VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Bill Kirkman)

Key:

SO: = Sue Onslow (interviewer)
BK: = Bill Kirkman (respondent)
s.l. = sounds like

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Mr Bill Kirkman at Wolfson College, Cambridge on Wednesday 16th January 2013. Bill, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me for this project. You were, of course, Commonwealth Staff and Africa Correspondent at The Times in the 1960s and also did frequent broadcasts on the BBC World Service and for its Africa Service in that decade. I wonder if you could begin, please, by saying, in your position as a journalist and broadcaster, what was your general impression of decolonisation and the expanding Commonwealth at this particular time?

BK: The main impression, of course, was that it was all happening remarkably quickly. When you think of it, 1960 was Africa's year, and a very large number of African countries became independent in that year. This applied to the former French colonies and of course to the former British colonies. I was, during that period, covering the decolonising conferences for the British territories, and it was really a period of very rapid change: so rapid, looking back on it, it's much easier to put it in perspective, but at the time the one obvious thing about it was that everything seemed to be happening at once. Incidentally, this was not just in Africa, because for example there were discussions going on about the ill-fated West Indies Federation at exactly that period.

SO: So what you're describing then is the Commonwealth as an organisation, which of course had changed from 1949 from being a British Commonwealth to a Commonwealth of Nations, was itself going through dramatic expansion in the early 1960s because of this decolonisation in Africa and the West Indies?

BK: Yes, I think that is clearer looking back from this position than it was at the time. The really significant thing that everyone was aware of at the time was that these countries - and they were of course mainly in Africa - were getting their independence. Since they all decided to become members of the

Commonwealth, one of the implications clearly was a great and fairly rapid increase in the size of the Commonwealth.

SO: Did you attend Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences as well? Were you acting as a reporter and an observer of these events?

BK: No, but I did have a little concern with the 1961 conference.

SO: Where there was the controversial discussion of South African membership.

BK: Yes, I wasn't actually covering the conference but I did attend a press conference at a hotel in London at which Mr Verwoerd announced the decision of South Africa to leave the Commonwealth. The reason for his announcement of course was that it was quite clear by this stage that the other members of the Commonwealth were not prepared to let South Africa stay in.

SO: Do you remember the tone of this press conference? Was it short, was it an acrimonious one?

BK: It was short, it was slightly embittered, and I suppose it came as a great shock to most of us journalists who sat in, because although obviously we were aware that relations between South Africa and the rest of Africa and the rest of the world were pretty bad, I don't think any of us would have predicted that on that day, without any notice, South Africa would announce its departure from the Commonwealth.

SO: So was there something of a buzz round the room when he made that announcement?

BK: Yes, there certainly was, yes. Incidentally, many years later in 1994, I had the pleasure of attending the service at Westminster Abbey at which South Africa was welcomed back into the Commonwealth. So there's a certain kind of symmetry about that, from my point of view.

SO: Bill, thereafter, did you follow the issue of racial change in South Africa particularly closely from both a professional and a personal interest point of view?

BK: Well, I did, not so much from a professional point of view in that I didn't actually go to South Africa until a good bit later, but I did follow it because it was of course relevant to what was happening in the Central African Federation - the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland; it was particularly relevant to what was happening in what was then Southern Rhodesia, because of course Southern Rhodesia was, by flavour, much more – they never had apartheid but they were much more like South Africa than they were about their two fellow members of the Federation, Northern Rhodesia now Zambia, and Nyasaland now Malawi.

SO: From your journalistic standpoint, do you feel South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth in '61 made the Commonwealth a more attractive club to join for the newly emerging independent states?

BK: Yes, I think I'd go further than that. I think that probably most of them simply would not have wanted to join a Commonwealth in which apartheid South Africa was a member.

SO: So you don't remember any particular African strength of feeling on this - for instance the Ghanaian view or Nigerian view on South African membership? Did you pick up any reverberations about this question of South African departure?

BK: Well, as I say, I think the main reverberation was that they saw it as inevitable because a modern Commonwealth couldn't contain the apartheid government of South Africa.

SO: Subsequent Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences in London in '63, '64 and '65 were devoted not exclusively but primarily to the Southern Rhodesian question: did you cover these meetings as part of your responsibilities at The Times?

BK: Well, only indirectly, because I was covering in 1963 it must have been the discussions on the future of the three central African territories. There was a conference going on in London with Iain Macleod, who was then the Colonial Secretary running it really, on the future of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. There was at the same time a conference going on in Rhodesia in Salisbury, as it then was, with Duncan Sandys who was the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, running that. The problem was what they were trying to achieve obviously was really two things: i) independence for the member territories, and ii) a peaceful breakup of a federation - which by that time it had become quite clear - simply couldn't work. One of the problems was that the attitudes of the two ministers concerned, Iain Macleod and Duncan Sandys, were very different. They didn't get on with each other, so you had a conflict of principles between Southern Rhodesia and the two northern territories, and you had a conflict of personalities between the two senior ministers concerned.

SO: Did this affect the officials' relationship between the Colonial Office and the CRO?

BK: I think it must have done. I think the CRO had had for a long time a rather reactionary staff, but by this stage that had changed and they had crept into the modern world; so I think it was much more personal but of course it did inevitably affect how the negotiations were handled.

SO: I know that you interviewed Iain Macleod for the Oxford Colonial Records Project and much of this interview was devoted to covering his time as Colonial Secretary between 1959 and 1961. Do you recall what Macleod felt about the Commonwealth as an institution, as a club?

BK: Yes, I mean Macleod was very clear that, well, two things really, that it wasn't tenable or right to continue a colonial regime, Britain as an empire. He was quite clear about that. He was also quite clear that it made eminent sense for the British colonial territories of Africa to remain connected with each other or with the other members of the Commonwealth; so he was very positive about

that. He was also quite clear about his feelings for his fellow government minister – when I did the interview with him for the Oxford Colonial Records Project after he'd left office – this was after the government had been defeated, and I had left The Times. I went to discuss with him details of where we were going to do it and I said as a matter of interest, "Why did you ask particularly for me to be your interviewer?" and he said, "Well, I've just read your book on decolonisation [W Kirkman, *British Decolonisation* (1967)] and I liked it". So I said to him, 'Well, of course I'm delighted to hear you've read the book, but as you have read it I sometimes think I was a bit unfair on Duncan Sandys". And without a moment's hesitation, Macleod said, "You want to conquer any feelings of that sort!" [*Laughter*]

SO: And I'm thinking you didn't keep a straight face at that particular moment!

BK: I didn't!

SO: Did you also interview Harold Macmillan?

BK: No, I didn't.

SO: I know that he had a particular view of the Commonwealth as a magnet for newly independent African states in the Cold War, that this way they would resist the siren call of the Soviet Bloc and particular versions of socialism and development. I wondered if Macleod agreed with that particular view?

BK: I don't think he did. I think probably things were changing fairly rapidly because there was a tendency for the Commonwealth to be seen as the kind of way of keeping people together. One has to remember that at the same time the EEC, as it was then called, was rapidly developing. So I think it was inevitable that from a British point of view, relations with the EC, later with the EU, were inevitably going to play an important part. Of course, in parenthesis, one might say that looking at it from today's point of view, one wonders how long that will continue, but that's another story! And the Commonwealth remained relevant but it didn't remain as relevant as it had done when it was a British Empire.

SO: How important, looking back, do you feel was the landscape of the Cold War at this time in the dramatic expansion of the Commonwealth? I'm very struck by historians who write about the Commonwealth that they tend to think of the British Empire and the Commonwealth in isolation from what was after all the broader ideological international community, the battle between right and left or systems of Soviet-led socialism and liberal democratic capitalism?

BK: Well, I think it certainly was significant. For example, one of the reasons why some British ministers, some British politicians, and I think Margaret Thatcher would be among them, felt far more positively towards South Africa than many others did was because they were concerned with the fact that South Africa, as they saw it, was a bulwark against the creeping influx of communism. Now of course, the purists would say – and I would count myself among them – that you don't do yourself much help by allying yourself

to a bunch of racist reactionaries when you're trying to keep out another group of extremists! Because I think there was a strong feeling that that was the case.

SO: In your coverage of decolonisation, between 1960 to 1964, you must have interviewed a considerable number of emerging African politicians. You also of course covered the Kenyan elections in 1963. You have made reference to the breakup of the Central African Federation - did you interview Kenneth Kaunda, or did you interview Dr Hastings Banda of Nyasaland?

BK: I certainly interviewed Kenneth Kaunda on a number of occasions and we had a pretty good working relationship. I interviewed him – you must remember at this time of course he was not Prime Minister of Northern Rhodesia, he was a minister and he was very obviously about to take over, but I did have discussions with him about where Northern Rhodesia, Zambia, would be going. He was quite clear that he wanted it to remain in the Commonwealth. He was quite clear of course that he wanted fundamental change in Southern Rhodesia. He was also clear that he was keen to have the benefits that membership of the Commonwealth would bring. To take one specific example, when they were discussing the railway from the coast to... well, I'll use the modern name, Zambia, you may remember that it was built by the Chinese. I had a discussion with him about this and he said he would have greatly preferred it to be built by the British because that would have kept the Commonwealth thing, but he had to have the railway, and the British weren't interested.

SO: So there was no British political interest and there was certainly no financial support for that particular project?

BK: No, no.

SO: Kenneth Kaunda, who of course plays such a significant part as a leading president of the Front Line States towards the final settlement of the Rhodesia problem from '65 to '79, was also a stalwart and outspoken critic of apartheid South Africa. You've made mention of his particular commitment to the Commonwealth. What was he like as a politician?

BK: Well, as a politician I think he was a pretty charismatic figure. He was an excellent orator for example, and a very hard worker. I think he stayed in office slightly too long, he would have done better to stand down slightly earlier than he did, but significantly, he's still living in Zambia, and he still has staff, so he has a kind of status there. He did play an absolutely crucial role in the period when the future of South Africa's relations with the rest of Africa were at a period of very great and dramatic change.

SO: Did you stay in touch with him? You said that you had first interviewed him when he was a nationalistic leader before Zambian independence.

BK: I stayed in touch with him a bit. In fact the last time I actually saw him was in 2005 in this college when I arranged a meal for him and a number of other people who were taking part in the conference to mark the 40th anniversary of

UDI, the Unilateral Declaration of Independence. He took part in that conference as indeed did you. I had a dinner party for him here.

SO: I'm just wondering whether you had been in any way in touch with him when he did step down in 1991, and whether you were aware of the Commonwealth Secretary General providing, should we say, quiet advice on whether it was appropriate for him to move to multiparty democracy in Zambia rather than trying to keep one party rule under his leadership?

BK: I don't know about that, it wouldn't surprise me, and I said earlier I think he would have been wise to have stepped down a bit earlier, and the way things have developed subsequently in Zambia bears that out. He was of course also very close to Julius Nyerere, the President of Tanzania; they were very good friends.

SO: Even though they might have intense political disagreements?

BK: Yes. I mean one rather significant thing was that when, you may remember that soon after he stood down, and he stood down voluntarily, Kenneth Kaunda was locked up by his immediate successor, and he told me this story himself. Julius Nyerere, who was still in office, came to visit him in Zambia, insisted on visiting him in jail and said 'I shall remain until he's released'.

SO: I see: solidarity of African leadership.

BK: Yes. And of course he was released.

SO: In the politics of Rhodesian UDI, of course, Kenneth Kaunda was a very firm supporter of Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU, whose fighters and refugees were based in Zambia, whereas Nyerere tended to support ZANU and its ultimate leadership under Robert Mugabe from 1976. That must have caused a strain to their friendship if there were intense political differences?

BK: Well, it may well have done, I was certainly not aware of that. They did remain pretty close on a personal level.

SO: What were your views, your analysis of Julius Nyerere as a leader of a leading Commonwealth country in Southern Africa?

BK: Well, I have the warmest regard for Julius Nyerere because he was a person of real vision. On a personal level he stood down from power very voluntarily; he worked hard to support his successor and to continue to represent his country, he was a very firm believer in what one would call Commonwealth values. He had a big advantage I think and that is that Tanzania doesn't have the same kind of racial tensions that other countries, Kenya for example, has. There's a much more united racial ethnic setup in Tanzania than there is, was and is, in Kenya.

SO: I'd say that is the direct product of Nyerere's deliberate 'nation-state building' from the independence of Tanzania.

BK: I think that's right, but it was helped of course by the fact that what you don't have in Tanzania is what you do have in Kenya - for example, two major powerful tribes, the Kikuyu and the Luo. In Zimbabwe there is the same kind of situation.

SO: Between the Shona and Ndebele speaking communities?

BK: Yes.

SO: Bill, obviously having covered the Kenyan elections of '63, you had a particularly good view of the dynamics of Kenyan politics and political leaders, Jomo Kenyatta, Oginga Odinga and also Tom Mboya, leader of the Trade Union Movement. Could you comment on those particular personalities who were of importance in the Commonwealth after Kenyan independence?

BK: Yes, well, let me start with Kenyatta. I think the really significant thing about Kenyatta is that he was a person of wide knowledge, wide experience, he had after all lived in the UK during part of the war. He was, in a sense, I think, *calumnified* over... the problems, pre-independence problems with Kikuyu. But he was a man, in my experience, of very considerable vision and very considerable calmness as a leader. I remember, for example, attending a press conference which he gave in the basement of a London hotel fairly soon after he'd been released and before the election, but it was quite clear that he was going to stand. And at this press conference, suddenly somebody threw something at him. Well, as you can imagine, there was a horror stricken silence because everyone thought it was a bomb. The police leapt forward and arrested the person who'd thrown it and there was a sort of horror stricken silence. Kenyatta remained absolutely calm throughout. The representative of KANU at that time in London, Joe Murumbi (who became vice-president for a time afterwards), looked across the room at me and said, "Did you see what that was wrapped in?" And he said, looking at me, "Actually, it was a copy of The Times." What it contained was the carcass of a chicken. And he did that to lighten the moment.

Kenyatta, I think, had a much greater vision than many people gave him credit for. Oginga Odinga was notable particularly as a flamboyant character but he's certainly not a trivial character at all. It was quite interesting that he was a Luo of course and he had a key position in the government in spite of that fact. He was a remarkable orator incidentally: he represented Kenya at the conference in 1963, in Addis Ababa at which the Organisation of African Unity, as it then was, was being set up and he was invited to speak on behalf of the still non-independent states because Kenya was just on the verge of independence, and he gave a remarkable speech attacking imperialism ferociously. But he had to begin, "Your Imperial Majesty."!

SO: I'm particularly struck, as were British officials at the time, by the difference between African nationalist and independence leaders making really quite robust, critical, derogatory remarks in public in contrast to the much more pragmatic attitudes that they would express in private.

BK: Yes, Oginga Odinga pulled no punches. As a matter of fact, I travelled back on the plane with him to Nairobi and I congratulated him on his speech and he said, "I hope you've covered it in full?" and I said 'Well, I haven't actually, I've left that to Reuters but I shall do a piece and it's easier to do it from Kenya because it's cheaper because the cost of cable' – it was cables then – 'from the Commonwealth countries is a good deal cheaper than from non-Commonwealth countries. So if you want your speeches covered, you'll have to remain in the Commonwealth.' "We will, my dear," he said, "we will."

Tom Mboya was one of the brightest people I ever met among African politicians. I knew him reasonably well and he had a real vision for his country and much wider than that, and of course he was assassinated. He was highly intelligent, very well educated, a real visionary, and he would have made a very good minister. I knew him before his death but I didn't cover his assassination, no.

SO: From your standpoint as a journalist in London reporting on Africa, what was the perception of the Commonwealth of the readership for which you were writing at the time?

BK: Well, the readership of The Times had a fairly strong appreciation of it, but what I think was true - not just of Times readers but generally - was that what was not really fully appreciated was the nature of the change that was happening in the Commonwealth. What was appreciated of course was the nature of changes that were happening in Africa and in the individual countries of Africa. It's very difficult to be sure about how people are thinking but what one has to remember is that at that time – I mean we're talking about three or four years in the 1960s – a vast amount was going on; independence movements were coming up, two or three a day as it were, and that was where the focus was. So I think people were very much aware of that but I don't think there was a great deal of balanced reflection on where this was leading the Commonwealth.

SO: Do you think at the time in the 1960s, there was an enduring perception in Britain of it being the 'British' Commonwealth? Even though I accept it was not.

BK: That wasn't my perception, certainly from the people I was dealing with, because I think there had been a general acceptance of the philosophical point that it was going to be a much wider body than the former British Commonwealth had been. There may have been, among some people, a feeling that it ought to remain the British Commonwealth but they were really, I think, a minority who were out of touch with the political realities of the day.

SO: As you say, Bill, the political realities by 1966 was the Commonwealth had expanded to 22, and that there was an emergence of African and Asian countries, who were forming a bloc at the United Nations, which appeared to be complicating things for Britain, for instance over Gibraltar, or particularly over Southern Rhodesia.

There's one particular African leader, the personality whom I should ask you about, and that is Milton Obote of Uganda.

BK: I saw Milton Obote when he was first in power. I didn't see him after his return to power. He was of course in a slightly odd position because he was not a member of the Baganda, so he was a prime minister of a country, the main bit of which was Buganda, I mean in size and importance and influence. My impression of Obote, when I went to see him at the time, was that he had a very clear view that he wanted Uganda to become independent which it did in 1962. I saw him just after that and he was quite clear that that involved remaining in the Commonwealth, I think he was perfectly happy with that, and he had and wanted to keep reasonably good relations with his immediate neighbours.

SO: What did you think of him as a political personality?

BK: Well, difficult to judge. I thought he was quite a reflective personality, he wasn't a flamboyant leader but he was a reflective leader with whom one could have a quiet and reflective conversation.

SO: That was very evident, that Britain welcomed his private comments on the whole question of sanctions towards Rhodesia after November, which was that he recognised that Britain was in a compromised position. British officials were remarking that they very much welcome his pragmatic approach and realisation that it is complicated for Britain on this; thanks to Obote's contribution, the discussion of Rhodesia at subsequent Prime Ministers' Conferences was not falling down on racial grounds.

BK: Yes, I think that's right. There are various possible reasons why that may be the case. In his capacity as Prime Minister of Uganda, he had to take into account ethnic differences and produce some kind of unity within Uganda itself, between the Baganda, the Banyoro and the Toro.

SO: While the acceleration towards independence was going on in Africa, you were also covering the breakup of the West Indies Federation?

BK: Yes, I was covering that in the sense that there were various discussions going on in London. I didn't actually go to the West Indies, but my own take on it, and I think I was not alone in this, was that it was a very good example of the obsession with federations that we had in Britain at that time. We should never have started the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, we should never have started the West Indies Federation because if you look at the map you will see that the distance between the members of it is very great.

SO: There was also the Federation of Malaysia and Singapore.

BK: Yes, precisely, so we were more kind of 'More Federal Follies' I had as a chapter in my book. There were also power differences. I don't mean power in the sense of people trying to run the thing but Jamaica and Trinidad were far more powerful economically, for example, than the smaller territories, and the Prime Minister of the Federation was the Premier of Barbados. Grantley Adams was a perfectly pleasant man but he was not frankly in the same league intellectually as either Norman Manley of Jamaica or the Trinidadian,

Eric Williams. The Federation of the West Indies was a gathering of people whose formal leader, Grantley Adams, really wasn't up to dealing on equal terms with the others. I think it's probably worth repeating that I went to interview Eric Williams in London. It was a very good interview for The Times, and when we'd finished we were just chatting and he was quite clear that the West Indies Federation was doomed, and he said, referring to Grantley Adams, he said he'd dealt with good politicians and bad ones in his time but this was the first time he'd had to deal with a vacuum! Which was a very unkind comment, but you could see what he was getting at.

SO: The process you were talking about, the unwinding of the West Indies Federation and the move towards independence, was also the time of the Cold War crisis in the Caribbean - with the Cuban Missile Crisis of '62. So the expansion of the Commonwealth again was touching the Cold War.

BK: Yes, my impression is that there was no wish on the part of the West Indies countries, the islands, to leave the Commonwealth. That wasn't the issue. The question was whether they would join together in a federation.

SO: What was your view of Eric Williams and Norman Manley as politicians, their political styles, their particular focuses and approaches?

BK: Yes, Norman Manley was a much warmer, outgoing personality, highly intelligent. Eric Williams was highly intelligent but he was more prickly and he had very little patience. He didn't suffer fools gladly. I got on quite well with him but he probably didn't think I was a complete idiot! [*Laughter*]

SO: You've set the stage for accelerated decolonisation in Africa, in the West Indies and the changing of the Commonwealth and its configuration, expansion of its membership. Did you take a view as a journalist, on the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965? You said that you were welcomed as a guest at Marlborough House when it was established.

BK: I had left The Times by then, but I was still of course interested. Yes, I felt that it was not before time. For traditional reasons the Commonwealth had really been administered from Britain, and I mean from the British government, and that clearly made little sense if you were going to take seriously the fact that it was a Commonwealth of Nations. So it was important to have a separate – and a clearly separate secretariat. I don't think there was a problem about having it in Britain because there were all kinds of historic reasons but also practical reasons, such as communications. So I think that was a fairly significant move. The first couple of Secretaries General were personalities in their own right and were able to deal with member governments, including the British government, which was very important. My own feeling is that by this time, however, decolonisation had almost finished. Although there were still a few to come, most of the former British colonies had become independent and the process was well under way. I think there was a feeling in Britain, a sort of fatigue about it all. There's never been to my mind a great enthusiasm for the idea of the Commonwealth in Britain.

SO: Yet in contrast to the lack of enthusiasm within Britain for the Commonwealth, when the Secretariat was created it was led by two people of stature who became Secretaries General, Arnold Smith between '65 and '75, and then Sonny Ramphal 1975-1990 – combined with the quality of leaders of Commonwealth states in this time. You've made reference consistently to their intellectual abilities, to their political abilities, also the fact that many of them were educated in Britain. Looking back it seems that this is a particular flowering of charismatic African leadership, charismatic leadership in the Caribbean.

BK: Well, I think all that is true and I think the Commonwealth was seen then as a remarkable and a very positive thing (outside Britain). I think the problem, as I see it, among a lot of the British was that they never quite bought into it in the same way that the former parts of the Empire did. In other words, for the African countries 'we're becoming independent and we can join this body the Commonwealth'. For the British, it was 'we're losing our colonies'. I think Macmillan's idea was a perfectly valid one except that of course the whole situation had changed or was changing, and as I said earlier, British links with Europe were, for obvious geographical and economic reasons, becoming ever more important.

SO: And it becomes of course increasingly relevant when Britain formally joined the European Economic Community under Edward Heath in 1973.

BK: Yes, that's right. Edward Heath was passionate as you know about that and Edward Heath I don't think had much interest in the Commonwealth. Of course in a way you can understand if you're taking the country into a major new membership, that's what you're focusing on, but I got the feeling that Heath was focused to the point almost of monomania on that. There were some British politicians, there've been more recently I think, who have got a sense of what the Commonwealth is worth, but at the time I think it was seen almost as a kind of relic of Empire.

SO: You point to the fact that these newly independent African leaders in the 60s and the 70s possessed a particular calibre of leadership – combining charismatic leadership and the authority of office. But this was also within their own countries, elite politics to an extraordinary degree. Kenneth Kaunda is described as a 'one bullet person' - take out Kaunda and then what would happen in Zambian politics?

The practice of international politics has changed over the life of the Commonwealth: in the earlier period it lent itself to the informal discussions at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings within a newly extended family but it still was focused at the top, whereas now international politics has changed dramatically. International organisations have multiplied, the politics within these countries have become more complex themselves.

BK: Yes, I think that's right. I'm no expert on international organisations but just observing what has been happening in the last two or three years, the UN's effectiveness has been questionable, to put it kindly, the European Union's effectiveness is under question – Bosnia in the 90s and now the economic situation. And I think my own take on this is that while this is happening, one

of the arguments against the Commonwealth from people who were not very enthusiastic was that it had no power.

SO: But it's a soft power organisation.

BK: Well, precisely, but a lot of people didn't find that attractive. If you now look at the organisations which are supposed to have power like the UN and the European Union and you see the severe limitations to their power, there becomes more to be said, in my view, for an organisation which does not pretend to be and never has pretended to be a centre of political power in the world but a centre of rational discussion and exchange of ideas.

SO: It's also the increasing complexity of the Commonwealth with the expansion of non-state diplomatic actors within it, such as its non-governmental civil society organisations. There is also the aspect of the expansion of its members – now it includes non-originally Anglophone countries, Mozambique, Cameroon and Rwanda. The Commonwealth has evolved into a multi-centred, multi-ethnic association. It's not a defence organisation, it's not an economic organisation, but its members do feature in leading economic organisations.

BK: Yes, it is represented not as the Commonwealth necessarily, it's been represented in a very wide variety of types of organisation, I mean geographically and of course in size: India and very small countries, for example.

SO: As a longstanding commentator of individual countries but also as an observer of the Commonwealth as a whole, how much importance do you attach to the value of Queen Elizabeth II as its leader: to the Commonwealth's continuing identity, in the continual value of being part of this club?

BK: Very difficult to say I think because the one very obvious thing is that she has been a dedicated supporter of, a proponent of the Commonwealth and has worked tirelessly in its support. I think that has obviously been very important. I think it's been particularly important that she's been accepted in that role by the majority of countries in the Commonwealth which of course are not monarchies. She was there from the beginning and has been a very clear, dedicated supporter. I don't think any organisation is likely to depend only on one person. One of the questions people tend to ask is will it continue when the Queen dies. Well, of course I don't know the answer to that but I see no reason why it shouldn't.

SO: Indeed, but she does provide the most extraordinarily inexpensive leadership of the Commonwealth.

BK: Exactly. Yes. And one of her strengths obviously is that she's not a political figure. She's Queen of individual Commonwealth countries but she's Head of the Commonwealth.

SO: Why do you think the Commonwealth has survived and how has it survived, just to conclude?

BK: I think it's survived because it brings great benefits in the way that you've just described as a soft power organisation and brings together and has brought together countries of very widely varied strengths, sizes, histories. It's an organisation which has a kind of unity of purpose without forcing people into a unity of political or economic... direction. There is a sanction of course of suspension of membership. Membership has been withdrawn from a number of countries... I think it is the fact that it is not a great centre of power oddly enough is one of its strengths. I've always been a great believer in the Commonwealth and I still am. I think in a way the arguments for it are much more obvious now than they were 20 years ago, for all those reasons.

SO: A beautiful oxymoron, because it doesn't have formal bonds that provides its energy and focus, and because it has the ability to consistently reinvent itself?

BK: Yes. Well, it has, and of course you wouldn't have invented it.

SO: No, indeed, indeed! Well, Bill, as someone who I should say was almost 'present at the creation' of the Commonwealth in the 1960s, thank you very much indeed.

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