

Historical perspective #3

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Sir Garry Johnson: The General Who Understood That Georgia Needed More Than an Army

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A Personal Remembrance

The news came from Smith, a good friend and former British Ambassador to Georgia, whose diplomatic service in Tbilisi I remember with considerable appreciation. His message brought sad and unexpected news: General Sir Garry Johnson had passed away. Justin added something that immediately took me back many years: "I remember that you were one of Sir Garry's close and valued interlocutors in Georgia over many, many years."

Yes, indeed. Many years. And not merely an interlocutor. Sir Garry became a friend - one of those people whose presence in your professional life gradually acquires a significance extending far beyond the business that originally brought you together.

I had the privilege of knowing him in different official capacities, alongside a relatively small circle of Georgian friends and colleagues. We spent many hours discussing Georgia's security, its armed forces, its troubled neighbourhood, its Western aspirations, and, inevitably, Russia. But looking back, what I remember most vividly is that our conversations were never confined to military affairs. Sir Garry had come to help Georgia build a modern defence and security system. He understood, perhaps better than many of us, that what Georgia really needed was a functioning state. That distinction was at the heart of his contribution to our country.

A Soldier Who Thought Beyond the Battlefield

Sir Garry's military career was remarkable even by the demanding standards of the British Army. He served with the Gurkhas, earned the Military Cross for gallantry during the 1965 confrontation in Borneo, held senior command appointments, and eventually became NATO's Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces Northern Europe. His career spanned some of the Cold War's most consequential decades and its aftermath. The obituary published by *The Times* recalls the extraordinary courage of a young officer leading his men in a dangerous cross-border operation in Borneo. The official recommendation for his gallantry award described the action as daring, coolly and brilliantly executed.

Yet the Sir Garry I came to know was not a man inclined to impress others with stories of military glory. He was far more interested in what happened after the fighting stopped - how societies organised themselves, how institutions functioned, how military power was subordinated to legitimate civilian authority, and how countries learned to distinguish between national security and the ambitions of those who happened to govern them. He had witnessed NATO's transformation after the Cold War and participated in the early outreach that eventually developed into the Partnership for Peace.

By the time he became deeply involved in Georgia, he had already acquired considerable experience advising the Baltic states on security-sector reform. And that experience mattered enormously. The Baltic countries emerged from Soviet domination with a clear strategic objective: to return to Europe and join its political and security institutions. Georgia shared that aspiration, but its circumstances were considerably more complicated. We had experienced civil war, separatist conflicts, institutional collapse, economic devastation, and the continuing presence of Russian military power. The Soviet security apparatus had disintegrated, but many of its habits, structures, and instincts remained stubbornly intact.

We wanted a modern state. We had inherited something very different. Sir Garry understood this contradiction.

Building Institutions, Not Simply an Army

In 1998, at the Georgian government's request, the International Security Advisory Board—ISAB—began work in Georgia under Sir Garry's chairmanship. Its mandate was to provide independent, high-level advice on reforming and modernising the country's security sector through the National Security Council. That rather bureaucratic description hardly conveys the scale of the undertaking. Georgia needed to rethink virtually everything: the structure and size of its armed forces, the responsibilities of its defence and security institutions, civilian oversight, parliamentary accountability, budgetary discipline, border protection, and the relationship between military planning and national strategy.

But another, perhaps even more formidable, obstacle remained. **To accomplish all this, Georgia needed not only to reform its institutions but also to change a political mentality still deeply infected by the Soviet bacillus.** The Soviet Union had disappeared from the political map, but its habits of governance had proved remarkably resistant to extinction. We were trying to build democratic institutions with people, practices, and reflexes inherited from a system where democratic accountability had been largely unknown. Sir Garry understood that institutional reform also required changing political psychology. He and his colleagues therefore advocated a practical approach.

Georgia should first identify the threats it actually faced, determine what resources it could realistically mobilise, and then build security forces appropriate to those circumstances. A smaller, professional, properly trained, equipped, and financially sustainable force was preferable to an oversized military establishment that the country could neither maintain nor effectively command.

This sounded elementary. In Georgia at the time, it was anything but elementary.

We had inherited a political culture in which institutions were often personalised, authority was fragmented, and formal responsibilities did not always match actual power. Sir Garry insisted that military reform could not be separated from reform of the Ministry of the Interior, border security, intelligence structures, and the wider machinery of government. His advisory board recommended demilitarising institutions that had inherited Soviet-style military functions, clarifying responsibilities, strengthening civilian control, and introducing democratic oversight.

The Georgian authorities endorsed the first major recommendations, with a reform program envisaged through 2004. The board continued to monitor progress, identify shortcomings, and press for implementation.

The word *pressing* is important. Sir Garry was friendly, courteous, and genuinely sympathetic to Georgia's difficulties. But he could also be extraordinarily persistent - sometimes almost obsessively so. He returned to the same questions again and again. Who was responsible? Who would make the decision? Where was the money? Who would implement the decision? And who would be accountable if nothing happened? He was not impressed by declarations without action.

I occasionally thought that his patience with Georgia was inexhaustible, while his tolerance for our institutional improvisations was considerably less so. Something distinctly British about that combination. And something we badly needed.

The Problem Was Not Only Political Will

One episode illustrates his thinking particularly well.

In July 2002, while I served as Secretary of Georgia's National Security Council, Sir Garry addressed an audience at the Georgian Institute for Public Affairs in Tbilisi. The Tbilisi Centre for Strategic and Security Studies organised the discussion, with Revaz Adamia, then Chairman of Parliament's Defence and Security Committee, playing an important role. Sir Garry acknowledged that Georgia's leadership understood the necessity of reform. He did not dismiss the existence of political will. But he asked a more uncomfortable question: how was that political will supposed to be translated into decisions? Was it the President's responsibility? The State Minister's? The National Security Council's? Parliament's? The individual ministries'? Where, precisely, was the institutional mechanism to turn a political commitment into a coordinated governmental program? He diagnosed that Georgia suffered less from a lack of political will than from insufficiently developed government institutions.

I remember the significance of that argument because it closely matched the problems we were confronting from inside the system. We could agree on strategic objectives. We could prepare recommendations, draft documents, and announce ambitious programs. But implementation required something less glamorous and infinitely more difficult: institutions that worked. Sir Garry understood that a government is not simply a collection of senior officials, however talented or well-intentioned they may be. It is a system of responsibilities, procedures, decisions, resources, and accountability. Without that system, political will can remain little more than an eloquent declaration.

The lesson here extends well beyond Georgia of the early 2000s. More than two decades later, I find myself returning to Sir Garry's observations with an uncomfortable sense of familiarity. Georgia has changed enormously since those difficult years. We have developed institutions, accumulated experience, and achieved things that once seemed almost beyond our reach. Yet the question of whether institutions genuinely govern, or merely serve those who govern, remains painfully relevant. The temptation to personalise power, substitute loyalty for competence, and treat institutions as instruments of political convenience rather than enduring foundations of the state has not disappeared. Perhaps this is among the most persistent legacies of our Soviet inheritance: the difficulty of accepting that institutions must be stronger than the individuals temporarily entrusted with running them.

Sir Garry would, I suspect, have recognised the problem immediately. And he would probably have asked his familiar, rather inconvenient questions all over again. A country may possess a government without having developed the institutions necessary for effective governance. Sir Garry never confused the two.

Georgia's European Choice

Another important aspect of his work concerned Georgia's strategic orientation.

When Sir Garry first arrived in Georgia in 1998, the country's strategic orientation had already been defined. After his return to Georgia in 1992, President Eduard Shevardnadze had set the country on a course toward integration with the West, calling that choice irreversible. Yet political declarations did not necessarily translate into a national consensus. Voices still argued, both within the political establishment and beyond it, that geography, history, and the realities of power left Georgia little choice but to accommodate itself to Russia's security orbit. Others regarded Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration not merely as a foreign policy preference, but as an essential condition for securing its independence and building a functioning democratic state. The strategic direction had been chosen; the debate over how firmly, how quickly, and at what cost Georgia could pursue it was far from over.

Sir Garry approached this question with strategic realism rather than romantic enthusiasm. I remember Rezo Adamia sharing with me his impressions of Sir Garry's meeting with President Eduard Shevardnadze. Two men from very different backgrounds, shaped by very different experiences, yet both accustomed to thinking strategically and looking beyond the immediate political horizon. As Rezo recalled, President Shevardnadze emphasised that Georgia could not simply replicate the Baltic experience. Our unresolved conflicts, economic weaknesses, fragile institutions, and complicated relationship with Russia made our path toward the West considerably more difficult. Yet he was equally insistent that these obstacles should not call into question the direction Georgia had chosen.

According to Rezo's recollection, Sir Garry agreed with that fundamental proposition. But he added, with characteristic firmness, that Georgia's European choice could not be reduced to a diplomatic declaration or an aspiration to join Western institutions. It demanded something far more difficult and consequential: transforming the Georgian state itself. It was an important meeting of minds. Shevardnadze had defined the strategic destination; Sir Garry was reminding us of what it would take to get there.

By March 2002, when I became Secretary of the National Security Council, Sir Garry was publicly observing that a broad understanding had emerged that Georgia's security future was connected to Europe and the United States. For him, however, Euro-Atlantic integration was not merely about joining an alliance. It meant adopting the principles and practices that made membership meaningful: civilian democratic control of the armed forces, transparent planning, responsible use of public resources, parliamentary oversight, and a coherent national security policy. I remember how pleased he was when Georgia's Ministry of Defence published its White Paper in 2002. What mattered to him was not simply the document itself, but that information once treated as secret could now be publicly discussed. That was a significant change in political culture. It meant that defence policy was gradually becoming a matter of public responsibility rather than the exclusive domain of generals and security officials.

And Sir Garry understood that this transformation was as important as acquiring modern equipment or improving military training. Indeed, it was something more: evidence of a profound psychological shift in Georgia's political culture - from the secrecy and unquestioned authority of the Soviet system toward the transparency and accountability expected of a democratic state.

For Sir Garry, this was not a secondary achievement. It was part of the very foundation upon which Georgia's future security had to be built.

Russia: Geography, Power, and Political Judgment

Our conversations inevitably returned to Russia. They could hardly have done otherwise. For Georgia, Russia was not an abstract strategic challenge discussed in distant academic seminars. It was the neighbouring power whose policies, military presence, and involvement in our unresolved conflicts shaped much of our national security environment. A former imperial power that had acquired the outward trappings of democracy without shedding its deeply ingrained imperial instincts. We had already experienced the devastating war in Abkhazia in 1992–1993, in which Russia's involvement and role had profoundly influenced Georgia's perception of its own security and vulnerability.

Sir Garry was neither naïve about Russia nor inclined toward rhetorical confrontation. He understood the enduring influence of imperial thinking in Moscow, including among those who presented themselves as reformers or democrats. But he also believed Georgia needed a disciplined, realistic approach to its much larger neighbour.

In his July 2002 remarks, Sir Garry described Russia as a country struggling with its post-imperial legacy and Georgia as a newly independent state experiencing the growing pains of sovereignty. He recognised that Russia's geographical proximity gave it legitimate security concerns in the South Caucasus, but insisted that Moscow needed to adopt a more mature approach toward its neighbours. To my mind, that also meant coming to terms with the imperial ambitions that had survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Sir Garry cautioned that Georgia's own responses to Russian behaviour could sometimes aggravate an already difficult situation. I remember his fondness for vivid analogies. On one occasion, speaking publicly about relations between a large and a small neighbour, he compared Russia to a bear and Georgia to a small dog that ought to think carefully before repeatedly biting the bear's ankle. It was a deliberately provocative image, and one that could easily be misunderstood.

But I never interpreted Sir Garry's realism as an argument for Georgian submission. He was urging us to distinguish courage from recklessness, national dignity from unnecessary provocation, and strategic patience from political weakness. A small country cannot change its geography. But it can improve the quality of its institutions, strengthen its partnerships, understand the balance of power, and avoid worsening its own vulnerabilities. That was the essence of his approach.

And I would add something from the perspective of the years that followed. Today's Russia has made the imperial dimension of its policies far more explicit than many Western observers were prepared to acknowledge in the early post-Soviet period. Sir Garry did not foresee every development, nor would I claim that he did. But he understood that the Soviet Union's disappearance had not automatically ended the political instincts of empire.

That was an important insight for those of us trying to navigate Georgia's future. And it remains relevant today, when the distinction between prudent engagement with Russia and acceptance of its claims to a privileged sphere of influence is as important as ever. Geography is a fact. Submission is a choice. Sir Garry understood the difference.

The Man Behind the General

It would be a mistake, however, to remember Sir Garry only through reports, recommendations, and strategic discussions. He was a man of considerable personal warmth, intellectual curiosity, and a deeply

ingrained sense of duty. He listened carefully. He could disagree firmly without making disagreement personal. He respected serious arguments, even when he did not accept them. And he possessed that particular kind of persistence which, in less distinguished company, might have been mistaken for stubbornness. He could return to an unresolved question repeatedly, sometimes long after his interlocutors had begun hoping that the subject might finally be exhausted.

I say this with affection. His persistence was not an expression of superiority. It came from his conviction that the work mattered and that Georgia could not afford to waste opportunities. He also understood the value of personal relationships in a country where formal institutions were still fragile. He worked with Georgian officials, parliamentarians, military officers, and civilian experts, encouraging cooperation across bureaucratic boundaries that often seemed more difficult to cross than some of our international borders. I think particularly of Revaz Adamia, whose commitment to Georgia's security and democratic development Sir Garry appreciated; of Irakli Menagarishvili, with whom he could discuss strategic questions in their broader diplomatic context; and of David Tevzadze, who carried the difficult responsibility of defence reform during years of severe financial and institutional constraints.

These were not easy conversations. Disagreements, frustrations, delays, and competing priorities followed. But Sir Garry remained engaged. His commitment to Georgia was not conditional upon our immediate success in implementing his recommendations. He knew that institutional transformation took time. What he found difficult to accept was the absence of serious effort. Sir Garry repeated a phrase drawn from British naval tradition on many occasions: *Ne cede malis* - do not yield to evil. For him, it was more than a military motto. It expressed a philosophy of duty, resilience, and moral steadiness. I have thought about those words again since learning of his death.

What Remains

Sir Garry's formal advisory work in Georgia continued until 2005, when the International Security Advisory Board concluded its mission and presented its final report. The report recorded progress, but also identified areas requiring further reform. That, too, was characteristic of him. He was not interested in declaring victory prematurely. His contribution cannot be measured simply by counting the recommendations that were adopted or the institutional changes that followed. Some reforms advanced. Others stalled. Some achievements proved more durable than others. And Georgia's subsequent history demonstrated, sometimes painfully, that creating institutions and ensuring their long-term independence are two different tasks.

Yet Sir Garry helped establish an essential intellectual and practical framework for thinking about national security. He encouraged us to see security not as the military's exclusive responsibility, but as a function of the entire state. He insisted that the armed forces must serve democratic institutions rather than substitute for them. He understood that defending sovereignty required more than patriotic declarations. He believed Georgia's place in the Euro-Atlantic community depended not only on what our Western partners were prepared to offer, but also on what we ourselves were prepared to build.

These were substantial contributions at a formative moment in Georgia's modern history. They deserve to be remembered.

But for me, there is something beyond the historical record. I remember the conversations. The arguments. The questions he wouldn't let us evade. His intellectual discipline. His impatience with

excuses. His genuine concern for Georgia and its future. And I remember a distinguished British soldier who, after an extraordinary military career, chose to devote much of his experience and energy to helping a small, vulnerable country find its way.

He did not have to do that. He did it because he believed the effort was worthwhile.

Sir Garry Johnson belonged to that generation of soldiers who understood the value of peace because they had experienced war, and the importance of institutions because they knew what happened when institutions failed. He helped us think about the kind of country we wanted to become, not merely the kind of army we wanted to possess. That, perhaps, is the most enduring part of his legacy.

And somewhere, I can almost hear him repeating those familiar words, with the same quiet insistence: ***Ne cede malis* - Do not yield to evil**.

I have lost a dear friend. Georgia has lost a steadfast supporter, a demanding mentor, and a man who took our independence and our future seriously.



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