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Oral History Interview with Sir Michael Weston

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Sir Michael Weston

United Kingdom

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco in person in Tonbridge on 23 September 2016

Michal Onderco:

There are three areas that I want to talk about. The first one is about the process before the conference - the domestic discussion before you went to the conference. Then, the most important: what happened at the conference, and then I want to briefly talk about the follow up. I want to start with a very general question. What were the main considerations that the United Kingdom went to the conference with?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well I think that we were quite clear that we believed that it was important that the treaty be extended indefinitely. As you know, when the treaty was first agreed and negotiated, we, the Americans, and indeed the Russians had wanted to have an indefinite treaty. And it was only pressure, at that time, from our European allies that prevented this. Because at that stage, I think, they had not given up the idea, all of them, of having nuclear weapons themselves. So this, at that stage, was a problem for them. So we agreed, reluctantly, to the 25 year limit, and our main aim when we went to the conference in 1995 was to extend the Treaty indefinitely.

Michal Onderco:

One of the things that shaped the conference and framed it was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of superpower competition. How did that effect the British calculation?

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't think it really for this treaty, made any difference. The treaty had been agreed on the basis of the five nuclear weapon states. The five continued to exist. So I really don't think it was a factor.

Michal Onderco:

And was, for example, the ongoing disarmament discussions which were going on between the United States and, the Soviet Union/Russia, did that matter at all for your decisions?

Sir Michael Weston:

In terms of aim, I think not. It was of course a factor, and indeed the most important factor, because really there are two predominant nuclear weapon states, with significantly greater numbers of warheads. The three others have enough to blow up the world, but nevertheless, as far as reduction in weapons goes, for a long time, it will always be a matter between the two. So yes, that was a factor.

Michal Onderco:

In the run-up to the conference what was the domestic input into the negotiation position, which, for example what government departments did contribute to the discussion.

Sir Michael Weston:

This, this was in fact something that the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office all played a part. We had meetings in London, in which those three bodies were involved.

Michal Onderco:

Did the parliament have any role?

Sir Michael Weston:

No.

Michal Onderco:

And how did the civil society contribute to your negotiations?

Sir Michael Weston:

I think as far as this treaty went – and this is not true for example of the treaties on the banning of nuclear weapons, or of chemical weapons – I don't think civil society was really very much concerned in this. There was no involvement, to my knowledge, but my memory may be at fault.

Michal Onderco:

So, not even the academic circles like PPNN, ran by John Simpson? Did you have any interaction with them?

Sir Michael Weston:

Not to my knowledge, no, I mean, I imagine they may have had some with the Foreign Office in London. But, certainly, I'm not aware of it.

Michal Onderco:

Did the industry try to lobby, for example?

Sir Michael Weston:

Not to my knowledge on this issue. Of course, on other issues: , very much so. Chemical weapons particularly. But as far as NPT went, I don't believe so.

Michal Onderco:

How was your coordination with the United States in the run-up to the conference, did you coordinate your positions?

Sir Michael Weston:

We did indeed, yes.

Michal Onderco:

And how did that work?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well, we had meetings in London, and Washington, and in Geneva. I mean at various levels. The coordination was very close . As indeed was the coordination with the French...

Michal Onderco:

OK

Sir Michael Weston:

Oddly enough, to me it was the first time I'd ever really worked on the same side as the Russians. Because we were at this time already embarking on the CTBT negotiations, they were well advanced. We had the Five meetings, the P5 meetings, in Geneva, where we were working together. And so as well as cooperating and coordinating with the United States, we were also cooperating with China, Russia, and of course, France.

Michal Onderco:

What were the main sticking points or the differences that the United Kingdom had with any of these countries?

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't think we really had any on the NPT, as far as the basic aim goes. We were all agreed that the outcome should be indefinite extension. And we were agreed that we were prepared to pay a price for that, in terms of being prepared to agree to a strengthened review process and to making commitments to work towards nuclear disarmament in the context of general and complete disarmament. . But, there, I think there we were all pretty much agreed. After all, the Russians at the beginning had wanted the treaty to be indefinite and they were not happy to settle for 25 years. And so, there really wasn't a basic difference at this point at all.

Michal Onderco:

When it comes to CTBT that you became very important during the negotiations at the conference, was there difference between the P5 on the issue, or how would you

describe the difference between the P5 on the issue?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well, the difference, the problem really was that, neither the Americans nor the Russians needed any more tests to feel confident about their nuclear weapons. The Americans, I'm certain; I'm sure the Russians were even more so, I'll explain that in a second. Whereas the other three of us would all have liked to do a little more testing. We couldn't because our test site, I don't know if you know - at the time, of the moratorium, there was a British test all prepared, ready to go in Nevada, and then we were not able to do that. The French and the Chinese, of course, wanted more tests, and did more tests. But essentially, there were differences on the scope of the CTBT. It was only when the Americans insisted on banning all tests, on all nuclear test explosions that we came together on that. Before that, the Russians had wanted an amount, the Chinese had a demand for peaceful nuclear explosions, and so forth. But essentially, as far as the NPT is concerned, I thought we were pretty much together.

Michal Onderco:

And when the, at the, one of the topics that became prominent in the run up to the conference was, of course, Iraq's clandestine nuclear programme. How did that effect the calculations about the NPT and about the extension?

Sir Michael Weston:

I think it added impetus in the sense that more people accepted the logic of limiting the number of nuclear weapon states even if they wanted to do away with them all.

Michal Onderco:

Did the whole Iraq situation effect your trust in the IAEA?

Sir Michael Weston:

[long pause] I don't think so. I mean, I think we...I am really not sure that I have anything to say about that, I just genuinely don't know, but I don't think so.

Michal Onderco:

Can we talk a little about the PrepComms for the conference? How would you describe the atmosphere during the conference, during the PrepComms, and with what goals did the British government go into the PrepComms for the 1995 conference?

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes, well I think it was probably right at the beginning the of the process that we decided what our aim was for the conference and therefore we went into the PrepComms with that very much in view and we really concentrated, pretty simple mindedly on that.

Michal Onderco:

But did PrepComms in any ways influence your strategy or did you use PrepComms to build the momentum for the indefinite extension?

Sir Michael Weston:

The latter. I mean we definitely tried, right from the start, to work toward indefinite extension, if possible without a vote.

Michal Onderco:

And how did you go about approaching and persuading other countries about that?

Sir Michael Weston:

Both we and the Americans, and indeed the French, made enormous efforts in capitals to persuade states that this was the way to go. It was certainly, in my time in the Foreign Service, it was the biggest lobbying campaign that I have known in capitals.

Michal Onderco:

Let's move to the conference itself and what was going on at the conference itself. The principle positions were basically the Mexican position and the conditional extension, and then there was the Canadian proposal for extension in perpetuity, and the 25 year extension. Can we start by briefly discussing how the British government saw each of the proposals?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well, as I said, our aim was absolutely clear that we wanted indefinite extension...

Michal Onderco:

So aligned with the Canadian position?

Sir Michael Weston:

...so we were very much in favour of the Canadian position and worked with that. 25 years was obviously better than nothing, but we thought this was a good opportunity to get what we would have liked, as I said, from the very beginning, which was an indefinite treaty. So that was very much a fall-back. We were pretty distrustful, quite frankly, of the Mexican proposal because of the links with disarmament and we were not in a position to move on that. I mean, yes, in the context of general and complete disarmament as an ultimate goal but we were not able, particularly, I think, the UK and France, due to the disparity in our numbers, we were not really in a position to get into any sort of commitment on reductions. So, I think we were pretty distrustful of the Mexican proposal. And, of course, the Mexicans had been playing a very prominent role in the CD [Conference on disarmament, note MO] on the test ban treaty negotiations and so I think our view was a bit jaundiced where the Mexican proposal went.

Michal Onderco:

Did you coordinate with Canada in the formation of that Canadian proposal?

Sir Michael Weston:

No, No.

Michal Onderco:

So, the Canadians came independently with that proposal.

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

...do you know how they came up with it?

Sir Michael Weston:

No, no. I don't.

Michal Onderco:

So they basically only came up with the proposal and that was what suited the British government, and therefore you supported that?

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes, I mean, to my knowledge, and there may have been things going on in London that I wasn't aware of but as far as my knowledge and recollection goes this was an independent initiative and, as you say, one we liked very much.

Michal Onderco:

At the conference did you see much difference between the publicly stated positions of states and what they would advocate in closed meetings, or in private?

Sir Michael Weston:

[long pause] I'm searching my memory. In the case of the, of the non-aligned, very definitely yes. Apart from the very hard core non-aligned who said the same in public as they said in private. There are a lot of countries who were much more ready, in private, to concede that they would support an indefinite extension than were able to say it publicly.

Michal Onderco:

In which country would that be most visible?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well, I suppose South Africa is the obvious example. The South African role was absolutely crucial throughout, and in private they were prepared to support the Canadian proposal. But in public, they had to take a much harder line.

Michal Onderco:

Do you think that the Canadians and South Africans coordinated together? Or that the South Africans coordinated with anyone else during the conference?

Sir Michael Weston:

My impression is that the South Africans played a pretty independent role. A crucial role. But I don't think they were in cahoots with the Canadians. I think they did what they thought was best for South Africa but it just happened it was convenient for others.

Michal Onderco:

You already said that before the conference you'd never seen this sort of lobbying happen at any other instance as it happened in the run-up to the conference. Did that continue in New York?

Sir Michael Weston:

Very definitely.

Michal Onderco:

In what type of form? Can you tell more about this?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well. In the way that diplomatic things go. A lot of bilateral meetings, at all levels, with other delegations and at the same time we were reporting on delegations that we thought were possible converts and then there would be action in those capitals. A really organized lobbying campaign.

Michal Onderco:

On the flipside was there any pressure from London on your delegation in any way to, or any instructions on a sort of amending the diplomatic campaign.

Sir Michael Weston:

No, though I think it's true to say that London were perhaps less confident than we were that we could achieve indefinite extension without a vote. I think they probably wondered if we were overconfident. But we worked very closely and in good harmony.

Michal Onderco:

If it were to become obvious that it would not be possible to get an indefinite extension without a vote, were you prepared to push for a vote?

Sir Michael Weston:

We were prepared to push for a vote, but we thought it would be divisive. A secret vote would have been possible and that would have been better from the point of view of the treaty in as much that it would not be as divisive as an open vote. But, on the other hand, we were less confident of winning a secret vote because people who had told us that they would vote for extension might not, in practice, do so. It wasn't

something we were very comfortable with.

Michal Onderco:

Some people say, for example, the method that was used by the president to ask if there was someone who was against the extension was a very interesting way of turning table. Was that something that came up, that was devised after they came up with competition, or was there a lack of support for an extension?

Sir Michael Weston:

No. I think we encouraged Dhanapala to go in that direction because we thought it was the best way for the future of the treaty, in that it showed the greatest support for it.

Michal Onderco:

Speaking of Dhanapala during the conference he invited the diplomats to join the 'friends of the President' group.

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

How did the discussion go in the 'Friends of the President' group?

Sir Michael Weston:

It was pretty frank, and, I wouldn't say it was necessarily that harmonious. But, I think he handled that very skilfully.

Michal Onderco:

Were there, for example, many procedural issues that needed to be sorted out?

Sir Michael Weston:

No. I mean, the main issue was how the extension was to be carried out, how it was to be done.

Michal Onderco:

So how did the fault lines go in the 'Friends of the President'? Who were the main opponents of the indefinite extension?

Sir Michael Weston:

The hard line [NAM] Indonesia, Mexico, Egypt. They were the ones which were the most difficult.

Michal Onderco:

So how did you manage to get them on board?

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't know. I think the Mexicans were always essentially reasonable and they didn't have a particular axe to grind. I mean in many ways the Egyptians were the most difficult because they wanted, reasonably enough, to take this opportunity to do something about Israel's nuclear weapons. So they had a very clear national interest at stake which was direct. Indonesia: I never quite understood, quite frankly, why Indonesia was as difficult as it was, but they too were very tough.

Michal Onderco:

When it comes to Egypt, what was the British position on the Middle East Weapon of Mass Destruction Free Zone before and during the conference?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well, I think our position on that did not really change. If it had been possible to negotiate a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone that would have been great, but clearly in terms of Israel, it wasn't. So it wasn't anything we could support very far.

Michal Onderco:

So you thought the Egyptian proposal was going to fail anyway?

Sir Michael Weston:

It was never going to pass. Yes. It could never fly, given Israel and the United States' commitment to Israel.

Michal Onderco:

And where the Egyptians aware of this?

Sir Michael Weston:

I'm sure. I believe Amr Moussa was aware of this but that didn't stop him giving it a good try.

Michal Onderco:

And why do you think this was? Because they saw it as the only opportunity to raise attention to the issue?

Sir Michael Weston:

They saw it, not the only one at the time, but certainly a good opportunity to do so. And something they feel very strongly about, and not without reason. [rest of sentence inaudible]

Michal Onderco:

Was there any feeling of exclusion, did you have a feeling that countries which were not part of the 'Friends of the President'...did they make it obvious that they felt excluded?

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes. Up to a point. This is true of all groups of that sort, which always happens at conference. You'll probably know rather more than I will about this, but, in my experience, one has to have such a group which the President constructs to try and get a balanced view and those outside are unhappy to be excluded. We coped with it. One of the great advantages, I think, of the negotiations at this particular treaty was that in most cases we were all colleagues and friends from Geneva and therefore were used to each other. And, one of the important things was that the Western group worked so effectively throughout this. Because, I think we were less worried about, to be frank, about difficulties with the Non-aligned than we were with those in our own group. The difficulty was that the Western group would have fallen apart because there were a lot of members of the group, Japan, Germany and Australia for example, who were pretty unhappy with the basic concept of nuclear weapons at all, and of perpetuating the situation in which five countries had them. And that was the difficulty. But the Western group worked very well throughout. It was a lot of hard work to keep it together but it certainly paid off.

Michal Onderco:

You mentioned Japan, and Germany, and Australia. Would these countries prefer more an extension for 25 years, for example?

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't know, I think they had their doubts about extending a treaty which basically they were not happy with, since it did license nuclear weapons. I mean, it's most obvious in the case of Japan. They felt viscerally that this was not something that they wanted to do. They behaved impeccably at the conference; I'm not suggesting that they did not. But one was always worried that somehow, one's support in one's own group would evaporate.

Michal Onderco:

In the case of Germany: Germany was just reunited. It was the first NPT conference they attended together. Did that pay a role for Germany? Was united Germany different that Germany five years before?

Sir Michael Weston:

I find that difficult to answer since I don't know. I had no experience of Germany

beforehand except much earlier at the UN where they played a very quiet part. In a way I think it was the beginning of Germany beginning to punch at its own weight. It was the first time that they really began to contribute in an international negotiation. I say, it had started in the CD where Ambassador Hoffmann played a prominent role. But I think to that extent it was something new that Germany was able to be as important as it was.

Michal Onderco:

So Germany played a role that you would position somewhere between the nuclear weapon states like France and the UK, and countries like those who advocated for an extension of 25 years. So Germany was somewhere in the middle between these two poles.

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes, I think that's probably a fair summary of their position. Yes.

Michal Onderco:

When it comes to Australia: was Australia also very independent? Or did it align itself with the British or the American position?

Sir Michael Weston:

It tried to be independent. But, when the chips are down, Australia relies on the United States for stability in its part of the world. So it couldn't be as independent as it would have liked to be. But, in all the negotiations, Australia played a very positive, but independent role.

Michal Onderco:

What was the attitude towards the non-members during the conference? Was there a feeling that the non-members should be brought in? Or were they vilified? What was the attitude towards the non-members?

Sir Michael Weston:

There was a great effort, at least on the part of the Western group, to involve them, and make them feel involved because we wanted their support. It was as simple as that. I know...they certainly weren't vilified.

Michal Onderco:

Was there a thought that universalisation is something that NPT should strive for? Was that seen as something that would help the treaty? I mean inclusion of countries like Israel, India, and Pakistan, and so on.

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't think there was any thought about doing that at this time. We had enough to worry about without doing that. Of course, subsequently, there have been efforts. But on the whole it is my impression that the NPT is one treaty that India, for example, will never sign. But I'm much more hopeful when it comes to the CTBT, whatever Arundhati Ghose might have said about 'never'.

Michal Onderco:

How were the NPT negotiations connected to the CTBT negotiations? Can you talk more about the linkages between the two?

Sir Michael Weston:

Well, there was in New York an idea that the conference should be adjourned until the CTBT negotiations were completed. So there was absolutely no doubt that without the progress in the CTBT negotiations we would never have had indefinite extension. So there is that basic linkage. Beyond that I don't think there is much to be said.

Michal Onderco:

So the CTBT negotiations were taking place independent of the [NPT] negotiations...?

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes

Michal Onderco:

The fault lines in the CTBT negotiations were similar to the fault lines of the NPT negotiations? Or were they different?

Sir Michael Weston:

No, they were very similar.

Michal Onderco:

After the conference and after the success of the conference, what was the immediate reaction in the Foreign Office? Once you had the meeting about taking stock of the conference, what were the thoughts that were going on in peoples' heads?

Sir Michael Weston:

I wasn't there so it's difficult to answer, but my impression is that we discussed with the Americans and French at least, how we were going to deal with the new commitments that we had entered into. But frankly my impression is that we heaved a sigh of relief and thought that we would worry about that when we come up to the first review conference.

Michal Onderco:

One of the things that was agreed at the conference was the strengthened review mechanism. Afterwards a disagreement emerged about what that actually meant. How did the British government interpret that strengthened review mechanism? And what did you expect from the future review mechanism?

Sir Michael Weston:

I think we expected to be held to account much more than in the past, about what we had done. That is we the five, in the way of reducing the numbers of our nuclear weapons. We also expected to be under pressure at future review conferences. The process would be forward looking as well in the future, so we would be asked about our intentions, so we expected to find review conferences rather less comfortable.

Michal Onderco:

What was your expectations about they PrepComms? Did you expect that PrepComms would really be about only preparing the agenda for the next meeting or were they to be the mini review conference?

Sir Michael Weston:

I believe, but I'm a bit hazy on this, I believe that we continued to believe that it was only the conference itself that was to be the review and that the PrepComms should be preparation for that conference.

Michal Onderco:

Even after the conference decided it will support negotiations of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone you remained to be very sceptical about it. Am I correct?

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

So there was no expectation that this would lead to some sort of successful outcome?

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't think so. I mean my own experience, before going to Geneva, had been almost entirely in the Middle East, dating from when I went to New York and took part in the Four-Part Talks in the early seventies. I personally never saw any chance of getting anywhere on a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone until one dealt with the basic problem of Palestine and Israel.

Michal Onderco:

And was there an expectation that the treaty may welcome new members afterwards? Or lose members? Did you expect that after the conference the membership would be affected?

Sir Michael Weston:

Of the NPT?

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't think so. I mean the important holdouts, their reasons, their objection to the treaty was one of principle and remained. I think particularly, of course, of India. I think, frankly, , if one tries to look at it dispassionately, they have a point, they have a perfectly valid point of view.

Michal Onderco:

For example Brazil joined afterwards...

Sir Michael Weston:

...yes...

Michal Onderco:

...so was there an expectation that Brazil would join at some point?

Sir Michael Weston:

I don't recall having thought about that.

Michal Onderco:

So after the extension of the NPT basically all of the focus shifted to the CBTB and the CD?

Sir Michael Weston:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

Was there any sort of lessons learnt that you took from extending NPT and would later be applied to CBTB?

Sir Michael Weston:

No that I can recall. I don't think so.

Michal Onderco:

OK. Well thank you very much.

Sir Michael Weston:

I'm sorry not to be more precise. After 20 years it's quite difficult.