



Sir Peter Gershon

Interviewed by

Kerri Mansfield

29th March, 2017

At the

WCIT Hall,

32a Bartholomew Close, London, EC1A 7JN

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It's the 29th of March 2017, and we're in the hall of the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists. I'm Kerri Mansfield, Head of Capability at Digi2al Ltd, and today I'll be talking to Sir Peter Gershon, who is currently the Non-Executive Chairman of both Tate & Lyle and the National Grid. So Peter's had a distinguished career which includes companies such as ICL, IBM and the Civil Service. Welcome. Thank you for joining us, joining me today.

Thank you.

[00:29]

Sir Peter, your public bio glosses through your early life, and moves swiftly to your many achievements in the world of commerce. Can we take a step back and talk about those early years? Is that OK?

Sure.

Yes? Tell me about your childhood. I understand you moved from Essex to Surrey, big move, across the Thames, when you were quite young and at prep school. How did that come about?

[pause] I can only assume that my... I was still quite young, I must have been, I don't know, eight, like that, at the time. I can only assume that my parents wanted to move. They certainly moved to a, moved from a semi-detached to a detached house, with a bigger garden, so I can only assume that they moved up the property ladder.

Yes. Which prep school were you at in Essex? I come from the same area myself.

Well a school that no longer exists now, called Seaton Lodge.

No, I don't...

But I also, after we, we moved to Surrey, I went to a state primary school. Whether that was because my parents couldn't afford to send me to a prep school, I don't know.

Now they had the bigger house maybe. [laughter]

Possibly.

[02:43]

*Your A Level studies were centred around what we would now call STEM subjects.
What led you to choose mathematics and physics?*

I liked them. They were my favourite subjects, so it was a pretty obvious choice.

What was it about them that you enjoyed so much?

[pause] Well I suppose I liked problem-solving. I was good at them. [pause] I suppose, those were the two reasons really.

Any particular memories of school, anything that you think back to? Do you keep in touch with any of your friends there?

[pause] Well it was, I suppose, of its time it was a classic boys' state grammar school.

Mhm.

750, 800 boys.

That's a lot of boys.

From eleven to eighteen. It was... So yeah, I'm, I'm still in touch with a few. One in particular whose charity he founded, I'm now a trustee of.

Oh that's nice. It's nice when you go back a long way with people isn't it.

So... Yeah, we were together in the same form for five years. He got his knighthood six months before I got mine.

[laughs] Well that's a pretty good achievement for, for a year in a school isn't it?

I still, I still think the school ought to put in for the *Guinness Book of Records*. I don't, I don't think there are many schools that can claim that, in one form, one form in one year, produced two knights within six months of each other.

Absolutely. That's an amazing achievement. Do the school know?

Yes.

[03:56]

Excellent.

Yeah.

That's cool. And then you went on to Cambridge, again to study mathematics.

Yup.

Tell us about Cambridge in the swinging Sixties and studying maths.

[pause] Well, I went to a school that clearly, well it had, it had a sort of track record of sending six to eight boys every year to Oxbridge. And it clearly had, you know, identified, each year probably identified who they thought were going to do it. So, I vividly remember going to see the headmaster some time, when it was time to sort of, do university applications, probably at the beginning of the upper sixth year. And, headmasters then were very different to what they are now. He was a very distant, forbidding figure. It was still the days when headmasters administered the cane for serious misdemeanours. And, he asked me if I was going to apply to university, and I said yes. And he said, which ones was I going to apply for? And I, I don't know, I said, Bristol, I don't know, there were two others, but, neither Oxford or Cambridge. And he said, 'Well, why aren't you thinking about Oxbridge?' I said, 'I don't think I'd get there.' And he said, 'Well, we think that you could get to Oxford and

Cambridge.’ OK. He said, for reasons I don’t understand, he just said, ‘I think Cambridge would be better for you than Oxford.’ ‘OK, fine.’ Then he said, ‘Does your family have any connection with any Cambridge colleges?’ And I said, ‘No one in my family has got a university degree, let alone been to Cambridge.’ So undeterred he said, ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ve just been to this,’ some conference of this new college they’re building in Cambridge, Churchill. He said, ‘The school hasn’t had anyone to Churchill yet.’ He said, ‘Put your name down for that.’ So I, I applied to Churchill. Turned up for the interview, and, much to my amazement, I got a place. And the rest is history.

That’s rather exciting isn’t it?

Well, it was sort of, you know, probably one of the few times in my life I did what my headmaster told me. [laughter] Churchill’s a sort of, it was a very young college, it was... It was out, at the time it was sort of, definitely quite detached from, it was a about a mile outside the city centre. It was a very... It was still a building site, which gave great scope for student pranks. [laughs] It was by charter created as a sort of, to be a sort of, Churchill’s vision was, it should be a sort of UK equivalent of MIT. So there were, 70 per cent of the students there were STEM, 30 per cent were sort of, social sciences and arts, which... And, unlike most traditional colleges, the bulk of the students there had come out of state schools, not private schools. So that quite sort of, it had a very different, you know, it had no tradition, it was mainly scientists, not arts, and it was grammar school kids, not public school. Single-sex at the time. So I think it would be regarded as sort of, quite a sort of, it didn’t really participate in the swinging Sixties. And if there were drugs, it was sort of, I don’t know, certainly weren’t prevalent in the college. My recollection it was, there was a lot of drinking, work, sport, the odd party, but, it certainly wasn’t like some of the other Cambridge colleges.

A little bit of punting in the summer?

Yeah, but it wasn’t on the river, so, I mean, yes, I mean one year I was co-owner, with some other friends, we owned a punt, but, you know, you couldn’t just sort of, walk out the back of the college onto the river or anything like that. So, it was a... And it

was quite a, this was the late Sixties, this was the sort of, the height of anti-Vietnam War protests. And Churchill was very right-wing college. I mean, not fascist but it was far to the right. I mean probably because, didn't have, I think, many arts students and people like that; it was sort of, it was... There was one occasion where the American Ambassador came to speak in college, and there was this massive protest outside the college, all these anti-Vietnam War protesters. Police protecting the outside of the college. And some of the anti-war protesters got in. They were dealt with quite robustly by members of the rugby club. As they came out of the college, sort of, bleeding and bruised, they complained to the police. [laughs] But the police said, 'This is private property.' There was nothing could do about it. But just, the college was, had no sympathy for that, for that sort of thing. Unlike some other colleges which were sort of, rather different, and the students were sort of, more to the left.

That's interesting isn't it, that, different colleges have different...

They were, yes.

A different mix of subjects as well.

Yeah.

[11:03]

And also changes political leaning. That's, that's very interesting. I notice you also did a master's. Was that in...?

Well I didn't do a master's. It's still the case at Cambridge, and I think it's the case at Oxford, that, three or four years after you get your bachelor's degree, provided you part with ten quid or something like that, you get a Master of Arts.

Oh wow. [laughs] That's interesting to know.

It probably works on the basis that if you're deemed to have sort of, survived four years in the university of life after you've done your first degree, you can sort of, upgrade to a master's.

So you didn't have to do any work for it?

No. No, well, not in an academic sense, no.

[11:47]

That's, that's a perfect master's isn't it. [laughter] Dodging around a bit, I had a look at your bio, and, your maternal grandparents seem very interesting people to me. A jeweller, and a cattle feed salesman. Did you know them well?

No, sadly not. My mother was an Austrian refugee. Her mother was murdered in a Nazi death camp, and my, her father died in Switzerland when I was about, six or seven.

So you never really knew them?

I met my maternal grandfather a handful of times.

They just seem interesting and different...

I'm sure they were.

...ways of living their lives.

We shall never know.

No, we won't. That's a, that's a sad story. I'm sorry to hear that.

[12:48]

The early Seventies was quite an exciting time to be in a new industry, the new industry of computing. Will you share with us your journey from being an intern at

IBM through to Director of Network Systems of the board at ICL? Because it happened fairly quickly, as journeys go.

Yeah. Well my first interaction of course was actually before IBM. when I did a... Because having got my place at Cambridge, I decided that, sticking around at school for another two terms, and then you had to go back for a seventh year after you had done your A Levels to apply for Cambridge. And I got my place at Cambridge in the late, '65, to go up in the beginning of October '66. So I decided that, spending another two terms at school was, pretty, a waste of time. So I decided, because, when I was at school I was living at home, that I'd sort of, probably it would be quite a good idea to sort of, try and crack living away from home before I went to university, and try to get work. And, through the careers master at school, how I came, I got a job at English Electric Leo Marconi, in Kidsgrove, in Staffordshire. So I worked there for six or seven months of '66.

That was quite a way from home.

It was a way, it was a way. So I lived in digs. And, had my first interaction with computers, on a KDF9.

I've never heard of a KDF9.

You've never heard of a KDF9? It was a wonderful machine. Where you had to learn skills which are now completely obsolete, like, splicing paper tape, being able to read punch cards, which I was an absolute whiz at, but are now completely useless skills.

But at the time...

But the only way you could input stuff into a computer then was either punch tape or punch card. The only output from a computer was reams and reams of computer printout.

The green and white striped paper with the sprockets?

Yup. Cyber security wasn't an issue because there was no data communication. And all the programing was done in assembly languages. Memory was very scarce. Storage was primarily magnetic tape. A little bit of disk drive.

[16:08]

And were you hooked from...?

Yes, I, I was... It was great. [pause] Of course the real highlight at that time was in the July hen England won the World Cup.

Were you there, did you watch?

No, I watched it on television.

Presumably not your own television?

No, I was up in, I was in the digs I think, or, I went round to a friend's or something like that. But yes, I was... Yes, it was... Yup. So, so that was my first introduction. And then I got work for two summer vacations at IBM, in the research labs in Hursley.

Yup. Was that as an, did they call it an intern programme then, or it was...?

No. No, we were called, I don't know, vacation students or something like that.

Yes. And did they provide lodgings, or did you have to do that yourself?

They arranged digs in the village.

Mm.

Yes.

So the whole thing was, you were there and you went and...

Yup.

Yeah. That's good.

Yup. [pause] so it seemed pretty obvious that, after I graduated I was going to go back into, the obvious thing was to go back into the computer industry.

[17:37]

Yes. Did you think of staying with IBM?

[pause] That would have been the obvious thing to do. And, indeed in my last year at university I had won an IBM scholarship. But because I had done these two stints in the research labs, they wanted me to go back into research. And I wanted to get into the sort of , closer to the customer.

OK.

But IBM wouldn't offer me a place in their sales and marketing function, so, I ICL did, so I went to work for ICL.

And where were ICL based?

So, at the time, you got an invitation to join as a graduate trainee. We spent the first thirteen weeks at a place called Moor Hall in Cookham. And, early on in that thirteen-week period you wrote down your preferences about where you wanted to work. And about week twelve, with about a week to go, you got an envelope which told you where you were going. I wrote down London and Bristol and Croydon, and the envelope said Sheffield.

OK. [laughs]

And, basically, at the time, it was, if you don't like it, there's plenty of other graduates out there, there's plenty of other people. Take it or leave it. Very different world to now.

[19:43]

So you went to Sheffield.

So I went to Sheffield, which was a small branch office. [pause] So part of it was, looking after sort of, general commercial customers. But the bit I joined was the bit that looked after the nationalised steel and coal industry.

Well that would have been interesting in Sheffield.

[pause] And, [inaudible] was all around, and, dealing with stuff related to British Steel. But it was... It had some very challenging customers. Both customers had a deliberate two supplier policy, between ICL and IBM, so it was always very competitive. [pause] Customers were trying to do some very interesting, challenging things. There weren't that many people in the office. So basically... So, I mean, I joined as a, it was called a systems engineer, which was a posh term for a salesman's bag carrier. [pause] That's how I got started.

And did you enjoy it?

Well, I... [pause] I, I got chucked into the deep end at a very early age, and, I never drowned. And I suppose, just, people sort of said, well you didn't drown the last time; we'll chuck you in as a something else, see if you drown, even deeper this time, see if you drown. I kept sort of, somehow, splashing around and not drowning, and...

[21:54]

What sort of computers did your clients use?

They were all, at the time, ICL 1900s.

Did you learn to use them and, then go in, or, was it purely on the sales side?

No no no, I was doing... And after... I was doing systems, I was doing systems engineering and project management. [pause] I mean, some quite, interesting things. [pause] Real Time systems, yes mainly real time systems[?]. And it was a tough, it still is, it is quite a tough environment.

Yes. It seems a very tough, physically tough area to be in.

Yeah, that's right.

With physically tough people.

And people, you know, and people in, in the steel industry are quite, you know, I mean are tough people, and they work in tough communities. Sheffield was quite a hard city at the time.

But as you say, you didn't drown.

No.

You bobbed to the surface then.

Yes.

[23:12]

And, and what pool did the throw you to next?

I was in Sheffield from, I went to Sheffield at the very beginning of '70, and, I was there until the autumn of '76.

That's quite a long time.

[pause] By which time I was... I had ended up as the regional support manager for the steel and coal region.

How far did that region stretch?

What, geographically?

Mm.

Pretty well covered the country. I mean British Steel had places in, South Wales, Yorkshire, Scunthorpe, Teesside, Scotland, North Wales.

So quite a lot of travel involved as well.

So it was quite... And the Coal Board was, well primarily it was, its main computer bureau was at Cannock in the Midlands, in the West Midlands. So yeah, there was a lot of, there was a lot of travelling, I used to travel, quite a lot of travel.

[24:28]

And was it also at this time that you met your wife?

No. I met my... I met my wife, my future wife, in the January of my last year at Cambridge, at a party I gate-crashed. So I was already in... She was a student nurse. So we got married in April '71, and she then came up to Sheffield with me. I was already in Sheffield, then we sort of... She came to Sheffield.

So your family started in Sheffield?

Yeah. Our two children, our older two children were born in Sheffield.

[25:29]

And where did you take them next, where did you take your family next?

So, '76 I got promoted to be a systems and technical support manager for the ICL central Government region, based in Euston. So at a time of ICL's new range of 2900s, what became the 2900 series. The Government was a very, there was still

preferential procurement in the UK, and Government had been a very early user. These were... And it would be fair to say that, most of the customers were not very happy.

With, needing to use a computer, or...?

With, with these computers, which had quite a lot of technical challenges, including that, quite often their mean time to recover from a break was greater than the mean time between breaks.

Ah. So that took some, a different type of careful handling, so not the... I would imagine very different people that you had to adapt to from the coal and steel.

They certainly were. Yeah, they certainly were. Well I mean, there were, you were dealing with the public sector, it was my first contact with the public sector.

Yes. How did that feel after the, the realism of the coalface as it were?

I mean I didn't... [pause] I didn't do that job for that long. I did it for about, six or seven months. And then I got chucked in to try to rescue a very very sick project. ICL had somehow managed to sell one of these computers as the basis for a command and control application down the bunker at Northwood, in north London, and, north London, which was sort of, one of the operational nerve centres for their, MOD, well it was a joint, it was a joint Navy, Air Force command.

And is obviously at the height of the Cold War.

So this is, this is at the height... It's also the height of ICL in , from about '75 onwards, was in a period where a lot of its most senior management had been imported from the States, mainly ex-UNIVAC people. Including importing some very high-powered American project managers, one of whom had been the project manager for this project. I mean, compared to us normal mortals, were sort of, paid unbelievable amounts of money. Anyway, the guy running this particular project had had a, I mean basically, I think he had had a nervous breakdown. So for some reason,

the powers that be decided that muggins should be dispatched to try to sort this mess out. And... [pause] So for about three months I, together with my deputy in London, it was a big team of people there... [pause] So my, you know, I did, I was doing twelve hours on and twelve hours off, and my deputy was working... I did, if I was doing days, he was doing nights. Did that for seven days a week for about three months.

[30:38]

That's a big rescue mission. What were you doing during that time?

Trying to get this system into a... It had... The system had been supposed to be ready to support a military exercise in the March of '77. It had missed that by a mile. And basically, the customer had said to ICL, the next exercise is July '77. If the system doesn't support the July exercise, that's it, it's curtains. Yeah, we were trying to do this on a, I mean at the time, it's a, it was, this is the Cold War, all this stuff is much more the classified side than it is today. I mean, it was recognised from the outside, but it was... And the computer was down a, in a bunker. I mean this thing was basically designed to replace... I mean the bunker, in the command room, was, you know, like you used to see on the films, a big wall with a map, with maps on it, and Wrens would be climbing ladders, pushing things around...

Moving the troops around on it?

The ships.

Yeah.

We may say, ships and the, and the other side so to speak. And that's literally... And it was trying to replace this with sort of, modern communications and what were then regarded as sort of, modern graphics and all this sort of stuff.

Yes. Mm.

And... [pause] By some miracle we managed to get the system into the, ready. But it wasn't really ready, but, we had no choice. And, I think that's when I learnt, and it's a very interesting experience I learnt, that not everything in life is absolute. Some things are relative. Because, every day, first thing in the morning, the command room chief, who was a very distinguished Navy admiral, Henry Leach, who subsequently went on to become the First Sea Lord, by the time of the Falklands War, in the early Eighties, would come down for a morning briefing. And there would be this briefing room, and it was packed with all these military officers, Navy people, Air Force people. [pause] The MoD people there said, well, I was going to have to participate in this briefing and brief the commander-in-chief on the performance of the system. Well fortunately I was sort of at the end, I don't know, it was on the second or the third day of having this briefing, and, even I with my limited... I then realised that, this was... And it was a paper exercise, this was not on, this was not like... It was a paper exercise.

Mhm.

Realised that, there had been a spot of friendly fire, that the Air Force had managed to drop bombs, in the paper sense, on Royal Navy ships instead of on the, the other side, because of poor weather conditions. And there were a few other things that had gone wrong. So I sat in, and, sort of... the Commander in Chief, the capability of the system I think was, 75 per cent or something like that. I mean, in any normal customer situation, 75 was horrendous. And he just said, 'Well thank goodness something works around here.' [laughter] And, he then sort of, he turns to one of his aides and he says, and I remember this vividly, he just says, something about the performance of the armed forces. He says, 'You need to put a ferret down someone's trouser leg.' And he just walks out. Very distinguished. He just walks out. And there was complete pandemonium in the room. Because, they're pointing fingers at each other, who was responsible. It was a cockup. I mean they were saying, 'Christ, it's fantastic, the system's fantastic.' And I'm sort of thinking, there's something wrong, this is terrible. 75 per cent is awful. And they're saying, 'No no, no no no, this is fantastic.' And somehow at the end of it. sort of, saying, somehow, it was deemed to have got through the exercise, deemed to have been a wonderful success.

And you thought, I'll take that. [laughs]

Oh, it just goes to show, not everything in life is absolute.

No, that true

[36:14]

Sometimes the context is very, is very important. And, so I did that. Escaped in, the August, and then... ICL obviously decided that, they would move me, so they then appointed me to run the defence sales region.

OK.

Which was the first time I had sort of, had responsibility for having to win business as well as

As well as implementing, supporting.

Yes.

So you had moved your family down from Sheffield...

Yes, we had moved.

...to the London region.

Yup. Yup, we moved to Buckinghamshire. The kids were still very young, the older two were still very young: well relatively young, they were still at primary school. And we've lived in that area, not the same house but that area, for, ever since.

That was a sensible move, wasn't it. It gives you the whole of the country quite easily.

Yes. And, I mean we moved there because of its sort of, proximity to Heathrow, and, relatively good transport links into London and... Then we realised that actually, it

was one of the few counties in England which had not gone to comprehensive schools, it had retained the Eleven Plus and grammar schools. So all our kids went to state grammar schools, pretty similar to the ones my wife and I had been to, and we never had to pay a penny on education. I remember that, unlike some of my friends who were spending a fortune sending their kids to private schools.

So by, by happenstance and good judgement, you ended up in a good place for your family and also good for communications for work and everything else...

Yup.

[38:40]

That's a very good thing. So how did you find the, being responsible for the buying, selling into the defence industry?

No, I was selling... I was selling to, I was selling into the Ministry of Defence, and the security services. [pause] Oh it was a, it was and remains a sort of, a fascinating world.

A different, but a different way of, a different path in your job, doing different things, meeting maybe different people along the line?

Yeah, there were different... I mean, you were trying to build... [pause] Well I wouldn't describe... Yeah, I mean you, you were trying to build different forms of relationships. [pause] Trying to get the company to do things in some areas differently to what, its standard way of doing things.

[40:08]

What was the biggest challenge?

[pause] The relationship was quite fractured when I started. [pause] So I suppose, trying to get the relationship to a better place, was quite difficult. I mean some of which was about trying to, get some very difficult technical situations stabilised, so you had some foundation on which to go forward. Because I mean technically it was

still the age, it was the age, still at the age of preferential procurement, so in theory, every computer over a certain size still had to go single tender to ICL. So, that didn't necessarily endear you to the customer. When customers are told what to do, they tend not to like it.

Mm. So it was Government policy to buy ICL computers?

Yes. Until the early Eighties, beginning of the Eighties.

But nevertheless, they've still got to work, and they've still got to do the job.

They've got to work, yeah, and do the job, which, in quite a lot of cases they weren't.

And as you say, if people are told, you must buy this, and then it's not doing exactly what they want, that can make...

Yes.

[42:05]

...pretty complicated for everyone. But it went OK, because you got promoted again.

[pause] Yes, at this point, in the very late Seventies, very beginning of the Eighties, ICL went bust.

So something had to change with procurement didn't it, for the Government.

No. So, it went bust. I mean not because of its government, it went bust literally, and had to be rescued, by the Government. [pause] This was then the early stage of the Thatcher years. Mrs Thatcher and Keith Joseph, who was then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, basically wanted, believed, in line with their principles, that ICL should go; it had gone bust, it should not be rescued, Government intervention, this was completely wrong. And eventually, there were some very very brave civil servants who stood up and basically persuaded her, and Keith Joseph, that, well her, that if ICL went bust, the Government would grind to a halt.

Because there would be no one to support any of the...

Who would do the maintenance of all the stuff.

Absolutely.

So she very reluctantly agreed that there should be a Government bail-out. Which was in the form that, the Government effectively underwrote the banks to do the rescue. But the price of that was, the chairman, the chief executive, or the managing director at the time, and the finance director, all lost their jobs, and three new people were appointed into those roles. So a chap called Christopher Laidlaw, who had been a deputy chairman of BP, was brought in as the company chairman. Robb Wilmot, who was then at Texas Instruments, was brought in as the managing director, and Robin Biggam was brought in as the finance director. And then Robb brought some other people from Texas Instruments along with him, including Peter Bonfield. And that change at the top then triggered other changes down the line. I was still at a level, I was, I suppose, middle management, so...

A little bit below the parapet.

Below the parapet. But one of the changes that happened was, bringing together of software support for customers with hardware maintenance into sort of new customer, into a new customer service organisation in the UK, and I was then appointed one of the four regional directors of the new customer service organisation.

Which was your region?

South-west, based, I was based in Oxford, headquartered in Oxford. [pause] But I didn't do, I didn't do that for very long. I think, less than a year. Because, by then, one of the changes that Robb Wilmot put in place was the creation of a much stronger corporate product marketing function, and, the guy he appointed to run it had been my boss when I was doing the defence job, he was in charge of the whole central

Government sector. And, I then moved to work for him in the corporate product marketing function.

So was that a good relationship that you had, you had a good working relationship from before?

Yes.

OK.

Yep.

[47:28]

And how long... So that was then based around the south-west...

No, the corporate production marketing function was global.

Was global. OK. How did that change things for you?

[pause]

Useful to be near Heathrow at that point.

It was very useful, because I spent a lot of my life on an aeroplane.

Did you enjoy it?

No, no, it's a very... Did I enjoy it? No, it was a very difficult... It was a very, it was a very challenging job. Robb Wilmot was a very, I mean I had a lot of proximity to Robb. He was a very very challenging individual to work for, or to be close to.

Mm. So you had quite a difficult working life. And also...

It was very challenging... Yeah, at that time it was, I was... Yeah, that was probably, the most challenging period of my whole working life actually, if I look back on it.

And at the same time, your family didn't have you at home, and your children must have been...

I, I haven't spent much time at home, ever, though. My wife carried a huge part of the burden, I mean, even when our, you know, our children were very young. And I was involved in sort of, projects, and the reality is, if you wanted to get access to time on a customer's computer, the only time you could get onto it was either at night or at the weekends.

Yeah, when the customers don't need them.

When the customers didn't need it. Just like that, you know...

How different were you...

And I, you know, I suppose that was a time when, you know, concepts like work-life balance weren't in the vocabulary.

No. No it didn't exist then did it?

The ethos was, you're paid to get the job done. The number of hours it says in your contract of employment is irrelevant.

Yes. How did that affect... Well how did you combine being a father, a husband, and your career?

Oh. [pause]

It's probably not a question you and your contemporaries ever thought about.

Oh, you... You just, you didn't think about it, and I don't think... I mean certainly when we were in Sheffield, because it was a relatively, ICL was a, you know, it was a very small community, the wives saw a lot of each other, and they... And, you know, a lot of them were going through the same stage, building our careers, they were having children. So they met quite a lot. So they had a sort of a, quite a good network. And I think, it was just, par for the course. I don't think they ever... I don't know whether any of them ever sort of, complained or not. I mean, they just, didn't, that was just the, that was just what was expected.

Yeah it was, absolutely.

Right?

Yes, I know.

If your husband wanted to get on in the world, that was, in the computer industry, that was, that was life. If you didn't want to get on in the world, you could have a quieter life, but, you can be at home more often, but you were unlikely to get much career advancement. It was a pretty simple trade-off.

Absolutely. And, and times changed.

And times changed. As I say, I mean, work-life balance was just not in the vocabulary.

No. Didn't exist. I, I remember it well.

You worked to get a job done.

Yes. At the times that you could do it.

At the times you could do it.

[51:37]

Yes. So how... What differences did you notice with your children growing up, compared to your years at school? Did you notice any differences? You mentioned that they were at grammar schools.

[pause] Yeah, I would say that schools were, as I say, they were recognisably the same sort of institutions. They were single-sex schools. They had the same sort of ethos, same school life. So, the odd time I went to a parents' evening, it looked and felt just like the sort of school I, I had gone to. But, I mean, clearly my... [pause] Though in some ways the kids had far more than I had ever, me and my wife had ever had when we were growing up. [pause] Trips, more outside activities. [pause] Computer games. Television.

Different world

It was a different world.

[53:15]

But one that you were very much part of in the new industry of computing. So you had a, the corporate time, and then, where did you from there with ICL? What was the next step?

So I did the corporate role for, [pause] not very long actually, perhaps, eighteen months, two years. And then, I came back into the UK business to run the whole of ICL's central Government sector, which was the most profitable part of ICL. It was learning how, still learning how to sort of, thrive in a world of, well competitive tendering was much more prevalent, but also it was a world where increasingly customers didn't need mainframes to solve problems, there were minicomputers.

I was going to say, we're moving into the time of...

Desktop terminals and...

Minis and PCs.

[55:54]

Yup. Yah, all those sorts of things were coming on. [pause] So, I did that for, two or three years. And by then, ICL had been taken over by STC. And, one of the early things that happened post the takeover was, a decision was made to put together some networking and communication, network and communication activities that existed in the sort of, old STC, those that existed in ICL, into a new division in ICL called Network Systems. Which I became the first director of, and went onto the ICL management board.

That sounds like an interesting portfolio to have been given.

Oh it was an interesting portfolio. Of course, you could also call it a ragbag of complete, collection of odds and sods. So, included, there was a sort of, a sort of, classic sort of, systems house business which had been in the old STC; there was a, an air traffic control business in STC; there was ICL's packet switching business and its bureau business. And we were supposed to weld all this together into some cohesive whole.

Yes.

[57:10]

And then, STC got into serious trouble, not ICL, ICL was doing quite well then, but sort of, some of the bits of the old STC went belly-up. And, as usually happens in these situations, the top management of STC was kicked out. We got a new chairman, there was a new chief executive, and a new finance director. They came in, they took one look at some of the sort of, the core STC businesses, and decided to kick out the STC old timers who were running them, and told Peter Bonfield, who was then running ICL, that he had to give up some of his managers to go and run these sort of, other bits of STC.

OK.

So I was exported out of ICL to go and run STC's telecoms business.

Mhm. How did that feel, after many years in core ICL?

It was, it was just totally different. Totally different.

What sort of challenges did you find?

[pause] Well firstly, the telecoms, it was the first time I had been in charge of what I call sort of “soup to nuts” business. So, you know, sales, commercial, engineering, and factories. Serious factories. But I suppose the big... I mean it was, the degree of customer focus in the STC business compared to the businesses I had been in was, orders of magnitude different.

More customer focus or less customer focus?

Much less. [laughs] It was terrible. It was just awful.

So what did you do, what happened?

[pause] Well I set about trying to get people to pay attention to customers.

It's always a good idea if you want some money out of them to give[?] [inaudible] business [inaudible].

It's always a very... One of the very... I learnt in the very early stages that customers make pay days possible.

Mm.

[pause] And it still continues to surprise me in the day and age how even quite big businesses manage to forget that.

Yes.

[pause] [inaudible] the only customer we were dealing with was BT. It was a stage when some fledgling... And BT was losing, the early days of losing its monopoly. So, some of the big US Baby Bells had come into the UK and were trying to set up competing networks in different parts of the country to BT doing both cable TV and telecoms. There was a subsidiary of Cable & Wireless called Mercury Communications which was trying to set itself up as a national competitor to BT. But the bulk of the business was with BT.

[1:01:33]

Yes. You've mentioned a few challenging people.

You try and change it, change the relationship and all this sort of stuff, and... STC at the time was, the chief executive had been brought in from GEC, been running GEC's defence business, and he brought his finance director with him. So again, I got exposed to a very different culture to what I had experienced at ICL.

You've had, so you've had some very challenging people you've reported into.

Yes.

Have you also had some helpful mentors through the journey?

Not in... Well not in the sense that I, people talk about mentoring today. I mean I never had somebody who was my mentor.

Yes, someone that was assigned.

No.

It was much more, organic, I think, before. Did you have anyone that you could go to when you came across, here's another challenging person? It was all, internal...

No. Sort it out for yourself.

[1:02:41]

So what values, behaviours and knowledge did you find that you had within you that have been useful to you throughout a career, with challenging management as it were?

[pause] Well to be on top... I mean if you, if you're running a business you've got to be on top of the numbers, because you're dead if you're not. [pause] And certainly when I was at STC, and then when I moved to GEC, I mean I, I worked for people for whom you just wouldn't, you wouldn't survive if you weren't on top of the numbers and the business. Other ways, I've been very, I've always been very data driven. I think there are always times, even when you're in a very very senior management position, where you have to be prepared to roll your sleeves up and get really stuck into the detail to understand what's going, why something's going wrong and whether you're satisfied that, that people trying to deal with it are, you know, whether you think they're the right people to deal with it, and they've got the right approach, and, either you've got to work out, the right things to give them support and air cover, or, you have to change the people. You can't sort of stand back and let this be, particularly to deal with issues which are very very serious. [pause] I think my early experience with, with customers actually, has lead me to be, I'm sort of, a pretty customer-focused sort of person. [pause] Whenever I've gone into a business, I've always found it very apt to try and work out, certainly when I was in STC and then when I went to, was in GEC, I'd listen to what people around me were telling me. I'd go and talk to customers, I'd go and talk to people at the coal face, and observe the degree of correlation or lack of correlation between these different inputs.

And then you decide your moves forward with the client?

Yup. Yup.

That's interesting, because it's, because, as you say, today's world is very different, where people will have a formal mentor within a company, and, maybe a series of informal as well.

[1:06:18]

And then later on you took a different tack, and you're working with the Government, away from the computer industry directly.

That's... So I went to the telecoms industry. Then I went out, I was headhunted out of STC to go and run another telecoms equipment company called GPT, which had been the merger of GEC and Plessey's telecoms businesses, which at the time was owned 60 per cent by GEC and 40 per cent by Siemens. And I spent, four years trying to sort that out. And then...

And did you sort it to your satisfaction?

Yeah, no, well I... I'd like to think it was... Yeah, I left it in a much better place than it was, than when I started. But it was, well I mean we had to do some very largescale restructuring. Certainly involved making a lot of people redundant, to get the cost base down. But we... We focused the business right from its core onto a new growth area, which stood it in good stead in the latter part of the Nineties. And then at a week's notice, late '94, the late Lord Weinstock, who was then running GEC, who I worked, who I reported to directly, rang me up, and told me to go and run the defence business.

OK. [laughs]

Which, I said, I know nothing about defence. And he said, he said, 'That's your number one qualification for this job.' [laughter]

No preconceived ideas.

And I was sort of, you know, if I thought the telecoms business had lacked customers focus, it was noting comparted to the defence business. So yes, I was...

So you had set yourself another challenge.

[1:08:41]

I was back on the hallowed portals of the Ministry of Defence.

And what did you feel this time round?

Well this time, of course it wasn't about selling computers; it was selling things that go bang in the night, are supposed to go bang in the night, and, [laughs] it's quite, the sort of heavy, heavy stuff at the front end.

Mm.

Oh it was a, it was a, I mean it was a fantastic job. I mean it was a, it was a huge job. Massive. Activities in the UK, Italy, some in Australia.

So you were back on the travelling again.

We had some in the US, which we grew quite substantially through M&A. Yeah, I did a lot of travelling. And then, the defence business got sold to British Aerospace as was, now BAE Systems.

And where did that leave you?

So, that... Now, I went with the business to be one of two chief operating officers in BAE. But in... So this was, very late '99, early 2000, the transaction completed. But during '99 I had been, I had done a review for the Government on procurement, non-defence procurement in central Government.

Mhm.

And I had recommended the creation of a new organisation in the centre. And, they approached me as to whether I was willing to do this, to run it, and I rejected them twice, and then they came to me a third time. And by then... So the transaction just happened. I had made a reasonable amount of money out of all my shares and share options in GEC. I don't know. One day I decided that perhaps, why wouldn't I do it? So, my friends describe this as a very strange form of midlife crisis. [laughter]

Wall, it's, it's going very much [inaudible].

[1:12:47]

So basically, I decided, it is very easy to sit on the sidelines and criticise how badly Government does things. And I thought, I'll give it a go on the, on the playing field, see if I can make a difference. So, April 2000 I had gone to the dark side. [laughs] As my friends would, as my friends described it.

Yes, because you had, you had been selling to Government, working...

I'd been selling to Government. Yes, but, that was, in a sense was an advantage. Because...

Yes.

I had got... You know, and, working in the public sector is, it is completely different, or it was, completely different to working in the private sector. It's just...

It still is.

And I had naively thought that having had two significant spells in my career where I had been selling to central... well I had run the defence region for ICL in the late Seventies, and then when I had come back, to run the whole central Government sector, I naively thought I understood how Government worked. And after I had been in my Civil Service job for about a week I realised I didn't have a clue, not a clue, about how it worked.

And that was a bit of a revelation?

It was a, a huge revelation. [pause] And my first six months in the job were really, were very very difficult, because, every lever I pulled, nothing happened. I couldn't work out how to get on with my boss. Because, all through my private sector career I had been used to having bosses with whom I could discuss the content of my job. I

might not always have agreed with what my boss said, but, we could have a substantive discussion about the content of the job.

Mm.

I'm now in an environment where, well firstly I have two bosses, I have a Civil Service boss and I have a minister.

Yup.

And I can't talk to them about the content of the job. If I tried, they'd just say, 'Well that's why we brought you in Peter.' And I could not work out how to have a relationship with my boss, my Civil Service boss. It's just, couldn't get anywhere. And, I also realised that, the place was, well it wasn't littered, but, there were quite a lot of people around who had come in from the outside and who had been completely marginalised by the system.

Mhm.

And I eventually realised, the way I would characterise it is, it was like facing a wall that is infinitely wide and infinitely high. And you know you've got to get to the other side. But you can't.

Because there's no way over or round.

Yes. Until you realise, there are doors, but they can only be opened from the other side if they want to let you in. [pause] And this is where... it was my wife, she said, that it's very funny that, my being a civil servant, because she said, 'You are neither civil nor servile.' [laughter] Which is... And, you know, I didn't speak the same languages as these people, and, you know, I was sort of, trade, rough.

From the outside.

From the outside. And, and because also this was a new job, I mean I was, loosely associated with the Treasury...

Mhm.

[pause] There was no track of people having come in from the private to do this sort of role. And I eventually realised how to use, my Civil Service boss could help me get these doors opened.

Mhm.

And once I had worked that out, and then... The only way I then could treat the individual departments was, the only model I knew was, to treat them as my customer, and to try to understand what their needs were. So, I started to go and see very senior people, you know, sit down and say, what are you trying to...? You know. And eventually I sort of found one or two areas where I could help. Because it's the only model I know.

Yes.

But this was sort of, I had not realised at the time that this was regarded as [laughs], somewhat radical. The system was not used to people from the centre coming, [laughs] trying to find out how to help them.

No.

I got one or two sort of runs on the board, and, you know, we began to sort of, move forward.

[1:18:16]

And one of the things you did there was the Gershon Review.

Yes. So I signed up for three years. [pause] Towards the end of the third year I sort of reached an agreement that I would extend for a fourth year, because, partly

because, there was, some particular things I wanted to do, I still regard as sort of, unfinished work. But then, partway into that fourth year I got called in by my former Civil Service boss, who was now the head of the Civil Service, who had jokingly said to me, 'Peter, if you want to leave at the end of your fourth year, you have to get an exit visa. And, the way you're going to get your exit visa is, you're going to do this review.' So, September of 2003, I was diverted from the job I had agreed to stay a fourth year and do to go and run the, this review of public sector efficiency, reporting directly to Messrs Blair and Brown.

And I understand that you recommended some ways of making some fairly significant savings.

Yup. Yup.

Were they implemented?

[pause] Well not... [pause] I mean, a lot of them were; not all of them. [pause]

That must have been satisfying, to find them and see it through.

Well I didn't, I mean I didn't see through their implementation. I mean my job finished in the July of 2004, because I had to report in time for the Comprehensive Spending Review of that year. So it then moved into an implementation phase, and I didn't, you know, I, I was always going to leave the public sector at that point. But it was, yeah, I mean it was a, it was a very interesting time. Because in one sense you've been given this enormous train set to play with, but it's actually, clutter the system, you come back and you've remit from the two most powerful politicians in the land, and the system says to you... And you say, 'Well I need some resources to do this,' and the system says, 'Well there's no budget.'

There's no budget. Yeah, absolutely.

So, fortunately I had been in the system long enough to know how you get round that. I'm not sure what I'd have done if I had come in cold form the private sector. So

what you do, you go out to woo people who are willing to lend you resource. So, you got resources from the private sector, you got resources from, the National Audit Office put some people in. And then I went into the wider public sector to get some people. So quite a sort of, non-traditional team actually working on it, which was actually, it was quite helpful. But you are aware, you know, that, all the spending departments definitely didn't want this to happen.

No, I can imagine.

So, there was a period where, yes, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, the head of the Civil Service and the Treasury Permanent Secretary, were on my side, but I'm not sure that many other people were. [laughs]

Were delighted to see you come through the door.

No. No. So, so you have to, we had to design a framework for how you, how do you do this. There's no textbook you can go to. You're designing a framework, and you get one... You then have to go and collect some data. Which is always the hardest point in any of these reviews, getting data. Data which is, forms some basis on which you can make half-intelligent recommendations which won't get sort of, knocked down at the, under the first attack. But basically, if you get that wrong, you've missed the, you know, you've missed the boat, you won't hit the timescale. So it's quite, it's quite demanding in that sense. And we took, took quite a lot of risk, you've got, the clock's ticking, and you've got to get the methodology done, the framework. But... I mean, I look now... [pause] I mean I was, I was always very clear, the Government had gone through a period where resources had been increasing over quite a long period of time, since the early years of the Blair government. So you then had a sort of set of leaders of the Civil Service who had little or no experience of having to make quite difficult decisions, sometimes involving quite large-scale reductions of civil servants. And of course it's completely difficult. I was always very clear that, you know, it was about taking, you know, what was it Mao said, in order to undertake a journey of 10,000 leagues, first take one small step.

Absolutely.

And this was a first step. It was never going to fix all the problems about making the public sector more efficient, and then, I mean, as it subsequently turned out, the environment for the public sector has just got progressively tougher, in terms of trying to find efficiency savings. And the reality is, in the follow-up to my review, and subsequently, there have been genuine efficiencies, but some of it has been efficiencies masquerading as, cuts masquerading as efficiencies.

[1:26:00]

Yes. And now, you're chairman of a number of different companies.

Yup.

And, in the private sector.

Yes. I was always very clear, I was always going to go back into industry. I'm not... I went into the public sector to do one job. I had this sort of, little extra task to do in my fourth year. But I was clear, I was not, you know, I didn't join to have a career. I was a very senior civil servant, but I didn't have a career, I didn't want to have a career in the place, to go further. So I was always very clear I was going to come, I wanted to come back into the private sector. I decided while I was in the public sector that, I didn't want to come back into the private and do another executive role, or start the next phase of my career with a portfolio of non-executive roles.

[1:27:13]

How do you decide which ones to take? I'm sure you must be offered more than you take.

[pause] It's part around, do I, do I think the role is interesting? [pause] I don't like, I'm not good in steady state situations that allege the job is just business as usual.

You've had a career of challenges.

I like, I like situations where there's, there has to be change.

Mm. That makes sense. There must have been very...

Put me into a situation where they just say, 'Just keep this thing going as it's...' I'd find that unbelievably boring.

Yeah yeah.

I'm not very good in boring situations.

[1:28:19]

There must have been a lot of special days in your life and career. What are some of the high spots there?

[pause] Most of the high spots are around my family life. They're not, not around my work. I mean... [pause] Getting my knighthood was very special.

How did that come about?

How... What do you mean, how did it come about?

How did you hear, when were you...?

Well you get a letter in the post. [pause] Somehow, it says, you know, the Prime Minister is minded to recommend to the Queen that you should be awarded this.

That's a pretty special morning, to open...

Please, please let us know whether, if you, if the Queen were minded to offer you this honour, you would be willing to accept it, or something like, like that. [pause] So, I... Yes, no, it was, that, that was very special.

And what happened next?

Particularly being able to tell my wife's parents, who were then both still alive, that I had finally made a lady out of their daughter. [laughter]

And so you went to the Palace.

So, you get the letter in, I don't know, early December; I think it's publicised in the New Year's Honours List. And then at some point you go to the Palace to get done.

Who did you take with you?

I took my wife and two daughters. Our son was working in Japan at the time, so... You're only allowed to take three people, so, it would have been very difficult to take... But I mean I had been once before, because I got a, I got a CBE when I was in the defence industry. So, so I got my CBE from the Queen, and I got dubbed by Charles.

[1:30:53]

Good days, highlight days?

Yeah... Yeah.

Where did you go after the Palace?

[pause] So we all went with Eileen's parents out for a supper, to Claridge's.

You have to do something... You can't just go home, can you?

You can't...

Put on your gardening trousers. [laughs]

No.

You've got to go and do something very special.

Yup.

And you've also had a number of awards and accolades for your work, including the Honorary Doctorate in Technology.

Yup.

What award have you been most pleased to receive?

[pause] My Fellowship of the Royal Academy of Engineering.

How did that happen?

I was nominated, and, for some reason they decided that, my achievements merited election to this distinguished academy.

Fair enough. Was that a ceremony, or, was it a meeting? How did they award it to you?

So, there's a, a dinner at which the new Fellows go to together with other members of the Fellowship. And, I think the actual scroll was given to me by Prince Philip.

[1:32:43]

You're working your way through the, [laughs] the Royal Family. You are in a position where you're able to influence people and companies and new people in the industry. How do you use that work with the next generation of technologists?

I quite... I mean I'm... [pause] I care about schools producing more young people who are interested in and want to do STEM subjects. [pause] So one of the things I do is, I occasionally go into schools and talk to groups of children who are either sort of in, sixteen or seventeen, about my career and the importance of STEM and stuff like this, and trying to get them to realise that, you can have a very good career if you've got STEM skills.

[1:34:35]

What brings you the most joy in your life?

My grandchildren.

How many do you have?

Five.

That's a lot of grandchildren. And do they live near you?

[pause] One lives, the oldest lives about ten minutes away, my older daughter. Our son and his family live about an hour and a quarter away. And our younger daughter with our two youngest grandchildren currently lives in Hong Kong.

Oh, so that's a little further for Sunday afternoon feeding the ducks.

Skype and FaceTime are wonderful.

[1:35:20]

Well back to technology. [laughter] What goals do you have for the future?

I don't... I've never really had any goals, actually. I've had very very few goals in my life. [pause] So, I think the only, the only one I've ever had, when I look back, was, when I started in ICL I had a goal about what salary I wanted to be earning by the time I was 30.

Mhm.

Which was a pretty silly, irrational goal really. I far exceeded it then, but...

I think a lot of people share that goal with you.

Right. [laughter] [pause] Oh, when you get to my age... [pause] Have the ability to, stay healthy, be able to travel, continue to do things which are, interesting, that I find interesting.

[1:37:01]

You've mentioned you've had some pretty positive financial outcomes. You've just said....

Yup.

You reached your earnings at 30 and you...

Well I far exceeded my earnings goal at 30. Yes.

And you had had some good share options.

Yes.

Have there been any negative financial consequences in your career?

Certainly going from a very senior job in the private sector into the public sector, you take a hell of a cut in your take home pay. [pause] So in that sense, yeah, but... [pause] I don't know, I think I must have gone from, including bonuses and stuff, in a good year I probably went from, earning north of a million to, 150,000.

That's a big difference.

But I'd done [inaud], as I say, I've done reasonably well on share options and stuff like that. [pause] I was able to sort of, sustain our standard of living for the period I was in the Civil Service without, from that point of view. But, you know, that's only looking... You don't become... Purely looking it in narrow financial terms, you would never go from the private sector into the public sector.

No you, no you would never do that.

You've got be able to... But, I had, I had a set of very interesting experiences. I learnt some new skills, working as a civil servant, which have stood me in good stead as a chairman.

[1:39:03]

Yes. Everything happens for a reason, doesn't it. What are the, what do you think is the best decision you've made in your IT career?

The best decision in my career?

Mm.

Pf! [pause] Well, I find that a very, I find that a very difficult question, because, if I hadn't have made the decision I had, or, acquiesced in the decisions that other people made for me, about... Not really that... Most of the, well, most of the jobs I've done in my career, I have never applied for.

Mm.

Yes, I had to apply to join ICL, must have gone through some form of selection process. I'd obviously, there were a number of jobs I got in ICL, I was going to selection panels, but even then, quite a lot of them, there wasn't a sort of selection panel process. As I say, I got moved, exported out of ICL into STC. I got headhunted to go to GPT. I got moved by ??? to go and run the defence business. The Government sort of, twisted my arm about going to work in the public sector. So I think it was really only when I was in consideration for the jobs at Tate & Lyle and National Grid that I went through some recognisable pomp. Most of the others, as I say, people decided what Peter Gershon should do next, and for some reason I, [laughs] I've acquiesced in to those decisions.

And you've risen to the challenge.

So there really is... I mean whether those decisions were good or bad, if I hadn't have made those decisions, or acquiesced in those decisions, I wouldn't be where I am today.

Absolutely.

I don't know where I would be mind, you know, I would, I wouldn't be where I am today. So in that sense, they were all good decisions. I mean as I said, if I had my time over again, I'm not sure I'd have done the corporate product marketing job in ICL. I think that was the one that really was extremely challenging. [pause] I mean pretty well all the others, yah, I mean as I said, there weren't lots of challenges in this, but, I look back and I think... people were I think, I left things in better shape than they were when I started. And they all developed me as an individual.

[1:42:41]

Your life is fairly well documented, in different ways. But what isn't documented that you would like people to know about you?

The one thing, well, my close family know this but not many other people do, is, I do a very enthusiastic rendition on the dance floor of YMCA.

That's good. [laughter] Thank you. Sir Peter, it's been an absolute pleasure to meet you, and have such an interesting, inspiring and lovely meandering conversation. Thank you for being so open and candid in your answers, and so willing to share your knowledge and experiences with us.

It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thank you,

[End of Interview]