

## **September 22, 2016**

### **Oral History Interview with John Simpson**

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#### **Summary:**

Co-founder of the Programme for Promoting Nuclear Non-Proliferation (PPNN) and director of the Mountbatten Centre for International Studies (MCIS)

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John Simpson

United Kingdom / PPNN

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco in person in Southampton on 22 September 2016

John Simpson:

I was asked by the British Foreign Office to go out to New York in the summer of 1982 to be the Brit on a UN study on conventional disarmament which had been initiated at the back end of '81. The Falklands War had generated a certain amount of turbulence over which states should participate on this study. The British initially said that they didn't want to participate, for fairly obvious reasons at the time. Then, the French said they were going to participate as did the other three nuclear weapons states. So the Brits were confronted with the problem if they sent someone who was a representative of the government, the study might degenerate into a big fight over the Falklands.

This was only explained to me at 9 o'clock in the morning that the study started. A friend of mine from Aberystwyth University had explained to me that what I should do was at 9am hammer on the door of the British Mission and say 'who is the person in the British Mission responsible for arms control?' The upshot of all of this was that I ended up on the study with an Argentinean. What, of course, no one knew at the time was that his boss's son had actually been at Southampton and was one of my students. He had completed his thesis, and was waiting for his results. This came in handy because ... in New York everyone knew everyone else, and he and I came to a sort of understanding and ended up going out and having a cup of tea each time we met and at the end deciding who would be present and who would go shopping on the final session of the study.

The person running the study was Ben Sanders, a Dutchman. I think I had at that point just published my book *The Independent Nuclear State: the United States, Britain and the Military Atom*. Anyway, Ben and I got to talking and we clearly had similar interests. He was responsible for moving the study forward and the upshot was that eventually after 13 weeks, I think, of coming backwards and forwards to New York and Geneva working on the study, we eventually came up with a document that was consensual. This was achieved by my Argentine colleague and myself spinning a coin as to which of us would go shopping and which would be there at the final session of the conference.

Ben had, by then, been appointed as the Secretary General of the 1985 NPT Review Conference. I went to this Conference because at that point the University of Southampton had received a significant amount of money from the Ford Foundation to undertake a study on what might happen in the 10 years between '85 and '95, and how was the '95 conference going to be handled. Ben knew he was going to have to retire in '87, and I invited him and others who had played a major role in the 1985 conference to a meeting in Guernsey in the following year.

Michal Onderco:

The Sarnia conference?

John Simpson:

Yeah I think it was the first one. While we were there Ben took all of the movers and shakers from '85 to dinner and sold them the idea that there ought to be a body which was semi-permanent and which would address itself to some of the issues surrounding the future of the NPT including its lack of a permanent base and continuity. Because basically the NPT would be dormant for 42 months and then suddenly spring up 18 months before a conference, and everyone would dash around, and the UN would provide the place and people to organise and run it etcetera. And then it would all close up after another half a year of tidying everything up and the individuals involved would all move on to other jobs. So there was no continuity in the exercise. That's what PPNN was created to do: to provide continuity.

Michal Onderco:

How did he sell them the idea? What did he sell them on?

John Simpson:

Well, what he sold them was the lack of an international body which held information on what had happened in the previous NPT Review conferences. So there was nothing to come back to, to work out how you ran such a conference.

Michal Onderco:

But there were surely, for example, experts who took part in conferences from one year to another, so they were...

John Simpson:

Well no, because ....In the case of the British, at that time they created a Nuclear Non-proliferation Department, or something along those lines, about 15 months before the conference and about 3 months after the conference they just folded it up.

Michal Onderco:

Oh, really?

John Simpson:

Yeah

Michal Onderco:

That was in '85?

John Simpson:

Yeah. It's essentially what happened from '75 onwards. They basically started in '75 with a clean sheet and the only basis they could work from was the Partial Test Ban Treaty. The Partial Test Ban Treaty was the only thing they'd got of a similar nature and a number of ideas were picked up from that. The rest was a product of consultations in Geneva between the Americans and the Russians, and the result of the Americans desperately trying to persuade some of the Europeans to sign up to the idea of them making a commitment never to have nuclear weapons.

Michal Onderco:

So he sold them on the idea of continuity of institutional history. How did he pick the countries? Because you said there were movers and shakers...

John Simpson:

Well. He picked the countries on three bases: one was the people who had effectively run the successful '85 conference. I remember sitting through the last 24 hours of it when it was in danger of going off the edge. So that was one thing. The chairman in 1985 was the Egyptian Mohammed Shaker. It was Mohammad Shaker and his sidekick, and both of them I think went on to be a member of the PPNN Core Group I seem to remember.

Michal Onderco:

Shaker was for sure.

John Simpson:

Yes. There was a number of Americans who'd been involved, in particular, Charles van Doren, Lawrence Scheinman

Michal Onderco:

...and Joe Pilat.

John Simpson:

Joe Pilat and, oh, who was my mate...I've forgotten his name I'm not very good at it these days. Lewis Dunn, because I remember Lew coming up to me when we were on a boat in Geneva and demanding to know why he wasn't in the PPNN Core Group. So I said, well he was from now on since he'd run the American side of the 1985 conference. Ben and I had known a number of people who had been on the UN conventional disarmament study, so we picked some of those we knew for PPNN. And also Ben knew people from being in the UN and also being in the IAEA before that, and he picked some people from that: he was largely responsible for putting the PPNN Core Group together.

Michal Onderco:

How much divergence was there in how these people used to see non-proliferation? Was there a lot of disagreement with them, or would they largely subscribe to the same thoughts?

John Simpson:

No. It was only at the very end of PPNN's existence that we started to come into some difficulties, and I'll leave you to guess which country generated difficulties, other than it's not very far from where you live. Ben was very good in many ways - what he did was create a group of friends. This was really very much how PPNN was able to function. It's Core Group met every six months and there were discussions, at times very frank. I think Ben and I didn't really cotton on, until fairly late in the day, the degree to which PPNN was seen to be significant by those who attended. Or at least I certainly didn't cotton on to this because of course I was coming at it from more of an academic perspective than a political perspective whereas Ben had spent 20 years living in that world. To give you one example: It became clear to me that at one point that someone who had just come back from Iraq had been told that the Iraqis were building a nuclear weapon programme. We had a discussion about this, without him mentioning it, and we poo poed the idea with the result that this person went back to his capital and said: 'alright there have been rumours but it isn't correct'. So there were positives and negatives in our assessment of what was going on but it gives you some feel for how it worked but above all, it was essentially, how can I put it, a discussion between friends and equals.

Michal Onderco:

But from what I saw in the archive: on one hand there was dissatisfaction that some countries were not at all represented. I found this wonderful letter from Ben to you that an Italian had approached him saying: 'how dare you have a meeting without an Italian'. And of course among the Americans at some point someone was not invited because you felt there shouldn't be an oversupply of Americans, and people were insulted by that.

John Simpson:

Well, the interesting thing about this is that they would come up and complain. But we, certainly I, didn't realise until fairly late in the proceedings that what they were annoyed about was that they saw these meetings and this group as something which was very high level..

Michal Onderco:

Sort of 'stamp of approval'?

John Simpson:

Yeah. I mean one of the interesting twists to this is that towards the end, I certainly got the impression, in terms of the conferences we used to run, that in the case of many participants from Africa, the Middle East, the Far East, et etc. being invited to a PPNN meeting was a bit like going and having a conversation with the Queen: it was a mark of significance.

Michal Onderco:

But your early Middle East representative was Mohammed Shaker

John Simpson:

That's right.

Michal Onderco:

He wrote the book on NPT history. He was an NPT president. He was Egyptian Ambassador...

John Simpson:

...in London for about 9 years I think.

Michal Onderco:

What more of a stamp of approval did he need?

John Simpson:

Well he didn't, but I think the key thing in his case, and to some extent I think this was where Ben was coming from, it sustained his interest in the NPT. Because every

six months he went to somewhere for three days where he were going to do nothing else but discuss the NPT and the future of the NPT etc. So although he was the Ambassador in London, if he had not had PPNN he would have spent all of time focussing upon being ambassador in London, and would not have an ongoing relationship with NPT issues. But as it was he was there and of course people in the Egyptian Foreign ministry always seemed to be fighting each other. There was a group in Egypt, some in New York, a lot in Geneva, and those in Vienna. At one point, if I recall rightly, the ambassador in Vienna insisted that none of the other ambassadors should attend an NPT meeting in Vienna...

Michal Onderco:

So a turf war...

John Simpson:

Yeah, a turf war...

Michal Onderco:

Let's come back to the founding. Ben saw these ambassadors on the...

John Simpson:

...I'm not quite sure how he recruited Oleg Grinevsky. I suspect it was through Timerbaev, the USSR number two in New York at the time. The story about Timerbaev was that he'd been asked by a university in New York to give a lecture and answer questions. Someone had asked something about one of the key issues at that time, the Russians military intervention in Afghanistan, and what was going on there? And he said that this was a big mistake etcetc and his comment got into the newspapers. Anyway he'd was asked to pack his bags and was ready to get on the plane to Moscow when someone came along and said: 'I think you'd better not get on the plane. Gorbachev has just announced that we we're withdrawing, and everyone now thinks you're the only person in the Foreign Ministry who's got a direct line to him'. Oleg Grinevsky was very, very interesting. I got to know him tremendously well. But this was just the way PPNN worked. The Core group was a collection of friends.. However, it took about three years for us to sort out who should be on the Core Group and make sure that all of the nuclear weapons states were represented....

Michal Onderco:

All the NPT signatories? All the nuclear states that are NPT signatories? Because France didn't become a part until France signed the NPT.

John Simpson:

I'm trying to think if Therese [Delpech] was there. The French got very annoyed as the Chinese had announced...Or the other way around: There was supposed to be a deal between the Chinese and the French. The French delegation then departed and by the time they'd arrived back in France someone back home had made their decision to join the NPT public. And left the Chinese out on a limb. I'm sure Therese was...I know she attended the '90 conference, because I talked to her there she was floating around. In part because of how Lewis Dunn had operated before and during the '85 conference, we started to conduct meetings on the NPT in what we thought would be the key countries . So by the time we'd got to '95, there were at least five of the core group members who were leading conference delegations. And some of them got themselves into real difficulties. Especially the guy from Venezuela.

Michal Onderco:

Why?

John Simpson:

Darryl and I went to Venezuela. It was an interesting experience.

Michal Onderco:

You held a conference, right, in Venezuela in 1993 or '4?

John Simpson:

Yeah.

Michal Onderco:

...and that was the reason he got into trouble?

John Simpson:

Well no. This was something which happened at the conference itself in '95. But what we attempted to do was identify a country, largely on the basis of having conversations with those on the core group who belonged to that country, or, where we could raise the finance, and hold a conference here? That was more or less how it worked. By then I think the majority of core group meetings were melded in with bigger regional conferences. Sometimes they weren't, depending on where we were going to. Bigger conferences, the six monthly conferences, tended to be held either in the UK or the US.

Michal Onderco:

After 1990 when the core group expanded and added new members...

John Simpson:

...and some were retired.

Michal Onderco:

Were there also some countries that got dropped?

John Simpson:

I can't remember. We'd have to look in the archives for that.

Michal Onderco:

For example, some of the choices of countries did not become immediately obvious to me, for example Czechoslovakia was invited to join in.

John Simpson:

That was because the person who came from Czechoslovakia [Jiri Beranek] knew a lot about the Russian civil nuclear programmes, and he ended up monitoring what the Iranians were doing. Again, this was someone who Ben had known from his time in the IAEA. The East German, Walter Rehack, was someone who Ben had known from his time in the IAEA. We had some very interesting times in that period after 1991.

Michal Onderco:

Why?

John Simpson:

Because the Wall came down, everything was changing and we were in the middle of it all. I can remember going and giving a lecture to the East German Foreign Ministry on the NPT Conference. It must have been the '90 one. I was introduced along the lines of 'this is the first time that a Western academic has actually given a lecture to the East German Foreign Ministry' there was then a pause and then in a very quiet voice he said 'and probably the last'. I'm sure Darryl also has stories because at times I sent my colleague Darryl to places that were challenging: let's put it that way.

Michal Onderco:

Already when you started in the second half of the 80's did you already have in mind already the idea that you wanted to work towards consensus on indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995?

John Simpson:

Yes. Well. Hold on. We had a conference in 1986 in Guernsey where we started to thrash out... We'd got the money from Ford on the basis that we were going to look at the review conference 10 years ahead. Therefore we started to try to work through what the issues were likely to be. And certainly after 1990 we started to get involved with the issue of procedures, and how this thing was going to work, and what was involved. Or what would be involved in getting through an extension of the Treaty. I mean, we held a significant number of meetings which discussed effectively how it might be done and what the issues were. A lot of the diplomats saw these as very useful in that, basically, they could come to one of our meetings because they would be away from the office for three days, or something like this, and in those three days they would discover what they would be facing in 1995.

Michal Onderco:

You must have had some countries on board who were not necessarily in favour of extension?

John Simpson:

Oh. We had lots of countries involved which were not necessarily in favour of extension. In particular we had problems with the person who was eventually to chair the first committee in the 1995 review conference. Because he basically was a one off. He was clearly fairly senior. I think he must have been Nigerian. One of the problems we had was that we had an almost a pro forma way of operating at these educational, if you'd like, conferences. The core group would split into about five groups, as did those invited to attend, and the PPNN group would go around each of the other five groups making relevant presentations. One of the things that proved difficult, at times, was that a lot of the people there weren't interesting in the technical aspects of nuclear non-proliferation. We thought that the technical aspects were important because you had to understand both the politics and technical aspects of what was going on. At that point, one of the key issues - which seems now to have disappeared into the background - was a whole set of issues about access to nuclear materials. There was no sort of real understanding of how the nuclear area differed from other areas, let's put it this way. And that difference, I think, was part of what we were attempting to address. There were a lot of other things going on by the time we'd got to 1995. But, I mean, the people who had more or sort of less started it were I guess us, and then Monterrey got involved...

Michal Onderco:

But was Monterrey also running something in the run up to 1995?

John Simpson:

Yes. I can't actually remember how it worked but after 1995 we had a sort of an understanding that we did certain things and they did others. Certainly in 1997. Sorry, it was 1996. There was a key meeting in Kiev. I'd been coming backwards and forwards to Kiev for UN meetings. It was quite interesting. It was at that point that it had become clear that the US and a lot of other states had two different understandings of some of the changes arising from the 1995 NPT outcome. The Canadians, in particular, thought that what had been agreed was to institute a sort of rolling process whereby NPT parties could be able to make decisions on issues at both PrepComs and Review Conferences. In other words, there was a sort of belief that what had been agreed was that each of the PrepComs would not only prepare text for the next review conference, but it would also go on and be able to, well, pass resolutions. At that conference it became obvious from what Larry Sheinman was saying, that this wasn't where the Americans were at. That why the '98 conference got itself into such difficulties because of differences between the Canadians and Americans.

Michal Onderco:

So, there was a sort of momentum from the beginning to work towards the extension? There was clearly. When did the discussion start about the end game, about 1995?

John Simpson:

My most vivid recollections about this was that it was during a PPNN conference on the Hudson River.

Michal Onderco:

The Pocantico Conference?

John Simpson:

Yes. One of the American funders we had, the Rockefeller brothers, had just converted buildings they owned in Pocantico into a Conference Centre. We ran a couple of conferences there, as I remember. The initial conference was one where the whole core group was in Pocantico, staying in the house itself. I think that there had been a decision somewhere down the line that Jayantha Dhanapala was going to chair the Review Conference. I think it had been decided that I was to open the proceedings. In preparation for this I was sitting at the great mans' desk and wondering what to say when it dawned upon me that one of the ways forward was to work around the idea that you could somehow trade a permanent NPT for an NPT with annual reviews. I can remember giving this speech, and then being asked by the 1995 Chairman, sorry, by the President to-be, to kindly delete that bit' from the text circulated afterwards

Michal Onderco:

Why?

John Simpson:

I assume what I was saying was a conclusion he'd already got to. It wasn't something he and I had actually discussed but the document that was then circulated was not the full document, or the full delivery that I'd made. But it was fairly clear at that stage, which must have been '93, because it was the first time I went to the Pocantico. I think that was the point at which people started to think seriously about it. After that in a lot of the conferences which weren't outside Europe or the United States, the discussion wasn't so much about what the end game was going to look like, but, how did one get from A to B. With A being the many issues floating around, and the many boulders on the way to getting a positive outcome. I think we did a couple of papers on this. In fact, I don't know if you have looked through this stuff. It's in the university. What we were attempting to do was to just identify and work through just how the whole exercise was going to evolve.

Michal Onderco:

It is obvious there was a discussion about whether there was going to be an indefinite extension or some different of arrangement. Can you talk a little about those discussions and about how you settled on the indefinite extension?

John Simpson:

Well, we didn't. I think the point was that we didn't.

Michal Onderco:

You didn't settle?

John Simpson:

No. There was a tremendous amount of uncertainty. Things only started to harden up, if I can put it that way, once the '94 PrepCom had taken place, and there had been decisions about who was going to be the president and who was going the chair the committees. At that point it became fairly clear that we were going to have problems with [Main] Committee 1. But equally there were a whole set of issues on the relationship of the process to, well, addressing the question of the extension, and the set of issues surrounding the review. It was a chicken and egg exercise. Those in the NAM who were taking a hard line on this, basically saw it as the way in which you got the most out of the exercise: to play around with the relationship between one and the other. The US, in particular, and by then the other nuclear weapon states, were playing a very different hard ball exercise. By then the French had acceded to the treaty and would Chair the EU group at the conference, and they were telling their former colonies in Africa what to do. The British were floating around on the periphery of all of this because it wasn't in their nature to tell their former colonies what they should do. But I think there was a certain amount of gentle persuasion going on, especially with some of the states in the Caribbean. The main difference, between those who wanted an indefinite extension and those who didn't, was that those who didn't, didn't know exactly what they wanted. It was a bit like what's been going on in the United Kingdom for the last couple of months. You can sell a single, clear, objective very easily, if you can all coalesce around it. If, however, you have different ideas about what it is all about then the whole thing becomes very difficult to organise in any effective way. Of course, what made it more peculiar that anything else was that the NAM holding held a Heads of State meeting in Bandung during the second week of the NPT conference where the South Africans and a number of African states objected greatly to the fact that the Indians and the Pakistanis were attempting to fix the whole thing even though they weren't in the NPT.

Michal Onderco:

How could they?

John Simpson:

Well, because, these states were members of the NAM of high standing. What the NAM agreed at the Bandung Conference would determine what the rest of the NAM would do. Because of the way the NAM operated.

Michal Onderco:



So what were the Indian and Pakistani preference?

John Simpson:

They wanted total nuclear disarmament. They'd objected to the NPT in the first place. They wanted to continue to argue that from their point of view. Also they both wanted to develop nuclear power. Or at least this was a cover for it all. They had interests which the rest of the NAM didn't necessarily have. Also, within the NAM there was a set of problems among the NPT and nuclear power. In particular, we were aware that the Indonesians and others had aspirations to nuclear develop nuclear power, but their politicians were playing a different game. The result was that the NAM had significant difficulties in working out what it was actually wanting, and therefore, having to operate in the situation whereas the nuclear weapon states, with the exception of China, had a very, very clear idea of what they wanted and were going around selling it in any way that seemed likely to...

Michal Onderco:

...and the Chinese didn't want indefinite extension?

John Simpson:

The Chinese didn't know what they wanted. The Chinese were in some difficulties because they'd been outflanked by the French in getting into the treaty in the first place, and weren't very happy about that. But above all the UK, the US, and Russia were the NPT's depositary states and had been operating in the non-proliferation area for whatever it was, 30 years by then; the French and the Chinese were coming into this cold. The French in particular, because they were chairing the EU. Some of us spent some time in the early 90's going around the EU countries explaining to them what the NPT was all about, and what nuclear non-proliferation was all about. Most of the states which were involved, or at least a lot of the states which were involved, had previously had little to do with nuclear in part because the leadership of the country had changed. So the people from the old Warsaw Pact who had nuclear knowledge were not in government, and were not able to transfer to the new regimes what had gone on in the past. So it was very difficult for both these nuclear states. In the case of the Chinese they had to operate as both a member of the P5 and as a member of the NAM, so had to take account of the views of the leaders of the NAM. Indeed one of the things which may have happened, as with the South Africans, is that you get into a situation where the politicians had gone along with the NAM line and the leaders of the NAM, and then the people who actually understood what this was all about, started to leap up and down saying "This is not where we are at, and we ought to be, you've sold the pass and somehow we need to get this back".

Michal Onderco:

How was the...on the one hand. So, there was never a conscious decision that PPNN was going to try and forge a decision for indefinite extensions?

John Simpson:

[long pause] I don't think that existed in the form that you've put it. I think the point was, most of the people who were in the PPNN core group regarded an indefinite extension as the only sensible thing to do. Because the alternatives... Again, it's a bit like what was going on here two months ago here - the alternative appeared to be unknown, or certainly not capable of being controlled. Also, there was a lot of leaning going on, by the nuclear weapons states, on the non-nuclear ones. Whether that leaning was useful or counterproductive is an interesting question.

Michal Onderco:

What's your guess?

John Simpson:

Well certainly some people took the view that it wasn't. But I'm not clear. I think you would probably identify some specifics where leaning took place. This activity was spread over a lot of people, and there was a lot of movement between what was going on in the conference and what was going on back home. People were being leant on back home. This is what happened to the Venezuelan Ambassador.

Michal Onderco:

If we can talk about what happened after the last PrepCom in 1994, throughout the

conference and at the conference. So what was basically happening, and what was the PPNN's role in this?

John Simpson:

To be honest I can't remember in detail. I think by then we had given up going around the world, and were focussing on holding conferences in the UK and in the US. That is where the Pocantico and the Southampton University Conference took place.

Michal Onderco:

So there was a meeting at the University of Southampton conference centre? Was there already some sort of discussion within the group about, so, what do we do from here? For the conference.

John Simpson:

I don't think there was a discussion in that way at all. What I think was going on was that we were providing those that came, particularly the ambassadors, an opportunity to hear what we and others thought were the core issues and problems of having a successful review and extension conference. And in a sense giving them room to talk to each other informally....

Michal Onderco:

...because there is quite a bit of free time in the programme. So that was also probably your hope? That they would talk to one another?

John Simpson:

It was also was part of what was going on. I think one of the difficulties was that the occasionally the ambassadors couldn't get their mind around the fact that they weren't engaged in negotiation. They were engaged in a sort of discussions about 'where are we?'. We were all feeling our way forward. This was all part of the comments that I started with: their puzzlement over : 'What are these people up to? They must be selling something'.

Michal Onderco:

And they never found out what you were selling?

John Simpson:

Yes. This in itself, I think, made people interested in what we were doing because this was something that they'd never met before. Being asked to attend a conference and it not being clear what was being sold. I guess they were asking themselves how did they get the money to do this?

Michal Onderco:

Did you have any problems in getting the diplomats from some countries to attend these conferences?

John Simpson:

No, I don't think so. Trying to get people from China was initially not easy.

Michal Onderco:

Why was that?

John Simpson:

I think more than anything else it was a problem of finding a channel whereby we could get someone to suggest someone who would be able to come. At that point I was on the Disarmament Board in New York and we'd also been to a number of conferences where people were there from China, and that was the way we eventually found someone who could come and represent China. Because the person I was dealing with on the board from China kept complaining to me that he ought to be on the PPNN list as he had to brief him...

Michal Onderco:

...OK.

John Simpson:

In many ways people selected themselves, there was a certain amount of Ben and I saying we need a new person because the world had changed. Well, we're back to where we started: which was essentially it was a group of friends.

Michal Onderco:

For many of these conferences you would send out these letters. They are available in the archive. If they were sent to, for example, the ambassador for the UN, they would be an invitation to nominate someone. Was there ever a country who wasn't interested in taking part in one of your events?

John Simpson:

I honestly can't remember. If you go through the archives you might find out.

Michal Onderco:

So you became such a brand that people were happy to be associated?

John Simpson:

I guess yes. When we started there was a set of issues about whether we needed to hire someone to sell us, but I think neither Ben nor I were very happy about this. It was pressed upon us by the funders. After a couple of years, we didn't need it, because the brand was sufficiently well known, and people rarely said no. Well some might complain that they should have travelled first class and not economy class and this sort of thing but...

Michal Onderco:

From 1994 to the conference, did the network manage to survive? Whether or not with the formal involvement of you are the chair.

John Simpson:

I wasn't the chair, Ben was the chair. But yes, because we went through until 2002.

Michal Onderco:

But did the people manage to exercise influence as a group of friends at the Conference?

John Simpson:

I think it's very difficult to answer that question. The only way to answer it is to go through the listings and see who within the PPNN core group was leading delegations. But that, in a sense, doesn't tell you the whole story because we were dealing with people who may have been influenced by attending our meetings.

Michal Onderco:

So the way the consensus was forged at the conference and the issues which emerged at the conference: was there something that throughout the nine years you had to prepare for the conferences, was there anything that surprised you at the conference?

John Simpson:

Not really because by the early 90's we'd gotten a fairly clear idea of what the issues were. We'd produced a book. I'm trying to remember what it was called and when it came out...

Michal Onderco:

"The Future of the Non-proliferation Treaty"? With Palgrave?

John Simpson:

was that the one that came out before 90? Or 95? 1995, yes. We always saw ourselves as being, a support group and not being the movers and shakers.

Michal Onderco:

But it was a support group that contained the movers and shakers.

John Simpson:

Yeah. Ben was appointed and continued to be in the Dutch delegation, I was not on the British delegation until 2000. But I could sit in and listen to most of the non-private discussions as a UN representative. So I had a better idea of what was going on than most of the NGO people, who were sitting on the outside because in those days there wasn't very much room to move.

Michal Onderco:

But in those private discussions, the contents and positions that states took: would that be something at you would say 'oh yeah, that's something I know from our

discussions, from the PPNN, or something you would discuss at PPNN in depth'?

John Simpson:

I don't think we ever thought in those terms. If you like, our interests as academics was to try and understand what was taking place, and that was rather different than having a document which said 'these are our red lines and make sure you don't go over them'.

Michal Onderco:

No, but sometimes, especially in the meetings where there is a Chatham House rule, you often hear about the positions the governments are likely to take or the line thought that it going on in the government on that position.

John Simpson:

I don't think we were in the position. We weren't journalists; we were academics. This was one of the oddities about it. I think the fact that ourselves and Monterrey could represent themselves as being academics, and not people who were arguing from a particular perspective, placed us in a somewhat difficult position.

Michal Onderco:

Was it a better position?

John Simpson:

[long pause] I don't think we ever thought in those terms.

Michal Onderco:

So after the conference and after the extension of the Treaty: within the PPNN, what were the discussions about making sense of it within the core group?

John Simpson:

One thing that I think emerged (I suppose the first meeting after the review conference must have been in about the October of 1995) I think in the year or so after the conference was a gradual understanding that what had been agreed was not necessarily regarded by all the states and the people as the same thing. In particular, what sticks in my mind, is this meeting in Kiev, where it became clear that the American view of how the new process was going to work was somewhat different to that of what I certainly initially had thought about how it was going to work. Because I thought we were looking at a situation where there was much more freedom of movement in the PrepComs. And the PrepComs were going to be some sort of negotiation. Whereas the US people there said "no, that's not the way it's going to be". There was this particularly big argument between the Americans and their next door neighbours about whether you could discuss, in the PrepComs, things which were taking place, and were about to take place, but which were obviously not going to have an impact on the next review conference.

Michal Onderco:

What would be an example of such issue?

John Simpson:

I've forgotten what the specifics were. It would be the sort of thing where there was going to be a decision on...I guess part of it was the set of issues on the Iraqi's; as to whether or not they were going to be allowed to do certain things. As I say, I've forgotten what the precise issue was. There was a feeling that this issue was so central to non-proliferation that it ought to be addressed, and the PrepCom ought to take a view on it. It may have been over the North Koreans and whether the North Koreans had or had not breached the NPT. The US said: "No, we're not going to buy that. We're not going to have an exercise on putting forward, voting on, and passing resolutions because that's the job of the review conference. That's not our job." I mean, there were two or three issues of that type emerged at this time, pushed by the Canadians. Because, of course, the Canadians had been responsible for much, or some at least, of the documentation arising from the conference. Clearly, the Canadian view of what was now possible and what was not possible was different to the Americans'.

Michal Onderco:

The issues that emerged at the conference, for example the Middle East Weapon of

Mass Destruction Free Zone, progress on CTBT and so forth. It is obvious these issues were discussed at the PPNN and before, but was it obvious that these would become the central issues of the conference?

John Simpson:

Honestly, I can't remember. You'd have to look in the archives to find an answer that one. We were, by then, focussing on how was this new setup going to work?

Michal Onderco:

And by new set up do you mean the fall of the Soviet Union?

John Simpson:

No, how was the new review process going to work. The Finish Ambassador who had been selected to Chair the first PrepCom meeting under the new arrangements invited Tariq Rauf and myself to fly to Helsinki and discuss options for implementing it. What had been agreed was an outline. It wasn't a "what are we going to do now" document. Therefore, there were sets of issues about...I can remember, we went to China at some point in this, and had a conversation with the Chinese Foreign Ministry. We were amazed to find that those based in China that we were dealing with initially thought that the PrepComs would basically operate the same way as the PrepComs in previous years, and that there wasn't much to discuss other than past procedures. Then the Head of the Disarmament Section of the Foreign Ministry arrived having just flown in from Europe, and told his men "no, that's not the way it's going to be-all has changed". So then we had a discussion with him about what he thought was going to happen and how the new process was going to work.

While Tariq and myself were in Finland, we discussed holding the First PrepCom in 1997 under the new arrangements in Vienna, and the second in 1998 in New York (?). The idea was the majority of the time committed to the PrepCom would be in the form of a free ranging discussion. In practice of course when the PrepCom took place the chairman said 'have a discussion' and no one said a word, and everybody sat there for 10 minutes in silence. The Finnish chair then said: "if no-one's going to say anything, if no-one's going to engage in a discussion, does anyone have a prepared speech?" then everyone raised their hands: Everyone had a speech. They never really, certainly until 2010, had the type of frank debates and discussions initially anticipated. I don't know what happened after 2010 in tremendous detail. But the whole idea of the PrepComs including wide-ranging debates never happened. This is why changes were made in the role of the PrepComs in 2000.

Michal Onderco:

There wasn't a debate because, you said there was a different understanding from the United States, on what was the task of the conference. Or was it that other state parties weren't interested as well as not ready for it?

John Simpson:

I think it was, quite simply, that it was one thing to respond to what some other state had said; it was another thing to engage in a discussion which appeared not to have any limits. There were no boundaries. There was no idea about what it was...it was going to be a free ranging discussion. Rather than a discussion within a clearly defined area and subject matter.

Michal Onderco:

If I may come back to the regional conferences? During these conferences, for example, when I saw one in South Asia, you invited diplomats who weren't from countries which were not very friendly towards each other, for example India and Pakistan. Were there moments when the tensions were really high?

John Simpson:

No. I can remember when we were in Japan, one of the Chinese who was there got rather...blew up a bit. I think one of the significant things I do remember when we were in Japan was that I had a conversation with the Vietnamese invitee who said: 'You realise what you've done. For the first time, the states of East Asia have actually sat around a table and discussed nuclear issues. This has never happened before'.

Michal Onderco:

Didn't you write an article in a book about all this? Didn't you do reports on other

conferences?

John Simpson:

There were two things which sort of struck me when we were in Japan: one was this comment; the other was a comment by a colleague who was on the Core Group, who's dead now, and who said to me rather quietly on the train back from Hiroshima: "The problem, I have with being here and seeing all of this, is that they've told you that after about 6 weeks everything was working again and functioning again. I can't get my head around the information they give you about what remained after the blast, and the whole idea that within a very short period of time, the ground was full of people and things again. I would take from this experience the view that nuclear weaponry is not this tremendous...The consequences of the use of nuclear weapons are as everyone believes them to be".