them. But, of course, it didn't work out like that. After decades of Soviet rule everyone voted against the communists and, you know, before you knew it the Warsaw Pact had been dissolved and eastern Europe was gone. And then he tried to hold the line inside the Soviet Union, including the Baltics, with not much success. But on the night when the Berlin Wall fell, and from the point of view of the West, everyone saw--, this is ten at night, everyone saw these images of people dancing on the walls and our correspondents being there saying what a historic moment and, you know, the huge drama. You have to remember that Moscow was three hours ahead, so it was one in the morning. There was no--, we had--, you know, there's no live television. There wasn't that much telephone contact, there was no iPhone or text or anything like that. So none of us knew. So it wasn't till the next day when you woke up and it had already happened, and the BBC World Service news, I used to turn on the BBC World Service in the morning to find out what had happened, you know, and you found out that the Berlin Wall had been breached. I discovered around that time that the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Shevardnadze, used to require that the BBC World Service headline news from, I guess, six in the morning, or maybe earlier, should be transcribed and translated into Russian and put on his desk first thing in the morning so he knew what the BBC World Service headlines were. So it's conceivable--, or maybe someone rang him earlier, but, you know, that's kind of the official way that everyone would have found out. It's easy to forget now that we didn't have that connectivity and people didn't always know things straight away.

Q: [1:20:40] So I want to come, in a little while, to the kind of climactic events of August 1991. But I wanted to just kind of, really for you to pick out what the highlights were in that period of time between the kind of, the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989, you know, I suppose ending

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with a kind of slightly more violent uprising in Romania right at the end of December. So we're talking now about 1990 and the first part of 1991, and I suppose there are--, there's a kind of, from the outside there's a sort of story of Gorbachev still as being very dominant and the important story. But, presumably, when you're there there are other things that are happening in a more subterranean way. There's the economy that's unravelling, there are new figures coming along, like Yeltsin and others, and I just wondered if, you know, before that kind of moment of crisis in the middle of 1991, in this sort of period what did you sense or, you know, what stood out for you as the big, important moments that you witnessed?

A: [1:21:57] So there were, yes, so there were various strands to this. I was aware, in London and, you know, the world we were broadcasting back to, everyone was very excited by Eastern Europe and Romania and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and what was happening in East Germany and the future of the Warsaw Pact and what would happen to NATO and all those things. And I would get questions about that. And we would sometimes try and explore them. But [laughs] it seems odd to say it now, but it all felt a bit peripheral because we were in the midst of the most extraordinary revolution which was unravelling over 70 years of the Communist Party. So to us it felt like those things happening in Eastern Europe were the consequences of something that was happening in the Soviet Union and which we were watching close up. And therefore that was more important because that was where it began. I mean, now I think historians argue the chicken and the egg, you know, how far was the pressure from Eastern Europe part of the story which led to the eventual Soviet collapse, and certainly it had an impact on the Baltics. So one of the big things that, in 1990, we were tracking was, okay, so Eastern Europe's now, you know, left the Soviet orbit, what's going to happen to the next bit, in the Baltics

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particularly, who'd never felt that they--, they felt they were forcibly occupied by the Soviet Army at the end of the second world war and they shouldn't be in the Soviet Union. And so there was this fight with Lithuania, and 80% Lithuanians. Latvia and Estonia were a bit more cautious because they had more Russians in their population. And Gorbachev now being very hard line and saying, "You can't leave. And if you do you won't get subsidised oil and gas any more." Essentially imposing sanctions on them. And they're all saying, "Well, we're prepared to tighten our belts because we want freedom." Incidentally, I'd get calls from Radio Scotland saying, "We'd like you to talk to us about Lithuania." Which is now quite interesting when you look at how, you know, the question of Scottish independence has come to the fore. In those days it was still rather a long way back, but they were very interested in the Baltics. So that was one thing. And then the other, as you say, was that this wasn't actually just the story of possibly bits falling off the edge of the Soviet Empire, it was being challenged from the very centre, along the same lines but with very different consequences. And this was about the rise of Boris Yeltsin. He'd emerged as the party boss from [inaudible 0:1:24:36] brought by Gorbachev to Moscow to be Moscow's party chief, in the mid '80s, as a kind of radical reform figure and a bit of a bouncer, tough guy, but who was not going to undermine Gorbachev's work by being an opponent of reform inside Moscow. And in fact Yeltsin out-Gorbacheved Gorbachev, you know. He would be on and off trams and talking to ordinary people. He was massively popular. And eventually he stood in elections as--, when he stood as, I think as a delegate for the New Congress, the absolute runaway majority. And then he decided to reinvigorate the idea of the Russian Federation, which was the Central Republic of the Soviet Union of--, Federated Union of Republics, and set himself up as a Russian leader. And I'll always remember, in, I think it was the spring of 1990, when the Russian

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Congress had its own meeting, and Gorbachev came along, Yeltsin came along as the new chairman of the Presidium. So he was sort of doing what Gorbachev had done, but only within the Russian bit of the Soviet Union, i.e. without all the other republics. And they were given a room inside the Kremlin to hold their meeting in and it had sort of little boxes high up on this top, on the higher floor, where you could sit down and overlook proceedings. We were all at the back, in the balcony at the back, and there was the big crowd of delegates, and then on the stage in front the Presidium, with Yeltsin in the middle. And in this box you could just see Gorbachev sitting on his own, watching. And he sat there all day, watching, watching how Yeltsin was operating. And I always thought it was, you know, either symbolically he was demonstrating that everyone should understand, he appreciated, or simply he thought the most important thing for how my own power goes and the future of my reforms, is how this man operates. I need to observe him. And of course he was completely right, because if you took away Russia from the sort Soviet Union, you're left with nothing. I mean, it would be like England deciding to secede from the United Kingdom. It's just what's left? So that was a drama which began to grow. And then the other drama was, at the same time, he'd set in motion this decline of the Communist Party so that it gradually, as the republics emboldened themselves and their own Communist parties either withered on the vine or became reformist vehicles and broke away from the mother ship, the Communist Party no longer had authority. It gave up its right to monopoly on power, quite a lot of reformers resigned from it. And Gorbachev still stuck with it, but it wasn't really a vehicle for control any more. And so that had profound consequences for the sort of control there was over all areas of society. So there was a sort of weakening of central control, both federative and the party, and then on another level, as you said, there was--, the economy was grinding to a halt, really, because Gorbachev felt it was

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just too much to lift price controls from this centrally--, this command system they had where everything was decided centrally, therefore no one had incentive to increase production. And as the republics were beginning to get more dissociated from Moscow, people were withholding goods or they were, you know, selling things on the sly and the economy was just not doing well. And you'd really--, the shops were more or less empty. I remember, the wife in one family I knew, the wife was someone who was quite a distinguished Academy of Science Professor, decided the only way to make sure the family could eat was to get a job in a bakery. That's the degree to which things were really sliding. And there were these miners' strikes and people talking about the need for radical economic reform, especially in Boris Yeltsin's orbit, but Gorbachev was a bit resistant. And part of the story of that year, 1990, was, whereas in the West everything's like, communism's over in Eastern Europe and arms control cuts and what have you, what was happening in Moscow was, the very branch that Gorbachev sat on, he had sort of began to saw away at, which was his authority as General Secretary of the Communist Party, this was a branch which was getting weaker and was maybe about to crash to the ground. And, you know, what was going to happen? And in order to keep himself going he had to begin to do deals with much more conservative people, who he really was opposed to. And that all set the scene for 1991, which was when everything came to a crisis point. And he did eventually decide to do a deal with republican leaders, particularly Yeltsin and the leader of Kazakhstan, to weaken the Union and make it more like a confederation, where he would be a much weaker figure and the republican heads would have more power, a bit more like the European Union, if you like, where they--, the constituent nations' prime ministers, all of the sort of, the most important voices in the room. I remember interviewing him years later about it, and he said, "What we didn't realise--," And he said, "I was stupid, I should

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have realised, was, of course, we were being bugged by the KGB." And at a certain point in one meeting in August '91, he's talking to Yeltsin and [inaudible 01:30:34] and they're saying, "Well, what are we going to do with all these figures, you know, the Defence Minister, the Head of the KGB?" And Gorbachev had said, "Well, we'll have to get rid of them." And of course they were listening. And that, he argues, is one reason why they decided to stage a coup against him weeks later.

Q: [1:30:50] Well, we'll come to the coup in a second. It's a complicated picture, isn't it, and there's a lot going on. There's the kind of, you know, the push for independence from the constituent republics, there's the economy, there are the various figures and so on--,

A: [1:31:04] And there was a move to a new American president, too.

Q: [1:31:07] Yeah, of course.

A: [1:31:11 So Reagan left and Bush took over. And we now know, people now say they know when Reagan was leaving he was in the early stages of dementia. So there was enormous nervousness among the new team, under Brent Scowcroft, who was National Security Advisor, that maybe Gorby had gone soft on the Russians, not Gorby, Reagan had gone soft on the Russians. And George H Bush took a very long time--, remember he had been Head of the CIA, he had good reason to be sceptical about the cold war enemy, he took a very long time from his election until he actually arranged to meet Gorbachev at the Malta summit at the end of 1990, I think it was. And Gorbachev's getting a bit nervous about the fact that he'd invested a lot in this

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relationship with the Americans to solve the external problems so that he could then turn to the much more difficult internal problems. And now with a new president--, in the end they were very good friends, Bush and Gorbachev, I've interviewed both of them, and they, you know, they became very close. But that was another complication.

Q: [1:32:17] So it's an incredibly complicated story to report on, then, so, I mean, I just wanted to ask the question about how easy it was to convey the kind of subtleties and the complexities. I mean, news famously, or infamously, kind of likes flashpoint events and it likes personalities. But what you've talked about is a kind of very complex shifting of the tectonic plates.

A: [1:32:44] Yeah.

Q: [1:32:46] How easy was it to tell that story? I mean, was it a struggle to kind of explain to London the complexities or was there a sense in which the BBC did allow you to explore it and tell the story in a way that you felt was the right way to do it?

A: [1:33:03] I didn't feel too frustrated on that front. I think one of the reasons was I was doing radio and not television. I was doing--, I was eventually joined by Kevin Connolly and Tim Whewell, so there were three radio correspondents, and Tim was focused on the World Service, but we basically all serviced everybody. And radio was much easier than television. I mean, there was no rolling television news then, so you had three television bulletins a day. I'm not even sure they had a lunchtime news in those days. And then there was Newsnight. There's not that much outlet, if you're a television correspondent, to be able to

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tell your story. But I wasn't involved in that. I might have done a few television reports or lives, but not much. And on the radio side--, so World Service had always been rolling news, it was kind of ahead of the game, really, because although it didn't roll, it had hourly bulletins and, you know, like I was saying, the current affairs programme went out four times a day. And Radio 4 had quite a lot, too, so there's this big chunk of the Today programme, the World at One which was an hour, as far as I remember, PM was an hour, and The World Tonight nearly an hour. And they--, so that was one thing, there was quite a lot of output every day. And then number two was, this was the biggest story in the world by now and everybody wanted it. And, I mean, I remember [laughs] I used to joke it was like feeding a baby, you know, it would wake every three hours and want another feed, and you never stopped. And even if you went out to dinner, the newsroom would say, "Give us the phone number of where you're going." And quite often they would ring up, and say, "Look, there's been a development, someone's said something. Can you please file on the phone now from your, you know, your host's telephone." And you'd scrabble something on a napkin and, you know, broadcast something for whatever news bulletin it was. And one Sunday afternoon Bush House newsroom rang me up and said, "We want a piece." And I said, "Well, actually, it's quite quiet this weekend." Surprisingly. And they said, "No, no, we still want a piece." And you have to understand, this is the biggest story in the world, and at any point in our four headlines we had to have a story that either relates to the Soviet Union and Russia and what's happening in it, or the Cold War nuclear story. And so, "Find us a story." That's the degree to which, in the World Service's terms, it was top of the agenda, but also Radio 4. And they would--, I mean, if I offered something they just took it. They made space for it. It must have been very frustrating for people in other parts of the world. But they were super hungry for it. And the thing is, wherever you are in

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the world, whatever time and whatever story you do, it's certainly the case that if a story really gets--, if people become hungry for it and they're following the twists and turns, it's much easier to tell, you know. If you suddenly landed in Britain now and someone tried to explain you where we are on Brexit negotiations at this point in two and a half minutes, it would be impossible. But if you're the political editor telling the story every morning in three minute chunks, then it's much easier. So that was sort of what was happening. Besides that, because I'd come from the current affairs side rather than the newsroom, I was always more interested, or as interested, in the analysis and the background. So, if people would ask me to do a feature on, you know, whatever it might be, the coal miners and their strikes or what it was like to be an ordinary family in Moscow struggling economically or, you know, talk to people around Yeltsin about his vision for his concept of the Russian Federation, I was very happy, if I could possibly, to say yes, because A) it was an excuse to go off and interview these people. And it was just fascinating. And then also you might--, you'd say, "Well, I can do it for you, but you'll have to give me five minutes." And they'd say, "Okay." [Laughs] And then, you know, you could [do it 01:37:14]. So it wasn't as hard as you'd think simply because, if you looked at the amount of minutes in the daily output that were devoted to the story, from one or other of us, it would have been a lot.

Q: [1:37:25] Do you think, sort of looking at that period as a whole, the BBC actually did well, it managed to kind of capture and report this kind of historic sort of process very well, or were there parts of the story that it didn't get right? As a sort of overall assessment, do you think the BBC did it well?

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A: [1:37:48] I think the general perception I get now is that we did. A lot of people still say to me, "Oh, I remember you, I grew up with hearing you report on Russia and it was fascinating." I'm sure we could have done better. I mean, some things we would have liked to have done better, but were stopped. So even, even right up to the Soviet collapse it wasn't always easy to get permission to travel. And you'd know there was trouble somewhere in Baku, I mean, there were riots in Baku, and I remember saying we want to go to Baku and my driver came back, and said, "Well, I can't buy an airline ticket till you've got a Foreign Ministry visa." So I sent him off to the Foreign Ministry to get a visa, and they said, "You can't have a visa till you have an airline ticket." And it was simply, you know, a closed loop in order to stop us going. Because they didn't want us there because, in fact, there was a lot of bloodshed. We did better on the Baltics. For some reason they never stopped us going. And we covered that in detail. There were more English speakers there. I think, in some other parts we could have done more. I don't think we probably illuminated what was happening in Kiev as much as we should have done given, you know, what's happened in--, what was to happen in Kiev and what's happened in the years since. And I think it was very--, it was probably politically top heavy, because it was so gripping and we had such good access. So we didn't do as much about ordinary people, and therefore when, after the Soviet Union collapsed and the '90s began and life was so tough, we probably, with hindsight, we could have set the scene better for how traumatic this was for ordinary people. I mean, when I--, you know, I'm probably not the right person to ask about how well the BBC did. You'd probably need to ask other people who were listeners or in other countries what they thought. But I do--, I am aware that as the years have gone by, and as I look back at what I thought then and knew, of huge gaps in my knowledge. And one of the things that I realised that, inevitably, we were caught up in was, you know, there I

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would be going to the Parliament every day and actually hearing Gorbachev say something which had become new policy, and then you kind of think, this is the way it is. And, actually, years later when I went out and did reports from villages, I did quite a lot of that in the late '90s and early 2000s, and I remember, you know, you'd talk to people, and they'd say, "Oh, of course, you know, it all went wrong when Perestroika happened in 1991." And I'd say, "No, no, no Perestroika began in 1985, when Gorbachev took over." And they'd kind of look at me. And I began to realise that for them in those six years, which for us were so exciting and full of change, they didn't see change in their villages. All they saw were the shops emptying. And they just saw--, and I said, "Well, what about, you know, what about Perestroika? What about, you know, Glasnost? And what about, you know, the Communist Party giving up its leading role and all that?" And they said, "Oh no, those are just party slogans, we didn't pay any attention to those." So when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, it was an even greater shock because they--, the world we lived in of Moscow politics, which was inhabiting, if you like, the world of Gorbachev and Yeltsin and all these activists around them and people involved in, whether communist or non-communist politics, that wasn't the world most people inhabited. And I think I wasn't as aware of that as I should have been at the time.

Q: [1:41:24] So, part two, I wanted to zoom in now on August 1991, the events then, which you've described in your book on the Cold War. You said, "It's one of the most vividly memorable episodes of my life." So I wonder if you can just take us through--, I mean, set the scene a little bit in terms of what was happening immediately before, and then take us through, step-by-step, what you witnessed of that kind of dramatic episode.

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A: [1:41:52] Right, so 1991, of course, we didn't know this was the year when it was all coming to an end. It felt as though it was getting complicated. Gorbachev--, Shevardnadze had resigned at the end of the year before saying there was a creeping coup coming, you know, that the hardliners were coming back. There'd been an attack on the Lithuanian parliament which had killed 17 people, which was an attempt by local Soviet garrison to take over. It hadn't worked. So you had a sense of stuff going on behind the scenes and it felt as though Gorbachev had been trapped by these hardliners. I used to call them hardliners because that's what they were and it was good shorthand for a radio bulletin. And so there was the Head of the KGB, the Defence Minister, he had a rather unpleasant Prime Minister, and so on. And the people who'd been around him from the beginning of Perestroika in '85, some of them had left. So Shevardnadze had gone, another very important man called Aleksandr Yakovlev sometimes called the architect of Perestroika, who was very involved in trying to dig up, or put the record straight on Stalin's purges. He also resigned from the Communist Party, he left Gorbachev's side. Yeltsin was now an alternative seat of power. They obviously had very tense relations. The republics were getting more restive and he was manoeuvring. He held a referendum asking people if they still wanted the Soviet Union, which he won, but you thought, well, you know, how was it organised? What does it mean? And then he had these negotiations with republican leaders to come up with a slightly modified idea of a union treaty. And I was aware in early August 1991 that there were these negotiations going on. And it was reported on TASS that they'd reached a draft agreement on a union treaty that would be signed on Tuesday August the 20th. And that seemed procedural and, you know, would it work, wouldn't it? I mean, lots of things they said they'd do and then, you know, didn't seem to have that much effect. So you never quite knew how much to place a lot of value on some of these

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statements. But it was August. It was hot and sleepy. And a bit like France, people departing, all this, they go off to their dachas. A lot of my fellow correspondents in the BBC and among the press corps who had gone off, you know, back home to Europe or wherever for the summer. But I was there covering in August. But it was so quiet, I remember the end of the week before I'd actually gone up and signed up at a new tennis club that had just opened, quite a big thing in Moscow, and I was going to play more tennis because it was so quiet. And my idea for the morning of August the 19th was to go off and play tennis, because we're three hours ahead, so you could get, you know, get a good game of tennis in before the world woke up. Instead, I was woken up at 5.30, 6.30 in the morning on Monday August the 19th by London ringing my flat. And it was traffic. So these are the coordinators in London who used to take the calls from foreign correspondents and broadcast them to the newsroom or put you through to [the news inaudible 01:45:08]. And you always called them traffic. So I would say, "Hello, traffic." And the woman who was on duty then said, "Oh, Bridget, the duty editor in Bush House newsroom wants to talk to you. Has there been a coup?" And I said, "Well, not as far as I know." I didn't know anything. So the line was put across to the newsroom and the duty editor said, "Well, we've got these rather strange statements coming out on TASS. It says Gorbachev's been taken ill in his dacha in the Crimea." I knew he'd been there. He was due to come back to sign this new treaty, "And an emergency committee has taken over." And I thought, hmm. And also, the man in charge of the parliament, who was a lawyer, a good friend of Gorbachev's previously, Lukyanov, has written a long statement explaining why, I think it was, I can't remember what it was, it was something like why this union treaty would be a danger to the country's security. He said, put these things together, and think, hmm, this is not good. So I remember, I said, "Okay, fine, will you file for the next hour."

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So I said, "Fine, I'll go and check it out." Pulled clothes over my pyjamas, rushed down, you know, in the lift, down and across to our office. As I explained earlier, it's just a few doorways away, up into our office. TASS chattering away. Our telex machine chattering away. Monitoring already on, you know, all sorts of reports over Moscow radio. And I read this stuff more carefully, and I thought, this does not look good. Gorbachev has clearly been told to stay in the Crimea, or he's decided he should, but he's no longer, as it were, in the driving seat. This emerging--, basically it was an announcement of martial law. And I remembered very well the announcement of martial law in Poland in December 1981 by General Jaruzelski to stop Solidarity in its tracks, I'd been in Moscow at the time but had been very focused on it. And then there was this back-up, absolutely classic party thing, that you have a document which explains the kind of legal, quasi legal justification for whatever it was. And I remembered the Union Treaty, and thought, well, maybe that's what they've got the jitters about. But I also thought, this is a country where people say things, they talk the talk, they don't walk the walk, and it's quite possible that all these statements have been put out to give the impression that they've taken over power, and actually they haven't, you know, nothing's happening. I shouldn't say it's a coup until they've actually seized power. Who's to say they've actually seized power? So I--, the first report I did for the BBC very carefully said, "This has all the hallmarks of a Soviet coup." But it didn't say it was. And then in the next hour things began to happen. I rang my contacts in the Baltics, because I thought, well, if this is serious the first thing they'll have done is move those garrisons into the parliaments and Government buildings and radio and TV, especially in Lithuania, but Latvia and Estonia, who'd all by then declared independence, and just, you know, will clamp them down by force. And I rang up my fixer in Vilnius, he's now the Head of Lithuanian Radio, and I said, "[I just… is inaudible 01:48:17], something

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going on? You know, these reports from Moscow?" And this sleepy voice said, "No, it's very quiet here." And I, you know, I got my friends to check, him and others to check things out, and they rang back, and said, "There's absolutely nothing happening." Then I turned on the television and, number one, they were reading out these announcements. So out of--, you know, normal programming had been interrupted. And the announcer was the man who used to read the news when it was the Soviet Union--, in the earlier days, before Gorbachev, which I remembered from when I was a student. He'd been retired as inappropriate for reform years, and he was back reading out this stuff in a gloomy voice. And then when the announcement was over and the news was over, they switched to Swan Lake. And I remembered from my earlier years as a student that when Brezhnev died or Andropov died or whatever, and they didn't know what to do as a party to prepare the nation for this traumatic moment when the great leader had died, they always switched to Swan Lake. And, you know, it was actually the Swan Lake that convinced me this probably was true because, you know, no one would do that unless they were sort of rolling the clock back. But it still wasn't clear how effective it was, so I was quite cautious in the way I reported it. And then as the morning unfolded--, by then I had a producer, we'd enlarged the office and I had a producer, and he came to the office and I sent him out to scout around. And then another correspondent, Peter Hitchens, now a columnist, called in, and he said, "Bridget, I'm on Kutuzovsky Prospekt and I've been listening to your reports on the World Service. I think they're too cautious, because there's a column of tanks trundling down Kutuzovsky Prospekt towards the Kremlin." I said, "Oh, okay." Slightly changed my tone. And then my producer came back, and said, "Actually, there's some tanks outside on the bridge near our office." So I finished my news report for that hour, and there was probably an interview I had to do, and then

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rushed out of the office. And there indeed was a whole row of tanks on the bridge, with these young soldiers looking a bit bemused, and our elderly cleaning lady wagging her finger at them. And that was quite symptomatic, actually, a lot of Muscovites came out to talk to the young soldiers in their tanks, and said, "What are you doing here? This is your city, we're your people, go home to your mother." So, on the one hand they did bring out all the hardware, on the other hand, already it was becoming clear that this was not the old Soviet Union when people were cowed by that. And it was a bit of a--, it was a bit chaotic, really, and more reports were coming in. Reports began to come in from, I think by then it had renamed it St Petersburg, where there was already quite a reformist mayor in place, Sobchak, and he was a bit defiant. And then the Baltics were defiant. Most other republics sat on the fence. But the Mayor of Moscow, who was very much a sort of reformist character, Popov, he was also quite defiant. And other people who'd been active began to speak up. Some activists appeared in our office, and said, where Yeltsin has--, they tried to arrest him and they didn't manage. And he's gone to the White House, the Russian Parliament by the river, which was the big building he'd take over as his headquarters. And he’s issuing--, they're issuing a statement calling on the armed services not to follow the demands of this special committee, emergency committee, that it's unconstitutional and as president of Russia, he's asking them as Russian citizens not to do this. And then I rushed down to the White House in my car and there he was. And he got up on a tank, you know, that famous picture, and read out his decree. Of course I discovered later interviewing people who were with him at the time that what had happened was he'd been at his dacha and there'd been an order to come and arrest him, and he had literally evaded them. It was so lucky. And managed to drive into Moscow. They were obviously fairly incompetent. And got to the White House, there were his other

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supporters. And they tried to send out a message on Russian radio, which his people were running as a sort of alternative Russian radio, but the Kremlin had cut the wires, so they couldn't. And that was why he stood on the tank. I think, a bit like Gorbachev in 1989 in Berlin, relying on the foreign correspondents to be there to film it, and then replicate it. Interesting use of media in those days, especially foreign television, as a source to replicate the message and cascade it out, because there really weren't that many Russians there, they came later, citizens of Moscow. But these activists who came to our office would say, "Oh, can we use your Xerox machine?" We didn't have one. "Well, can we use your fax machine because we need to duplicate all these leaflets?" In those days fax and Xerox machines in Soviet institutions were often under lock and key because the party didn't want them used for nefarious business. But the Metro was absolutely covered with these leaflets and they were all over the city and the message got out pretty quickly. And people began to converge on the White House. And by then Tim Whewell, my colleague, arrived. So I'm broadcasting away and we decide that he should go to the White House and be there and broadcast from there. And he is there for the next two days, I think, hiding under a desk when they think it might be attacked. Pretty nerve-wracking, but nothing did happen, mainly the Head of the armed forces, actually, refused to go through with it. So Yeltsin played a very important role as an alternative seat of power. So we didn't know--, I mean, I realised, by the time the tanks appeared and we got the news about Yeltsin, it was pretty clear that this was a showdown and everything might come to a juddering halt. And then I was very clear, from the response from London, that the whole world was listening to us. And John Major, who'd just taken over as Prime Minister came out and said he'd spoken to Yeltsin on the phone and, I think, the White House spoke. The whole world was looking at Moscow. It was incredibly exciting. And I remember at one point I kept having to

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broadcast, and Ben said, "Bridget, I think you should just come out and go around the streets and just see what's happening." And that was, you know, it was chaotic. There were barricades of buses. There were these young soldiers not sure what to do. There were crowds of people turning up at the White House, they were building open fires and great vats of soup and there were women with pushchairs and men with briefcases, someone had a guitar and they were--, the people were determined but quite cheerful and they were going to support this attempt to overturn democracy, is what they saw it as. And then, it's hard to think of it because the day, you know you lived through every second, so it seemed a very long day because it was so intense, at the end of the day it was announced there'd be a press conference by the Emergency Committee. I don't think I went, because I felt I had to be able to report. But they'd broadcast it live on television and it was pretty clear that the Vice President who Gorbachev had put in his Government and who was leading this Emergency Committee, his hands were shaking. I mean, we found later he was an alcoholic. So I think they were probably shaking because he was an alcoholic. I think they'd all been drinking and they were pretty incoherent, and that, really, I think, did a lot to deflate its chances. I mean, they hadn't secured the Baltics. The mayors of Moscow and St Petersburg were defying them. The armed forces were clearly not happy with what was happening and the people of Moscow were out on the streets. So it would have been a big bloodbath if they'd tried to push it through. But I think--, and then the reaction of the rest of the world, also. But we did think, at the end of that first day, that they would try and storm the White House, I think through the second day. But by the end of the second day it was pretty clear that it was not going to work, and Yeltsin, I think a couple of them came and said they wanted to go down as a delegation to--, for us to talk to Gorbachev and there was an attempt, there was an attempt to mediate, and Yeltsin was

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involved. And then some of the coup leaders said they wanted to go and then they sort of fled Moscow. It was very chaotic, but...

Q: [1:57:15] Did you have any kind of, any lines of information about what was happening with Gorbachev in his dacha?

A: [1:57:23] No, nobody knew. So black hole, nobody knew. So these two delegates who were sort of--, they were not part of Yeltsin's crowd, but they weren't actually in the Emergency Committee, said they wanted to go down to talk to him. And they came to see Yeltsin, these people [inaudible 01:57:41]. And then some of the Emergency Committee, Gorbachev's, I think, if I remember I was down at the White House by that point, Yeltsin announced, because they were in open session in the parliament, this is what happened in those days, they just had these long open sessions and people would come in, and say, "We've just heard that--" So that was the place to be to find out was happening. So, "We've just heard that some of the coup leaders, some of the members of the Emergency Committee, are taking a plane down to talk to Gorbachev." So, you know, part of the worry was are they going to shoot him? I think they were going to try and win him over to their side. So it was decided, on the spur of the moment, there in that room that Yeltsin would send a delegation. I think it was led by the vice, his vice president and various others. I remember one of my colleagues, Jonathan Steele from the Guardian, managed to get on the plane and went down with them. So there were all these people going down to see Gorbachev. But no one really knew what state he was in. We only found out later when--, they all went down, but I think he refused to see the coup leaders. He saw Yeltsin's lot. And then they arrested the coup leaders on the spot and Gorbachev was brought back to Moscow. And he didn't realise what had happened either.

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He didn't--, he had some information but he didn't know that much. And the next day, he didn't go straight to the White House, people thought he should have gone and thanked all these protestors who'd basically saved the day by standing up, he didn't, he went home. His wife had had a stroke. She thought they were shot. When they were down there--, the coup leaders had gone down to see him on the Sunday, and said, "We need to have an emergency situation." And he had said, "Go to the devil." And they'd left thinking that he'd said, "Well, do what you want, I'm not going to interfere." And in fact he claims what he said was, "I'm having no part of it." But they cut the phone lines. And when Raisa found out that they were surrounded by security guards, she had a stroke, because she thought they'd be shot. I mean, you know, think what happened to the Tsar and his family. They were terrified. So perhaps it's reasonable that he went home. But the next day he came and had a press conference in the Foreign Ministry press building, which I was at, and, you know, it was quite clear he didn't quite get the picture, that Yeltsin was the man of the hour now. But he was asked about how cut off he was, and he said his son-in-law had found a little radio which they put batteries in, and they could get shortwave radio around the world. And someone said, "So what did you listen to?" And he said, "The clearest of all was the BBC." By then I'd left to go back to the office to do a new report to London, and then he said, "Where's the BBC reporter? I'll take a question from them." But I'd gone. But he never forgot it later, he always would give me--, he'd say, "I remember, I listened to the BBC, of course I'll give you an interview." And he wrote me a letter when I retired from the BBC, which I have on the wall now. So we always had a kind of link after that. But when he came back he didn't--, the next dramatic thing that happened was that Yeltsin, by now, his White House is the seat of power, he's the man of the moment, he's the one all the foreign leaders rang, and he called Gorbachev to a meeting of the

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Parliament. I can't remember whether I was there or watched it on television. I think I was there. And, in front of Gorbachev, he said, "I'm banning the Communist Party." Which was an extraordinary thing to say to the man who's running it. And he made it very clear that he was in control and Gorbachev had really, you know, he was a victim of the coup. But he was the victim of the fallout of the coup as well. And then it was only a matter of months before the whole thing unravelled. The Soviet Union disappeared at the end of the year.

Q: [2:01:32] I just want to clarify that one point about what Gorbachev said about the BBC. So his words were that it was the clearest or the best?

A: [2:01:42] That's what I remember. I don't remember it being that--, I don't remember it being that he thought it was the best.

Q: [2:01:50] He was talking about reception effectively?

A: [2:01:52] I think someone said, "So what did you listen to? What could you get best?" And he said, "BBC [inaudible 02:01:54] or BBC best of all." So BBC, they're the best of all, or BBC best of all, best, more audible than anything else.

Q: [2:02:03] But, presumably, because it was audible he was in fact listening to the BBC Russian service at that point?

A: [2:02:08] He was listening to it, yes. So the main presenter would have been Masha Slonim, at that time, I think. But they probably were

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translating my news bulletin reports and things like that as well. Anyway, certainly in years later he always--, you know, I'd sort of doorstep him or ask for an interview, he would say, you know, "I'd always give an interview to the BBC. I remember that moment." So, you know, whether or not it was most audible or best quality, he certainly remembered the BBC.

Q: [2:02:39] So a broader point, really, about the role of the BBC and, I suppose, the media, you've touched on this. I mean, we've talked a lot about the reporting of what is happening, but of course the media is part of this kind of circuit. It gets broadcast back again and then actually starts to affect politics, as it were. And I wondered whether or not, you know, you got that sense very clearly that what was being broadcast on the BBC had an influence in the Soviet Union itself in some way.

A: [2:03:15] Well, it certainly did. It used to in the pre-Gorbachev era. Certain commentators, if you'd go out into the provinces they'd say, "Did you ever meet Goldberg?" Who was a big commentator, or Levin. And these were people who they knew well and who--, people who did go out to their dachas and twiddle with their radios and catch the BBC Russian Service on shortwave, this is very meaningful for them. And in fact the book I wrote about the Cold War, where we got eyewitness reports from people about episodes through the Cold War years, it was very striking, the number of people, Russians who we talked to, who would say, "Oh, of course I always believed in communism and Lenin and pioneers and everything. And then at a certain point when I was a teenager I began to listen to shortwave radio, BBC, and I realised it was all a lie." And so I think in those Cold War years, I'm talking mainly about the Brezhnev years, I think on a certain sector of the population,

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you know, thinking, intellectual population, it did have a profound impact. And probably greater than the number of people who listened to it, because it would be talked about. And certainly when, in later years, running forward a bit, I do remember going out, when I was going out and reporting from the provinces, by now we had BBC Online, discovering there were quite a lot of local radio stations which did a mixture of music and chat and news. And they didn't use the BBC, but you'd say, "So, you know, how do you do your stuff?" And they'd say, "Oh, well, I always look on the BBC News Russian Service website, and then that's my sort of starting point for the news we do on the..." So, you know, you can have an influence which isn't acknowledged, and maybe for good reasons not acknowledged in the Soviet period or, later, in the Putin period, but it can have a big influence. So I think it did. And certainly when--, by the time I got there as correspondent, it had a kudos, the BBC, as the voice to the world and as the standard of the world. So one incident I'll always remember, 19--, I can't remember if it was '90 or '91, but Lithuania had voted in its Parliament to declare independence, sort of unilaterally and not recognised by the world, but it was a big event for it. And Latvia wanted to follow suit. So they decided to have a vote in their Parliament, and I went out to Riga to cover it and, you know, it's indicative of the challenges of broadcasting, there was only one direct dial phone. And so we were all queuing up to use it. And because I was the BBC and we were--, the BBC was important to the Latvians, but also we were on the air first, I was allowed to have the phone open while they were voting in Parliament. And my fixer, who spoke Latvian, then rushed back in, and said, "Bridget, it's..." you know, whatever it was, 90 to--, and it would have been, the Russians would have voted against it, so I don't know what it was, 70 to 30 or whatever, which I then put in my report straight into the Bush House newsroom for them to put out on the next hour. And then I handed the phone over to

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Reuters or AFP, or whoever needed to file next, and left the building. And outside on the banks of the river was a huge crowd of Latvians, all singing. These were called the singing revolutions, these campaigns by the Baltics for independence of those years. And so they were all singing Latvian songs. And I did what I always used to do, was to walk round the crowd and try and count it. Because the official figures, which might have been from, say, TASS, which would have been run by Moscow, would always try and underestimate the crowd, and the police tended to underestimate. And then the activists who were running whatever event it was, always inflated it terribly. So you had to do your own counting. So I was walking around counting it, and a Latvian MP rushed out onto the stage and interrupted the singing and said something to them. And they all cheered and began chanting, "BBC, BBC, BBC." So I didn't know what had been said, it had been in Latvian, so I asked someone in the crowd in Russian, "Why are they chanting BBC?" And he said, "Oh, that Latvian MP has said they've just voted or independence in Parliament, and they turned on the BBC news at the top of the hour and it was in the headlines. So now we know it's true." So it's nice reminder of something which is much bigger than the Soviet Union, which is for many countries around the world, if you're a truly global broadcaster who covers everywhere, and the BBC still does a lot more of that than many other international broadcasters, it's a standard. And if you make it to the headlines or the main news bulletin, you know the rest of the world thinks what you've done is important, it's not just you. And that matters. So I think that's one of the reasons why the BBC had this kudos, because it was a standard of global--, as a global measure and was therefore very important [inaudible 02:08:26]. So that's why the Soviet Foreign Ministry wanted to know what the morning news was. So that they could have in front of them as they measured up with--, you know, as I've being explaining, we were all caught up, cocooned in this extraordinarily dramatic

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Russian world, and you kind of wanted to know what the rest of the world is thinking about it. And is your news fourth headline or first headline or not there at all? You know, these things matter. But there were other occasions when sometimes people would ring up, and say, you know, "I heard that interview you did--," Say, from the Foreign Ministry, with--, actually, this was Latvia again, it was an activist who was very anti-Latvian and pro, part of the hard-line attempt to stop all these things happening, he said, "We heard your interview with him, and we think he's a real danger. Can we have the raw interview?" I said no, of course. They were cross about it because they sort of thought we all ought to be on the same side. But we weren't going to give raw material. But it did make you realise how attentively they listened to what we were outputting.

Q: [2:09:31] So, I mean, just to sort of jump forward a little bit, after December 1991 you have the end of the Soviet Union, effectively, and we're in, as it were, the Yeltsin era.

A: [2:09:43] Yeah, new Russia.

Q: [2:09:45] A new Russia. And then, to jump forward again, we later have the Putin era.

A: [2:09:51] Yeah.

Q: [2:09:53] I wondered whether or not it's possible to kind of get some sense of whether the BBC's standing changes in that period. I mean, clearly Gorbachev had a kind of particular kind of affinity in recognition of, you know, not just your role but the BBC's role. I'm kind

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of guessing that there wasn't necessarily that direct--, that sort of relationship with Yeltsin even though he was a progressive, in a sense, and less so with Putin? I mean, I wonder if you can just map out the BBC's status, as it were afterwards.

A: [2:10:25] So two things happened. One was internally in the new Russia. There were more outlets which gave you real news. I mean, already, in the late Gorbachev years there were, when censorship disappeared, and suddenly reading newspapers was fascinating. But they wanted--, you know, they were very interested in relations with the United States, so they wanted this sort of global comparison. But in the early Yeltsin years they were also very interested in the rest of the world and how much they'd helped them and, you know, how much they could learn from the West. They invited in western advisors and economic experts and so on to help them adapt to a market economy. They were writing a new constitution and they were looking at the American constitution and the French constitution for the presidency. So they were looking elsewhere for models for all sorts of things. And I think, you know, actually, to this day, I think they still look westward for the models rather than to the East, for example. Although, you know, it's interesting, Kazakhstan always looked to Singapore and Korea, they liked a slightly more authoritarian model. They very much liked the Singaporean model. So it's not true everywhere. But in the early Yeltsin years, I think we still did have--, I felt I got a lot of access. I mean, I remember, again, interviewing the Vice President of Yeltsin, who he fell out with, actually, in 1993, there was a real bust-up and another conflict at the White House when his Vice President and the Speaker at the Parliament sort of mounted a counter-revolution against Yeltsin. They felt he'd gone too far and his shock therapy reforms were too tough for the population and Russia was being humiliated in front of the West. I mean, you know,

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foreshadowing over the Putin arguments to come. But I did an interview with Putin's Vice President who had been very critical of--, not Putin, Yeltsin's Vice President, Rutskoy, a military man, he'd been very critical of Yeltsin. And I remember going into the Kremlin to do the interview. So he gave me an interview. You know, I just rang--, had my assistant ring up, and say, "We want to interview him." And he said yes. And there in the Kremlin, in his big room, he had a huge picture of Peter the Great, I remember, who was sort of his hero, obviously. We did a long interview, in Russian, in which he was extremely critical of Yeltsin. And, actually, I'm not even sure I was able to make it into a news story for our English speaking outlets, but I certainly gave it to the Russian Service, and they broadcast it. And someone or other transcribed it and put it on Yeltsin's desk, and he hit the roof. And he called in Rutskoy, his Vice President and carpeted him, and said, "You can't do this, you know. You're sitting in your office in the Kremlin undermining me. I will not have it." And this is a precursor, of course, to what--, we didn't know it was coming, this conflict that was to happen. And Rutskoy sent messages to me via various people to say he was furious with me and he'd have me kicked out. Well, I was a bit worried about that and I consulted, and the advice I got from within the BBC and others was just play it cool, just don't worry about it. And within six months this whole thing blew up into a huge conflict. And, actually, I think Rutskoy might have ended up in prison, I can't remember. He certainly wasn't Vice President any more. But it is interesting that he, a) gave me the interview, you know, if you'd tried getting an interview with the Vice President of the United States, or any other country, it's a huge rigmarole. It would take months and there's all sorts of protocol and you have to hang around, and negotiations and things, no, no, no. And then when we broadcast it, you know, there were this--, it led to this outcome. So that's the early Yeltsin years. When you roll onto Putin, I mean, even then they were still pretty, in the early Putin years,

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they're pretty focused on outside. You know, he was new and he wanted to be sure what his stature was externally. He was, at that time, trying to get more foreign investment. He wanted Russia to raise up from its knees. And I did an early TV documentary called Who is Putin, because at that point nobody knew, and we asked for an interview with him in which I had given my full CV and everything, so the Kremlin were--, his people were very clear who I was. And they didn't give me an interview for the documentary, but a few months later the Press Office and the Kremlin rang the BBC bureau in Moscow, and said, "Mr Putin wants to do a big phone-in to have a bit more of a sort of presence internationally. And he's going to have..." And also make the point that he's engaged with the internet. This is 2001. "And we're going to have a couple of Russian broadcasters, but we'd like to have the BBC there as a global, you know, a global voice, you're active online. And we'd like Bridget Kendall to do the interview." So, you know, they'd had my CV, they knew who I was, but also they wanted the BBC because of its global footprint, and it still mattered to them. So, you know, I think maybe what pattern can one see, that when people get in power for longer, maybe they aren't quite so concerned about their global image. So then the magnification that the BBC can give them matters less. I went back and did another interview on similar lines with him in 2006, when Russia was for the first time hosting the G8 summit in St Petersburg. And there's always a bit of a tradition that the host president or leader gives an interview to international broadcasters, and this was part of what they did. But they had, again, a Russian, two Russian journalists, the Head of their news agency RIA Novosti, and someone from Russia Today, and me. They didn't invite CNN or anyone else. So at that point I think he was still feeling that we were a useful vehicle. We haven't been invited back since. You know, he's in a different place now. He's been there nearly 20 years, he doesn't feel the same need to talk to the world.

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Q: [2:16:43] Okay, I want to step back from Russia and the Soviet Union a little bit and just ask you some questions about changes at the BBC. And, I mean, I want to kind of talk mostly about Bush House and the World Service. But before that I want to kind of go back to sort of Birt and Birtism. And that, of course, rather like [laughs] the Soviet Union, you know, it's complicated, Birtism, there's a lot that's in there in terms of the mission to explain and so on. But in terms of the kind of the daily operation of your work, the kind of--, the thing that was happening then, there's kind of an interest in bi-media, there's an interest in kind of the merging of operations. And there's an anxiety, too, I mean, there are some quite outspoken opponents of what John Birt was doing, who kind of worried about increasing uniformity of output and so on, that, you know, the mission to explain was all well and good, but, actually, the kind of mapping out of a story rather than that kind of reportage, all of these debates were going on. And I wondered whether or not it's possible to kind of give some sense of, from where you were standing, what these debates meant, if anything.

A: [2:17:57] So I think of it--, I suppose I think of the evolution less about who the Director General at the BBC was and more about the changing media landscape worldwide, and especially the change in technology. So it's less--, my perception of it is less personal, although I was aware of all this. But, I mean, one of the things about bi-medialism, for example, was, as far as I was concerned, this didn't just come as a policy that came down from a particular BBC manager, it was the fact that the technology was changing and other things were happening that meant we needed to look for more efficiencies in order to compete. So I've talked a lot about how I used to have this big Uher to record on, the next thing that happened was that it went to a cassette recorder about the size of a paperback book, which you

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could record on for 40 minutes. And then we went digital and, you know, now you can--, well, you can use your iPhone, actually. And similarly with cameras, they're great big things, and they became smaller and smaller. And, along with that came the possibility, first we had a circuit in the Moscow office, and then there were the early satellite dishes, which we used to haul around the Soviet Union to broadcast from onsite. And they've all got smaller and smaller and smaller, till you don't even really need a satellite dish anymore. And, along with that came the possibility of doing more live, more rolling. The first Gulf War, 1991, when they had, on Radio 4, something called Scud FM, which was rolling news to cover the war.

Q: [2:19:41] I had to do a shift on Scud FM.

A: [2:19:47] Yeah. So this led to an idea of, well, we really ought to be able to roll news. CNN was just beginning as rolling TV news. They were there for some of those early dramatic events in the 1990s in Moscow and, you know, they were able to cover it wall-to-wall, whereas we were still feeding stuff in to bespoke radio and TV programmes. So first of all there was 5 Live and then there was, there was also Global TV, which had a stuttering start because it had to be funded commercially, and that was tough, but it was a rolling. And then they decided that there ought to be a UK equivalent, News 24. So these happened in the '90s, really after I left Moscow. So by the time I got to Washington, 5 Live and then News 24 and then Global TV. And then, of course, there was online, which began to merge everything, because you could also have these things live streamed digitally. And it, from my point of view it was--, this changing technology meant that you couldn't any more pour quite so many resources into the Six O'clock News and the Ten O'clock News, into, you know, bespoke package

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which would go out once, live on the PM programme, and then be gone. You had to think, you know, what are you going to do to fill all those hours on 5 Live? And it made sense to think about reversioning. So you might, you know, I get an interview with the Vice President of Russia, it made sense to take along a camera as well as having it for the Russian Service because then you could use it for television. And, from my point of view as a correspondent, I thought that was good, because quite a lot of it, if I think back to a lot of my early work, you would get these fantastic interviews but they weren't in vision, so no one could use them for television, and that was a shame. So it was a bit of a, at times they would be--, now it's all cheaper so it's not so difficult, but at times you'd think, well, is it worth taking a camera? It would cost so much. But on the other hand if it turns out to be a really good interview, wouldn't you be sorry if we didn't have it as an interview? And then sometimes there was a bit of a tussle of, radio producers would say, "Yes, but you have to mic it lower, so the sound isn't as good." So you end up with a product you can use both on radio and TV, but for radio it isn't such a beautiful sound as you would want if it was just a--, and also it's a slightly different sort of interview. So that was one discussion that went on. There is then the question of, well, how do you process all this? If you collect the material for both outlets, if you sit down and make it into a radio package, it takes a certain amount of time. If you've then got to do the same for television, well, then you have to think, well, when do we actually put it on air? Because you can't say, "Okay, we've done the Today programme package. Put it on and then tonight we'll have the television package." Because we found quite quickly that the television editor said, "Well, we don't want it, actually, because it's been on the Today programme, it's old news." And then you think, oh, all that effort, filming and doing all that stuff, and now it's not being used. So then there had to be negotiations about, well, who does it go out

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with first, or do they have to go out absolutely simultaneously. And then some of these programmes would say, "Well, this is less valuable to us if another programme is running it too, because it isn't quite so newsy, it isn't quite so bespoke." So then, you know, some things you would just do especially for them and--, yeah, it was a big, I think it still is, it's quite hard to find a way to do both things. But I think, from the point of view of being a correspondent, I would say that in many ways I welcomed this because things that you were doing that were really difficult to get or which you knew were really good, could get a bit more air time or could be used again. Now, you know, you can get things on catch-up, so it's not quite so frustrating as it used to be, where something--, you did something really great and it went out once and then no one ever saw it again. That was always a bit of a shame.

Q: [2:23:53] But was there a sense of any downside to this in terms of the multiplying number of outlets to kind of, to feed?

A: [2:24:00] Yeah.

Q: [2:24:02] And you talked about the kind of, the metaphor of feeding a baby, it feels as if now you're feeding several babies.

A: [2:24:06] Yes.

Q: [2:24:17] And, I mean, you know, it has been said that that presents a challenge in terms of actually having the time and space to go out into the field, as it were, to do the original reporting in the first instance.

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A: [2:24:18] No, I think that's right, and I think erm--, so when I was Moscow correspondent I was sort of feeding round the clock because the World Service was round the clock. And then, you know, we would do a package for the Today Programme, they'd run it on the World Service, too. And that was all manageable. But when you have two television, rolling television stations, another two rolling TV stations, so 5 Live and the World Service, and then Radio 4 in there as well, quite demanding, then that's too much. And then, you know, nowadays of course you have, you know, special little things you do just for the online market, Youtube or whatever. It's too much. How do you decide what you do? And I think it, for a correspondent it becomes quite difficult to know who you're working for. So, if, I think I felt this more as a diplomatic correspondent, if you think, oh, that's a really interesting person who's coming to London, you know, I could probably get an interview with them. But who for? And I'm not quite sure. So in the end you build relationships with programmes because it's the only human way to deal with it. And then, if there's resource needed, I used to go off for the Today Programme and do a series of radio reports in the 2000s. Once a year, once every two years they'd send a producer, we'd be very ambitious, we'd go way out, and we did utterly original journalism. We spent ages putting it together. And they absolutely loved it. And it made quite a big impact. And the downside was, well, possibly it was picked up by the World Service and it was online, I would write articles online. But it didn't have a bigger life, I mean, it was never televised. But, if you like, we came out of the end of the sausage machine there and decided that there were moments when you would just do something very bespoke, just as you might make a long documentary. And, you know, you had one creative piece and you knew what you were doing and you put your energies into it. But in between all that, then there would sometimes be moments when you were feeding lots of different bits. I mean, I sometimes felt, though,

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that, especially, say, as diplomatic correspondent, where you're dealing with quite complicated subjects, I often did political reporting. That's what I'd done in Russia. If you had many bites at the cherry--, so you're at some quite complicated but fascinating event, I don't know, a Putin G20 conference in St Petersburg I covered, when relations were already going pretty badly wrong with the West. So I was reporting for TV, but I'd do the odd radio piece and I was doing lots of live stuff. I quite like the idea that I often had room to say things that I wouldn't have had room to put in the main piece, but I wanted to get out there because they're fascinating. So that, you know, that could work quite well in a kind of blitz, so you were there for a weekend, you barely sleep, you're broadcasting round the clock, and then you go home and collapse. But of course you can't do that day in, day out. So I think probably correspondents--, as correspondents you found ways to manage it by focusing, in one way or another.

Q: [2:27:39] I wanted to ask about the World Service, which, I mean, its very raison d'etre, really, I mean, even before the end of the second world war, was sort of on the basis of the Cold War, a kind of means of projecting Britain, as it were, to the world. And the Cold War, as it were, has come to an end. So I wondered what your sense was of the ability of the World Service to kind of reinvent itself and to find a new purpose in the world since the end of the Soviet Union and the end of that era.

A: [2:28:11] I think, I was helped--, it was helpful to write this Cold War book, actually, because it made me realise that the world I'd grown up in, born in the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s, till the end of the Soviet Union, it was unexpected. I mean, it was--, of course at the time I didn't think about this, but in comparison to what's happened since, it was very

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different. It was very black and white. I mean, if you think about the Second World War in comparison to any other big war, Hitler was so awful, and what he was doing in the concentration camps or wherever, it was so clear what we had to do, it made it very simple. And similarly with Stalin and then with the Soviet Union that followed Stalin, when they were still incarcerating people and the economy was a joke and the Party was stultifying and the KGB was terrible. And many people's lives were really very constricted. I mean, some people now say--, there was a period in the '60s where quite a lot of Soviet people thought it was fine, you know, the economy wasn't so awful and life was restricted but you could sort of get on if you kept out of politics. But I'm not sure I agree, having been a student there in the provinces. Maybe it's like that in Moscow, but in the provinces in the 1970s, life was pretty awful. And you had to watch over your shoulder, you had to worry who was reporting on you, who you could trust. You couldn't get even the simplest things like toothpaste or medicines you needed, let alone a proper range of food to be healthy. And so I think that the Soviet era was pretty awful and their propaganda was laughable and they were claiming a lovely, wonderful paradise when everybody knew they were living in a very grim world. And certainly my two years there as a student, I was pretty confident by the time--, with that experience behind me, I became a BBC correspondent, I could say that the Soviet Union was a sort of, a negative place and the Party was wrong and what Gorbachev was doing was good. For me there wasn't a sort of--, it was very clear. And I think it was for most people. And I felt confident in that, because I knew I was expressing the views, not just to people in the West, but most people I knew in the Soviet Union. But if you think about what's happened since, if you think about Putin's Russia or if you think about, you know, where we are in the world now with, at the moment, a mess of Brexit in Britain, Trump is President of the United States, it's really quite hard to see how black

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and white it is. And I think that makes it much harder for Bush House, because everything is--, when it's more relative it's much harder to have a clear news story. And if you don't have a clear news story, it becomes sort of a bit more confusing and a bit blander. And then it doesn't cut through. And then we're in a technological world of multi-platformism and many people taking a much more strident view, with much clearer voices, much more opinionated voices than, at the moment, the World Service can afford to have. So it is, I think, harder for them to cut through. But I think where the World Service always comes into its own is in parts of the world where people are living under a dictatorship, in repression, in difficult circumstances. And then it's still a lifeline, and it remains a lifeline. And even in parts of the world where that's not true, but people find that the media noise that surrounds them, for one reason or another, is oppressive, they still turn to the World Service. So I get quite a lot of Americans say to me now that they turn to the World Service because they can't bear a lot of the media and the media noise around current American politics.

Q: [2:32:01] There has been some criticism, and one recently, actually, just a few months ago, Owen Bennett-Jones kind of wrote quite a long critique in the London Review of Books. And it was kind of, you know, to quote him, the World Service has been transformed from one of the most respected radio stations on earth into a multimedia production house churning out material of highly variable quality. And, I mean, I won't quote lots and lots, but, I mean, he's kind of critical of the management, critical, I suppose, of the way in which the World Service operation to some extent has been merged with the domestic and therefore some sense of its global view being kind of lost or diminished in some way. That the licence fee isn't enough for the BBC to compete with Netflix and Facebook and so on. And it's a kind of--,

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A: [2:32:57] I think there is a--, I think there is an economic drain on the BBC. I mean, it's a lack of funds. It's trying to do so much, much more than it was when I first joined it, in a world that's much more competitive. And it's competing with lots of people who are only doing one thing, you know, ITN news is producing--, well, Channel 4 its two evening newses. We're producing--, the BBC is producing any number of things. So there is a huge danger of dilution. And, I think, also with the nervousness about funding and the future funding structure, there probably is a tendency to look over your shoulder a bit more. Sometimes when I've looked back through the archives at news reports and current affairs reports from earlier years, they're much sharper and edgier. I mean, I think there is the technical thing there, too, which is an interesting one, which is that, say for a television reporter in the 1970s, if you were asked to go and cover something, you jolly well had to get there with your cameraman and get the pictures and get the synch from the prime movers, because there's no agency going to get it for you. I mean, it's certainly true when I first went to Moscow. If someone said go and cover X, you had to be there and you had to get the synch, because there weren't--, no one was going to deliver it for you. I remember when Vis News, which became Reuters Television, first turned up in Moscow, and it was sort of a bizarre idea, but agency pictures didn't exist, and live satellite feeds. So, you know, if you didn't go to the press conference you missed it. You couldn't look for it later on the internet. So I think that did make--, and there was a sort of immediacy and authenticity and an urgency to earlier work which didn't need to be there later. You could always play catch-up. You could always look at all the pictures at the end of the day and not have been at an event and never filmed a thing and still put together a brilliant piece of television because you could just juggle all these sources. But you were more detached from it, and in the end something might be lost. So, I mean, I kind of--, when I look--,

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stand back from it, I don't--, I might lament it, but I kind of see it's the way of the world, and a lot of it's to do with technology and competitiveness. And it is a worry what will happen to the BBC and how it will survive in this media landscape. This is not just a news thing, as you were saying from that quote with Netflix, that's about entertainment as well. And if you look at early--, if you look at the BBC dramas and comedy programmes from the 1960s, when they had audiences of 20-25 million, everybody watched it. I mean, there was ITV, but there was nothing else. So they could say what they liked. They could be incredibly rude about the Government, and the Government wouldn't dare take it off air because it was too popular. But now, now you have to worry a bit more.

Q: [2:35:50] Are you glad that you spent all those years working for the BBC, I mean, you know, does it feel as if it was, you know, the right career to have and you wouldn't have had it in any other way?

A: [2:36:07] Yeah, no, I do, I really do think that. Though I think--, I'd say the big, big thing I'm glad about is that I started to study Russian and stuck with it and have made it the centre of my career. And it's been incredibly rewarding and I turned out to be doing it at exactly the right time, when communism ended, and I was there with a front seat, which the BBC facilitated. And I wouldn't have wanted to be there working for another news outfit. In fact I was offered to apply for jobs with other competitors, American and British, and I never seriously wanted to do it. Number one, because they didn't offer the breadth of output. We've been talking about the breadth of output, but I liked the fact that I could work for news or current affairs, I could go off and make TV documentaries, you know, I could do a number of things. Whereas if you work for one outfit that just does one thing, that's all you

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do. I thought that would be narrowing. But I also think it's the ethos of the BBC, its public broadcasting ethos. And particularly where I began, in the World Service, this truly global feeling that you are what your reputation is. And I think they still feel that strongly, it may be harder to deliver. I would say, I don't know across the board about quality, but I regularly come across really excellent pieces of journalist, like, for example, our Russian Service colleagues. When I joined the BBC World Service, they were mostly translating what we did in English, and they were, did a bit of analysis and commentary. They couldn't go to Russia because they were all émigrés. And John Tusa was the one who tried to make them more journalistic. And now, a lot of their work, which turns up translated on our online services [inaudible 02:38:05] I still feel very attached to the BBC. I still work for it in various capacities. But a lot of what they do is really first rate. So I think, you know, there may be some bits of the outlet which have been--, output which have been diluted, but there are others which, I think, if you look back 30 years, they're much better.

Q: [2:38:22] We're just about out of time, but I wanted, really, to give you the opportunity to talk about anything that you feel that we haven't touched on or that we haven't done justice to. And, I mean, that could be kind of a moment, an instant or a person, colleagues, part of the machinery, I mean, it's up to you, really. But, I mean, is there anything that we should have talked about that we haven't?

A: [2:38:49] I don't know, we've talked about a lot, haven't we?

Q: [2:38:50] [Laughs] We have, we have. Can I just finish, then, by asking just one last question, which is about that leaving the BBC, which was three years ago now, and I know you're still working, doing 'The Forum',

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for instance, and I'm sure you're connected in all sorts of other ways. But, I mean, was that, you know, that moment of leaving, was it a kind of--, what did it feel like?

A: [2:39:21] So I'd been there a long time. I'd been offered--, there'd been interest in me taking this sort of role, Master of an Oxbridge college before, and in the end I'd always thought, no, I'm having too much fun being BBC diplomatic correspondent. Which I did for a long time, but the world kept changing so it was always a new interest. And then I was very involved in following Putin's Russia, and that was just fascinating. But I did always wonder, well, how's this going to end, Bridget, am I just going to carry on being one of those, increasingly elderly correspondents who, you know, maybe does the odd piece but does less and less and, you know, you wind down. And I wasn't sure that I wanted to do that. And it was my partner, actually, he said, "Look, if you want to do another thing, you've got to do it now, or you'll be too old." And I think I'd also thought, well, how do I ever retire when my identity is now so tied up with being a BBC correspondent? Because the thing about being a BBC correspondent, especially one abroad, is it just totally takes over your life and, you know, you can't--, you can just about plan a holiday, but even that you might have to cancel if something happens. And you certainly can't plan your weekends in case there's, you know, a 9/11 attack or whatever. You have to put it first. And that is a sacrifice, but it's also, you know, it brings a lot with it because, you know, wherever I go and people say, "What do you do?" And I say, "I'm a BBC correspondent." It's, "Oh, right, okay." And then they absolutely understand what you do, they might well have heard of you, and so your identity is very clear. And to suddenly lose that identity, I wasn't quite sure how I'd deal with that, psychologically. And what's being very good about this move, which I--, it was a bit of a risk. It's a different world. I wasn't sure how people

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would think of having a journalist. They've been very receptive, and, actually, I've found that, I think particularly having worked for the BBC and done--, always had quite an analytical approach, and in latter years done much more analysis because that's what the corporation wanted from me, actually it's not so different from what quite a lot of my colleagues here do. And I talk a lot to our historians and we do events together. And now, you know, I've written a book about--, this project, on the Cold War has sort of moved me over into contemporary history, which is, you know, kind of what journalism is. And certainly now I've got this long time looking back over the latter Cold War years, it's been very good to have time to sort of analyse it in a slightly longer frame, as we've been talking about. But what has been really nice for me in this new role, which I hadn't really anticipated, but it is, is that I have such a clear identity here. You know, people say to me, "What do you do?" I say, "Oh, I'm Master of a Cambridge college." They say, "Oh, right, okay." They know exactly who I am and what I do. And I think that's, for me that's been very, it's very comfortable to inhabit a mantle. You know, in the end I wasn't--, the BBC thought I was too old to join at the age of 26, but I was quite young, and from that time on I had a very clear mantle that I carried. I was a BBC reporter and then correspondent. And now I have another clear one, and I think, you know, with that comes--, when you inhabit a role in that way, it is very 100%. I work even harder here than I did at the BBC. I'm sure my partner would say I don't leave enough time for family life. But I think I like it like that, and I think that's the way I've always been, to throw myself into something very wholeheartedly. And the other thing is, one of the things that was a change here, which I find quite delightful, is that throughout my BBC life, certainly as a correspondent from the time I went to Moscow, you know, I used to say, as I was telling you, that it was like feeding the baby, and it really was, like you never really knew. Your life was not your own. So you'd wake up in the morning, say as

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diplomatic correspondent, I never quite knew what I'd be doing later that day. I always used to say it was like preparing for a viva and you don't know what the subject is, because it's such a broad canvas, diplomatic. And you'd think, well, here's the news, maybe I'll have to do this for the Ten O'clock News. But you never know whether you might be asked to jump on a plane and go to Paris, where there's some diplomatic talks going on, or you think you're going to do something, then at six o'clock the news moves on and they say, "We don't want it anymore." You can't really commit to a dinner party. You can't really be sure what time you've got that's your own. Whereas as here in my job as Master, we have the academic year, we have the programme. I know very well that on the first Monday of every October I will have a reception for fellows here. Sometimes with my PA, you know, someone asks if I'll go and speak and, you know, on a Thursday next August, so I say to my PA , "Well, what did we do last year on that date?" and we look it up, and [inaudible 02:44:25], "Yes, probably I'll be free." So I have this very regular diary now. And I think some people might find that rather stultifying and sort of feel a bit entrapped by this routine. But I find it very exotic and very refreshing.

[Interview ends 02:44:52]

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