

Inside the world of the extraordinary man who ruled Number 10

He was the UK's top civil servant. Now Jeremy Heywood's widow has written a biography, serialised in The Telegraph over the next three days

By [Charles Moore](#)

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(Emphases added)

Jeremy Heywood was the most powerful man in Downing Street and Whitehall you have probably never heard of. Ending up as cabinet secretary, he worked extremely closely with four successive prime ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May. All four paid glowing tributes at his memorial service. He died of lung cancer in 2018, aged 56, working almost to the last.

Now Heywood's widow, Suzanne, has written his biography, something no mandarin's widow has ever done before. The book is dedicated to 'Jeremy, civil servant, husband and father'. It is a loving spouse's tribute – although, as we shall see, it is much more than that. Its title employs a question that was in constant use in Whitehall during his many years at the top, 'What does Jeremy think?'

One needs to ask a follow-up question, 'What does Suzanne think?' While she was writing her book, Lady Heywood asked me to come to see her. I had just published the final volume of my biography of Margaret Thatcher, and she wanted to discuss the pitfalls of writing about government and the lives of the recently dead.

She had interviewed nearly 200 eyewitnesses to the Jeremy Heywood story, she told me. I was impressed by her devotion. I was also struck by her deep interest in how British government works, the question that dominated his professional life. But my strongest impression was of her strength of character, forged in an extraordinary upbringing. I wanted to learn more about all of this, so when the book appeared, I seized the chance to interview her.

This is Covid time, of course, so we spoke by Zoom.

She tells me her story. When Suzanne was seven and her brother five, their family went to sea. Her father, Gordon Cook, a keen sailor from Yorkshire, had conceived the idea of retracing for its 200th anniversary the third voyage of another Yorkshire Cook (though no relation), Captain James. The latter-day Cooks set off, their children with them. For the next decade, they truly had a life on the ocean wave, with no home on land. They lived on Wavewalker, a 70ft schooner.

Increasingly, Suzanne hated it. One day, crossing the Indian Ocean, they capsized in a terrifying storm. The force of a wave buried Wavewalker and threw Suzanne across the cabin, breaking her skull. The wrecked boat and its crew were brought to Ile Amsterdam, roughly equidistant between South Africa and Australia. The tiny French island's sole doctor operated on her six times to remove the resulting blood clot on her brain. 'I still have nightmares about it.'

Personal relations were also poor. 'I was lonely,' she recalls, 'and I had a difficult relationship with my mother.' Things got worse as she reached her teens: 'I was quite a studious child, and although I managed to do some schooling by correspondence, this wasn't easy when we didn't have an address. Dad would say, "We're going to Samoa next," and then change his mind during the voyage...'

Suzanne read constantly, but often did not know how to pronounce words in books because she had hardly anyone to talk to about them. Jeremy would later tease her about these patches of ignorance.

When Suzanne was not quite 17, her parents left her in charge of her brother in New Zealand, with no adult help, and sailed away. Somehow, sister and brother survived. Somehow, Suzanne got an education. She ended up reading zoology at Somerville College, Oxford (where she occupied the room once inhabited by a certain Margaret Roberts, later Thatcher), and then doing a PhD at Cambridge.

This all but unique upbringing, she thinks, 'gave me massive resilience and determination. Jeremy saw this.'

Perhaps her childhood also inspired in her a longing for something and someone she could depend on. On leaving Cambridge, Suzanne joined that least ocean-going of professions, the Civil Service. She first met Jeremy in 1994. They were both in the Treasury, where he was already established as a rising star. He had come to wider notice two years earlier as private secretary to the Chancellor, [Norman Lamont](#), at the time of Black Wednesday – the Major government's notorious eviction from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (the ERM). Suzanne was told this tall, thin, brilliant man she saw eating in the canteen was 'the scariest person in the building'. He asked her to join him on his Treasury Fundamental Expenditure Review. 'He would be quite tough, always asking the difficult question that you didn't know how to answer.' She enjoyed him 'striding around the Treasury with me following along in the wake of his swirling dark coat'. Of such is Whitehall romance made. They married three years later, when Suzanne was 28 and Jeremy 35.

Suzanne felt 'utterly secure' with Jeremy. As for him, he liked her practicality, partly because he was 'the most impractical man I ever met'. **He never learnt to drive a car and she 'never saw him change a light bulb'. He was so unobservant of country life that he once excitedly pointed out to her a 'giant rat' in a field: it was a rabbit.** Each had a deep interest in what the other did at work. Suzanne found him the sort of man who could actually help with a work problem, rather than just clucking in sympathy.

Nothing could stop Jeremy's rise - or hers. In 1997, the year of their marriage, he became Tony Blair's private secretary (eventually becoming his principal one). She joined the management-consultancy firm McKinsey & Company and would later become one of its first two women senior partners in Britain. The Heywoods were rising as a 'power couple'.

Quickly, however, a shadow was cast across their success – infertility. Both wanted children, but when these did not arrive, each reacted differently. Suzanne would search out every sort of scientific expertise to achieve their aim. Jeremy 'couldn't deal with medical things'. Although supportive, he was 'nowhere to be seen for the medical stuff. **'Our infertility story,' she tells me, 'is interesting because of what happens later with his cancer: he would pretend it wasn't happening.'** IVF – after several failures and a miscarriage – worked. Along came Jonny, now aged 19, and twins Elizabeth and Peter, 17.

As Jeremy's biography unfolds, the reader keeps wondering how anyone had time for anything. The job of a private secretary is one of the most demanding in government because your time is never your own. If your minister – in his case, your prime minister – has an urgent problem, you have to sort it out at once. The book is full of lovely family holidays all over the world being disrupted by sudden prime-ministerial demands. Once, for example, Jeremy had to leave Suzanne and the children in Cyprus because of the row when Blair was accused of trying to take a prominent role for himself in the Queen Mother's funeral in 2002.

Some of Jeremy's critics in the Civil Service – yes, he has several: he was controversial as well as brilliant – saw such things as part of his problem. He 'always continued to do the job of a private secretary, giving power what power wanted, even when promoted to higher things', says one. He had never been head of a government department. He was 'too much a "consigliere" of the Number 10 court', says another, rather than a more detached helmsman of the ship of state.

Suzanne acknowledges this as 'a fair criticism'. But the trouble is that 'you always need someone in government to deal with the mess in the middle', and Jeremy 'was such a brilliant fixer'.

In home life, too, she says, he achieved an odd balance. 'He was a workaholic,' she tells me, 'but the children wouldn't say that. He was good at being present in whatever situation he was in: you felt you had 100 per cent of his attention.' His children valued that. So did his prime ministers. After stints as private secretary to Blair and to Gordon Brown, Jeremy's importance was recognised in 2008 by the creation of a new role – permanent secretary to the Prime Minister's Office. In 2012, he became cabinet secretary and – another first – principal policy adviser to the Prime Minister, then David Cameron.

In his work, Jeremy Heywood was witness and participant in many important stories – Blair's attempt to reform public services; Brown's efforts to 'save the world' during the 2008/9 financial crisis; Cameron's forging of a coalition with Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats in 2010; the EU referendum, and Theresa May's version of Brexit, which

finally crashed in 2019. The tale that Suzanne seeks to tell, however, is not merely about high drama, let alone personal gossip. In fact, it is tantalisingly hard to get judgments of famous politicians out of her.

Discussing Brown, for example, who was widely considered an almost impossible man to work with, she emphasises how impressed Jeremy was by his grasp of financial issues. She adds only that ‘it could be quite difficult for Gordon to make a decision’. She sticks by political impartiality, claiming that her husband did not tell even her how he voted. For Suzanne, the purpose of the book is to help people understand how the Civil Service works, as seen through the eyes of one of its greatest professionals. ‘I admire the Civil Service,’ she says, unfashionably. She is good at conveying the unsung virtues of that never very popular breed.

‘Politicians write their memoirs, of course,’ she tells me, ‘but there’s an upstairs, downstairs element to all this. The life of the Civil Service is like the downstairs story of Downton Abbey.’ She wants to bring this out because ‘institutions benefit from people knowing how they operate. Otherwise, it creates resentments.’ Besides, Jeremy had told her so much about all these things. ‘I’d always said to him I intended to write such a book.’ She had been keeping diaries, often drawing on what Jeremy had told her.

This brings us to an undeniable problem. As Jeremy’s friend and predecessor as cabinet secretary, Gus O’Donnell, confirmed when in office, civil servants are not supposed to write memoirs. The conversations they have with ministers and colleagues must remain private to maintain trust. This matters, particularly at the top. Opinions should not be publicly linked with named officials, or they cannot give them freely in private. If future prime ministers think their heat-of-the-moment words to their cabinet secretary will find their way into print, they will keep him out of the room when something serious needs discussing.

As is customary, the Cabinet Office saw the draft of Suzanne’s book. On matters of national security, she says, she took out what they asked, but whatever she thought important to her story, including private conversations, she kept in. The mandarins were (and are) unhappy. They tried to persuade her at least to delay publication for several years.

Some politicians were displeased too. Both Theresa May and David Cameron complained about some passages. If I were May, for example, I would not have liked reading about how, tense over decisions about [Hinkley Point nuclear power station](#), she once accused Jeremy of ‘conspiring with the French’, whose company EDF is involved – a remark for which he demanded and received an apology. Some colleagues feel that Jeremy himself would have punished such breaches of discretion if another had committed them on his watch. In the end, Suzanne agreed to hold back publication until Cameron’s own memoirs were safely out of the way, but refused to delay longer than that.

‘But I’m not a civil servant,’ she says rather sharply when I tax her with these problems, ‘there’s no rule to break: there’s nothing against a member of the public writing a book.’ This is disingenuous, I suggest, since she was married to the top

official and he told her what happened and who said what. She does admit that being the spouse is 'tricky'. But she is not repentant. The book is 'respectful', she says. 'Some people say it's too nice. That's intentional. What I refuse to do, though, is change history or allow major omissions... Because of my background, I am not easily sat upon.'

In her view, she had to write the book 'because he was dying'. In the course of 2017, Suzanne realised her husband would not survive. Suddenly, there was an urgency. 'I didn't want to lose the history,' she says. It was a salvage operation in the storm, part of her way of dealing with the knowledge that she was losing him. Now she feels she must publish it: 'I want to move on with my life.'

Jeremy had never been a completely healthy man. In 1987 – well before Suzanne knew him – one of his lungs had collapsed from a rare hereditary condition. He had also been, again before her time, a chain-smoker, and he always worked too hard. He had colitis, and later lupus and osteoporosis. He was often overtired.

As the family climbed Lantau Peak in Hong Kong just after Christmas 2015, Suzanne noticed how hard Jeremy found it. He declared himself 'horribly unfit', but it was more than that. She noticed his swollen knees and ankles. During the 2016 EU referendum, he developed pains in his legs. When Suzanne's mother died in October of that year, Jeremy was too unwell to help carry her coffin. Following suspected pneumonia, he saw an oncologist a week after the general election of June 2017. In October, he texted Suzanne: 'OK ml [my love]. Bleak news.' He had stage 4 lung cancer.

Jeremy found it much easier to discuss his career than his illness. Apart from anything else, he had feared that unless his cancer remained secret, he would have to stop work. The title of the relevant chapter in the book is 'I Don't Want To Talk About It'. That was Jeremy's attitude. When Suzanne absolutely insisted that their children must be told the bad news, he asked her to do it alone. 'Jeremy hated conversations like that,' Suzanne recalls. 'How to deal with the emotional response: he hated pity.'

The book was therapeutic for them both, perhaps. A pattern developed: 'I'd interview him. Then I'd do lots of desk research, interview others, write a draft and show it to him.' By his death, Jeremy had read 90 per cent of it. 'We were working against the clock,' says Suzanne.

In Jeremy's case, the determination to continue with his job was almost manic. One day, while in 10 Downing Street, he suddenly fell to the ground as his spine, damaged by a tumour, could no longer support him. His agony coincided with a telephone call from May, who did not know the extent of his condition. She said, 'I need you to investigate Damian Green' (her number two, who had been accused of sexual harassment). 'We should both stop work,' Suzanne told him after this 'surreal' moment, but he did not agree.

‘This was difficult for me,’ says Suzanne, ‘because I had to absorb all of it. I had to be the person who was facing reality,’ including, of course, the reality for their teenage children. ‘I was the annoying person. He hated it when I took him to scans. He would get really angry with me.’ But she understood that his defiance in doing his professional duty was ‘his way of coping’. She found him the newest treatments which, she believes, probably won him an extra six months.

May was kind in granting her increasingly ill cabinet secretary's wish to keep going. She also called on him when the cancer kept him at home in Balham, to pay her respects. In August 2018, it became obvious that Jeremy would not live much longer, but it was not until 21 October, Suzanne records, that his mobile phone lay untouched by his bed for the first time. He formally retired, and was immediately nominated for a life peerage, as Lord Heywood of Whitehall. On 3 November, [he died](#).

More than two years later, Suzanne feels a sense of achievement in getting the book out. As friends had predicted, the first year of widowhood was very hard: ‘You spend the entire 12 months comparing them with what you were doing the year before.’ She cannot help thinking of the future they had planned. ‘I absolutely feel the sense of missing out. Jonny has gone to Cambridge. Jeremy doesn’t know he got in.

‘We did live our life in a bit of a rush,’ she adds, and now there is no chance of putting that right. ‘I don’t think the grief ever leaves you: I’m not sure it should.’

But she is coming out of the shipwreck. She has done her husband justice, she believes, and with him, the profession in which he served. She hopes that, in this pandemic, ‘people will understand the people in Government trying desperately to get things done’. For all his Whitehall propriety, Jeremy clearly looked for some sort of immortality through his work and through the book. When he was dying, he glanced again at the manuscript and said to his wife, ‘We have put our names on it. Jeremy and Suzanne. So all our descendants will know. They will be amazed.’

Suzanne Heywood’s book is certainly a work of love. At the end of it all, I ask her, is Jeremy its hero? Can a civil servant be such a thing? She smiles, and considers. ‘Jeremy would not like that description of himself. He saw himself as the person behind the hero.’ But then she calls to mind Jonny’s words, delivered at his father’s funeral: ‘Some heroes wear capes – mine wore a cardigan.’