University of London
INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Sir Ronald Sanders (Part One)

Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
RS: Sir Ronald Sanders (Respondent)

Part One:

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow interviewing Sir Ron Sanders at Senate House on Monday 12th November 2012. Sir Ronald Sanders was twice High Commissioner to the United Kingdom for Antigua and Barbuda and Ambassador to the World Trade Organisation. He was also a member and Rapporteur of the Eminent Persons Group which presented its report to the Perth CHOGM in November 2011.

Sir Ron, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wondered if you could begin, please, by talking about your initial involvement as a diplomat in the 1980s, before you came to London for the first time as High Commissioner after your country had been granted independence and joined the Commonwealth. I know that you were at the United Nations in New York and made a particular contribution to the Commonwealth's response to the Falklands crisis.

RS: Antigua and Barbuda became independent in 1981 and one of the first diplomatic missions it set up was its mission to the United Nations. I went there as the Deputy Permanent Representative and of course in 1982 we had the Falklands/Malvinas issue between Britain and Argentina. The Commonwealth was particularly active in trying to secure support for Britain amongst Commonwealth UN members and the Secretary General had sent Assistant Director General, Moni Malhoutra and others to New York to convene meetings with Commonwealth High Commissioners to try to persuade them that they should stand behind Britain on this matter.

I was away for a part of that period and came back to New York to find that the Caribbean High Commissioners had more or less agreed that they, the Caribbean Ambassadors at the UN, were going to be supportive of Argentina in this matter. This was for geographical reasons and the fact that there was a view that it was an anti-colonialist effort. When I went into that meeting with that decision more or less made, I questioned it seriously in terms of my own country's interests. I put it to the group that our countries all spoke English,

not Spanish; that our historical relationship was with Britain, not Argentina; that our diaspora lived in the United Kingdom, not Argentina; that our tourists and investors came from Britain and not Argentina; and that I could see no economic, political, cultural or historical benefit in supporting Argentina in this matter. Whatever the merits of the discussion, the point was - from a strictly domestic standpoint - there was nothing in this for the Caribbean to support Argentina.

In any event, on the facts of the case, the merits were entirely on the side of Britain because the people of the Falklands had decided that they wished to be British and we had all become independent on the right of self-determination. And we could not, in my view, deny the Falklanders the very thing that we insisted upon, that made us become independent countries. So if they, the Falklanders, had decided they wished to remain British, we should respect that position. So both in terms of international law and in practice and our own interests, I thought the Caribbean should support the United Kingdom and my view eventually prevailed. And the Caribbean did support Britain in that UN vote.

SO: How much resistance had there been to that particular point of view before your intervention? Had the Caribbean representatives been more inclined to support Argentina then? So yours was a critical contribution?

RS: Yes, I think so. I don't think all of them were resistant to supporting the UK, but the bigger countries were and they were the ones that had the greatest influence. I think they were caught up with being part of the Latin American and Caribbean group in the UN. Whether they had done enough research on that issue up to that point, I am not sure. But certainly after this discussion the Caribbean did support Britain wholeheartedly.

SO: How appreciative was Mrs Thatcher of this?

RS: Well, it was quite remarkable because when I came here as High Commissioner a couple of years later and went to her to hand in my letter of introduction, the first thing she said to me was "Thank you very much for your help on the Falklands". So I have to assume that in the briefing session which she had gone through (or whatever brief they had given her on the fact that I was coming to hand in my letter of introduction), they had drawn that to her attention. The truth of the matter is that on the Falklands, Mrs Thatcher was always very grateful to the people who stood up for Britain.

SO: Hence American Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger was awarded a special knighthood after the Falklands War, for his particular contribution in bringing the American administration alongside. So you came to London as the first High Commissioner in 1983. That year saw another crisis in the Caribbean - with the US invasion of Grenada, a member of the Commonwealth. The Reagan administration had not, shall we say, followed the courtesies of contacting Mrs Thatcher beforehand. Do you have a vivid recollection of the response within the Commonwealth of this particular incident?

RS: Vivid indeed! I did come to London in 1983, but I didn't become High Commissioner until January 1984. I did attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in Delhi and I was present at all of the Caribbean

discussions prior to the invasion of Grenada by the United States. In fact, I vividly remember the first of these meetings which occurred at the Dover Convention Centre in Barbados at the invitation of the then Barbados Prime Minister Tom Adams with the members of the countries of the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States. At that meeting, an American general had come along to brief us on how, if an intervention were to take place, how it would militarily occur. And that man was Schwarzkopf. Of course I didn't know who he was at the time, or he hadn't yet made his reputation in Iraq, but it was he who came to brief our Caribbean leaders on possible intervention in Grenada.

Now there were a number of people who were very unhappy about the possibility of foreign troops on Caribbean soil, even within the OECS. The prime ministers who were not in the least bit concerned about that were the prime minister of St Lucia, who was then John Compton, and Eugenia Charles who was prime minister of Dominica. They were particularly strong that we required some kind of intervention to remove this coup, which they regarded as a stain on the Caribbean's democracies and so on. Quite rightly, I mean one sympathised with their view but there was also the sense that to invite foreign intervention in the Caribbean was a backward step. And one for which we would pay a high price, particularly inviting the Americans.

Now John Compton first asked the British to intervene and the High Commissioner here for the OECS countries at the time was a man called Dr. Claudius Thomas. He in fact was the *doyen* of the Caribbean *corps.* He had been in Britain a long time as High Commissioner, he was very close to John Compton and actually did go to the Foreign Office to plead with them to intervene and he got the answer that Britain wouldn't intervene. And in fact they tried very hard for Britain not to recognise this government that had taken office by coup. The British response was that they didn't recognise governments, they recognised states; and since the Head of State had not been removed, there was no question of not recognising the country.

But in any event, I have to tell you that this was a rancorous period in the Caribbean's history. Within the OECS there was great certainty that they wanted intervention - I mentioned their names already, John Compton and Eugene Charles - but Tom Adams of Barbados, was also very keen to have an intervention. When the issue spread out into the CARICOM countries, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Belize and the Bahamas were then involved in the discussion. None of them, with the exception of Jamaica, was keen to do this. In fact, the prime minister of Jamaica at the time was Edward Seaga and Seaga had been working very closely with Tom Adams, Eugene Charles and John Compton in organising the American interest in the intervention.

When we broke up from the meeting in Barbados at the Dover Convention Centre, a couple of days later we went onto the Hilton Hotel in Trinidad, where we were joined by CARICOM leaders. That meeting broke up with great division in CARICOM: Guyana, Trinidad, the Bahamas, and Belize were definitely not for any form of intervention of this kind. They were for all sorts of other sanctions that could be applied against the regime - economic sanctions, blockades of one kind or another, but not for inviting the Americans to come in. When we left Trinidad after the meeting broke up, there was no real commitment from the Americans to go ahead with that intervention. Indeed I suspect that had the American Embassy in Beirut not been stormed

by a truck with a bomb on it, which then exploded and caused Reagan major embarrassment in the United States, the invasion of Grenada would never have taken place. Reagan justified the invasion of Grenada on the basis of communists and Cubans being in Grenada and threatening United States' students there. All of that was flannel as far as I was concerned! I think the real issue was that he wanted to demonstrate that the Americans would hit back at anything that they thought threatened the American interest. It was Beirut that promoted that response.

SO: So he needed a foreign policy success?

RS: Exactly! So that in my view was why he went into Grenada. And of course it was a poorly organised intervention. Thank God they were going into a small country, because had Grenada been a big one, it would've been a disaster. The Americans had situations in which their helicopters were stuck in the sand on the beaches and the local people had to yank them out of the sea. There was a story – whether it is apocryphal or not, I don't know - that they were bombing what they thought was the Cuban Embassy, when they actually bombed the mental asylum next door. There were all of these inmates of the place wandering around the streets, and so on. There were American soldiers who had no clue where they were, using a public telephone box to call Washington to say 'These are our co-ordinates. Where exactly are we?' and that kind of thing. So it wasn't a very well planned operation at all. But in any case, they overwhelmed the people because there was no great military strength there. The Cubans had been told by Castro not to participate in any fight. Some of them did retaliate against shots that were fired at them, and some of them died. But basically the Cubans had stayed out of this and they had no real military presence there anyhow. So that was that.

What this thing did in the Commonwealth, was to infuriate many Commonwealth leaders because they saw it as fellow Commonwealth countries inviting the United States to invade a country. That's all they saw it as. They therefore felt threatened by this because it would have been a precedent if it had happened in other parts of the Commonwealth, in their part of the world, and consequently they were extremely worried about it.

So when the Commonwealth Heads of Government gathered in Delhi in 1983 under Indira Gandhi's Chairmanship, it was a Commonwealth that was - on this issue - very divided. And I remember Robert Mugabe waving his finger at Caribbean leaders who had participated in this, saying that they had done the wrong thing and this was very bad precedent and not good and so on. Mrs Thatcher herself, who had earlier said that she was not advised by the Americans that this was going to occur, took great umbrage, at least publically because she had such a close relationship with Ronald Reagan and thought that she should have at least been informed.

It's interesting if you read the records of the telephone conversations between Thatcher and Reagan afterwards, you get the distinct impression that she was really not that offended.

SO: I completely agree. The telephone transcripts which are available on the Margaret Thatcher Foundation website suggest a much more, cosy discussion then.

RS: Yes, very cosy: it was very much a 'Margaret and Ronnie' discussion. And so while she publically made these statements from that conversation, one could see that she wasn't exactly troubled that the Americans had gone in at all. I think in different circumstances she would have done the same thing. And she was quite happy the Americans did it so they could take the blame but she could wring her hands publically and get away with it.

SO: And sound outraged in the House of Commons?

RS: Even at that CHOGM conference in Delhi, you know, her interventions were more on the side of the Caribbean people who were defending themselves as to why they wanted this intervention, rather than with those who were criticising it.

SO: How much would you say that this decision to invite, as you said, the Americans to come in and correct the political complexion of the Grenadian Government was the personal policy of John Compton, Eugene Charles and Tom Adams? Did they carry their governments behind them or was this very much a leadership choice by these particular prime ministers?

RS: No, I think they had their governments behind them. I mean, the truth of the matter is that if this thing were left to the Caribbean people, and if they had the wherewithal to do it - the countries in the OECS that were closest to Grenada - they would have intervened themselves without America. But they knew they didn't have the capacity. Grenada had had at that time the best built up army because in 1979, you must remember they had a coup then in which Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard had come into office. And one of the first things they did was to beef up the army. So they had an army that was well equipped, was Cuban trained and was capable of taking on another Caribbean army. The OECS countries had what I would say, even though they were called armies, were reserve groups of people incapable of any kind of intervention. But if they could have done it themselves, they would have done it.

This was the first thought of what later became the ideology of a pre-emptive strike, which is what George W Bush said he did in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan: a pre-emptive strike because America's interests were threatened. This really was started with the OECS countries who were promoting that idea of a pre-emptive strike against Grenada because the whole justification for inviting the intervention was that here was an army that had taken over by coup. They (the junta in Grenada) were setting a precedent and God knows if there was going to be an expansion of what they were doing. But they threatened the interests of the rest of the Caribbean. Therefore they (the OECS governments) wanted a pre-emptive strike to put a stop to it before it became anything else.

Of the countries that did have armies, that could take on Grenada – Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica – Guyana was not for any kind of intervention. Trinidad was not for any kind of intervention. Jamaica, of course, was already fully involved in it, we see after. So, that was the dilemma. What happened at Delhi of course was that Sonny Ramphal who was Secretary General at the time, recognised that this thing could create serious division, not only within the Commonwealth, but within the Caribbean itself. He set about doing behind-the-scenes work to try to heal the process, to try to heal that rift that

had developed not only in the Commonwealth countries, but in the Caribbean itself. And I think he did a marvellous job, frankly. Because he managed to persuade them that one shouldn't focus on repercussions but on how to correct the situation going forward. So he had convinced them that the Commonwealth ought to play a role in getting an interim government put in place; in getting the Americans out and putting in a Commonwealth police force. And that of course was the decision of the Delhi meeting.

It was very much in the spirit of reconciliation, in that Ramphal brought along Tom Adams and he brought along John Compton and Eugenia Charles. I don't think he ever managed to bring along Eddie Seaga - who did not turn up at that meeting (CHOGM in Delhi 1983) incidentally because he knew what was going to happen. So Seaga didn't show up, but he sent Hugh Shearer who was his foreign minister at the time and a far more amiable and likeable man, than he was himself. But the point is that the Secretary General did manage to put the Commonwealth back on the path of reconciliation on this matter and did get them to agree to these several measures that would bring Grenada back to democracy with an elected government and with the removal of the Americans. That was the agreement. It didn't quite happen that way in the end because the Americans didn't leave; even when they were told that an election held with their troops on the ground was not going to be regarded as free and fair, they remained anyway. But in the end they did withdraw and there was an election; a new government was elected and democracy has prevailed in Grenada ever since.

So you know the Commonwealth did do very good work in helping the interim Grenadian Government which was appointed to manage the affairs of the place. At one point Ramphal was actively trying to get Alister McIntyre, who was a highly respected economist, was known worldwide and at the time was the Deputy Secretary General of UNCTAD but also Grenadian by birth, to head up that interim government. The Caribbean governments and others, because they knew McIntyre, were very much disposed to that idea. In the end, it didn't happen because McIntyre fell ill and couldn't take up the task. The Secretary General then turned to a man who was the Head of the Commonwealth Youth Programme in the Caribbean, and who was also a Grenadian to take up the post as the interim Head of Government. And that worked successfully, through the period in which it had to settle down and hold a free and fair election.

And while, as I said, the Americans were still on the ground when that election was held, I really don't think they influenced it in any way.

SO: So this seems to be again the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor, contributing to reconciliation and political accommodation?

RS: I think it was one of the finer moments frankly of the Commonwealth because if you were there in Delhi, when the African heads of government - Kaunda, Mugabe in particular, and Julius Nyerere - all of them very disturbed at this. Even Indira Gandhi as Chair: her remarks from the Chair were caustic when she spoke of this and though she did do a good job of chairing it, I think she did that job more objectively because Sonny Ramphal was at her right hand in guiding the meeting. I think it was one of the Commonwealth's finest moments because the bitterness, that vexation which permeated the first couple of days of that meeting, were in the course of it dissipated.

SO: How important was the Retreat in helping to ameliorate that tension?

RS: Oh, I think it was, but I think the work that the Secretary General had done even before the Retreat was far more important, and that was to get some of the key fellows to speak to one another and to try and appreciate the point of view of the Caribbean fellows who had participated in it. You see, while John Compton and Eugenia Charles sincerely believed that this was something that had to happen in the Caribbean's interest, one wasn't so sure about Seaga of Jamaica and fortunately he was not at the meeting. So there was no opportunity therefore for people to direct their anger at him. And as I said, he had sent this very amiable foreign minister who had been a former prime minister himself. Hugh Shearer was very, very well known to people and Shearer managed to talk his way through it.

SO: Yes, but benefitted from the very fact that he wasn't, as you say, Edward Seaga and so could help to deflect some of the animosity around the issue. How much then did the issue of Grenada overshadow the issue of South Africa at the Delhi CHOGM? I am very struck by the analogy of African leaders who are irate at the idea of American intervention when in fact, African leaders - particularly in Southern Africa - had been consistent and increasingly were pressing Britain within the Commonwealth, and also trying to encourage the United States, to take a much more active and interventionist stance against South Africa?

RS: I don't think it interfered with that thought process at all because they didn't see an analogy between the two. They didn't see how the situation of the two could compare. I mean, South Africa was a situation in which white people were ruling black people illegally. Grenada was a situation in which there was a coup and, remember, in those days that issue of non-interference in the internal affairs of states was a big thing. The one country that seemed to be not part of the thinking of non-interference was South Africa. South Africa had all of the emotionalism of race, oppression, and exploitation. So it harked back in the minds of Caribbean people to slavery in Africa itself; it was just not acceptable and Africa of course had had its own fair share of coups. I can't remember how many military governments might have been in office at the time then, but the point is that military governments were not as bad as governments that were exploiting and oppressing people. In South Africa, a minority government was oppressing a majority people.

SO: From 1984, the momentum gathered within the Commonwealth to press Britain to adopt a much more confrontational stance. What was your view point from London on the role of the Secretary General and the Commonwealth Secretariat? What were your own observations and involvement in the committees and discussions around that particular issue?

RS: The Secretariat did take up a very activist position on the issue. I think there were several reasons for that. Part of it was Ramphal's own passion about this matter as Secretary General, as a person. He had come out of a situation in which I think racism was abhorrent to him personally; the exploitation of people on the basis of race was just not on. And of course, there was also his own legal background and his international position. All of it cried out against what was happening in South Africa. And then of course he had a group of leaders in Africa who themselves were pretty strong on this. So there was no question that he didn't have a mandate. The Indian Government, Indira

Gandhi and after her, her son Rajiv, were all very firmly in the corner of the Africans on this.

We also had Bob Hawk from Australia and Brian Mulroney of Canada who, for whatever reasons of political interest to them, came on board on this. There was no question of the Secretary General's mandate from the overwhelming majority of Commonwealth members to take a very strong and activist position against South Africa and against apartheid. Ramphal did this in many ways, not only in the discussions which took place in London amongst Commonwealth Heads of Government, but also among Commonwealth High Commissioners. We had set up the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa, which was liaising with the anti-Apartheid Committee of the United Nations. I myself became an elected member, one of three, to liaise between that Commonwealth Committee and the UN Committee on apartheid propaganda which at that time was very convincing. You know the apartheid regime was very good at selling their story and one had to counter that at every level.

Of course, as you know, Ramphal as well as being very active, established the Eminent Persons Group, the first one to go into South Africa and to take evidence from people on the ground including the regime, on what could be done to bring an end to all of this. And the EPG was of course keen to see Nelson Mandela, which a couple of them did do while he was in prison. They produced a powerful report, *Mission to South Africa: The Eminent Persons Group Report 1986.* It became a best seller once it was published by Penguin and it did a great deal to alert people around the world to what was happening in South Africa in real terms. Not that we should have needed it because the television cameras were telling their story virtually every night - the brutal beatings, the killings of people and so on were right before your eyes. So I think by the time that the EPG report was produced, almost everybody was convinced that something had to happen, except Mrs Thatcher. It wasn't until the situation became untenable for the South African army itself because they were then faced by Angola and Mozambique on their borders being supported by the Cubans. At this point their own military capacity became doubtful, and something clearly had to happen.

SO: In your discussions within the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa, do you recall any awareness of the South African nuclear programme? The South African Government had embarked on nuclear weapons capability in the 1970s and by 1979, Pretoria had developed the technology for a 'home grown' atomic bomb. I know that the Anti-Apartheid Committee at the UN held a seminar in February 1979 to discuss this whole question. The overwhelming argument was that the greater danger the apartheid regime represented for international peace was precisely because it had acquired nuclear weapons. Does that chime any bells?

RS: No, I think we were aware of the suggestion but I don't recall it being a focus of our discussions. If South Africa possessed nuclear weapons capability, this would have been a great danger - a huge danger and a danger to more than just their neighbours. But I think the issue that continued to preoccupy people was to bring an end to apartheid.

SO: Were you aware at all of Mrs Thatcher's bombardment of letters to President PW Botha throughout her premiership, trying to encourage

the South African President to accelerate the very slow pace of reform which he had instituted from 1979/1980?

RS: No, we weren't aware of it. I have no doubt that it was occurring because what little I did learn about Margaret Thatcher during her stewardship as prime minister, is she would have wanted to accelerate that process of reform. I don't think Mrs Thatcher herself was a supporter of apartheid. I know people claim that her husband had business interests in South Africa and therefore would have wanted the system to carry on. But I never got the impression that she approved of the apartheid system at all. But she was caught in what she and the Americans thought, or their interests in that part of the world lay in keeping a regime in office that was friendly to them.

SO: Did you attend the Nassau CHOGM meeting in October 1985?

RS: You mean, when she said she'd given 'a tiny, weenie little bit'? Yes, I was there.

SO: Where did the idea of the EPG first come from? Do you recall?

RS: I think it would've been the Secretary General's idea. I don't recall it being anybody else's though, it's been a long time now and I think we must double-check that, whether it was Sonny's idea or whether he got it from somewhere else. But he had been setting up so many expert groups to look at various developments in the international community that I would be surprised if the idea didn't emerge with him. Whether it emerged with him or not I know he certainly picked the membership of the group. I thought it was a group that worked very well together in the end.

SO: It presented its report, as you say, to the London Special Conference which was convened in August 1986. As it became a best seller beforehand, it was out in the public domain before it was formally presented?

RS: Six months before.

SO: I would like to pick up on this later because, of course, you have been the Rapporteur for the second EPG group and helped that forward. At the same time for the 1986 EPG, there was a concurrent movement within the Commonwealth to boycott participation in the Edinburgh Games, to stay away precisely because of Britain's refusal to use sport as a way to press South Africa into accelerating political change. Was your government particularly active and involved in that particular angle of diplomacy?

RS: Well, the Gleneagles Agreement of 1977 had been done before. All of the governments of the Caribbean were very strong on resisting sporting links with South Africa. We actually had a rogue team of West Indian cricketers go to South Africa during that period and they were all banned from playing for the West Indies after that. I don't think any of them every played again for the West Indies once they'd gone to South Africa. Yes, I think the countries of the Caribbean were all very strong and it lingered on for sometime after that. I remember when Robin Jackman who was a South African had been picked for an English cricket team to come to play in the West Indies; both the governments of Guyana and Antigua objected to his inclusion in the team on

the basis of that South African connection and the Gleneagles Agreement. Although, to be truthful, the Gleneagles Agreement didn't speak of individuals and I think some countries did worm their way out of banning Jackman on the basis that he was an individual and not a team. So Jackman did come to the Caribbean, though he didn't play in Guyana.

SO: You made reference to Sir Sonny Ramphal when he was Secretary General convening special groups. South Africa was merely one issue of his political activism, leading the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor. His particular political agenda in the 1980s also included the issues of HIV/Aids, development and climate change. How much do you think that there's also the aspect of the Commonwealth as an innovator in diplomatic practice in Ramphal's convening special expert groups to report on increasingly important issues which are not simply in the realm of, should we say, contemporary political contention?

RS: There was an enormous amount of that. Again, it was my view that this represented the Commonwealth at its best because it was taking on international issues - some of them were full blown, some of them in their infancy such as climate change, and bringing together the best of Commonwealth brains to think about the issue and to suggest solutions that would apply not only to the Commonwealth, but to the world. I think that speaks to the thing that Ramphal always said, which is that the Commonwealth can't negotiate for the world, but it can help the world to negotiate. While you mentioned climate change and HIV/Aids, which I think was towards the end of his period in office; more spectacularly was the work that was done on trade and new international and economic order and so on prior to that. You know, this was long before the World Trade Organisation was formed, when we were still in the hands of GATT and people were very concerned about the changing international economic order.

One of the expert groups, he set up, for instance, that looked at the matter of trade and how small developing countries were being affected by it and tried to find a Commonwealth consensus, was chaired by Sir Alec Cairncross of the United Kingdom. It included an Indian economist who was vital to that team and that man today is the prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh. So you know it was that kind of expertise that Ramphal was bringing together and producing reports that the Commonwealth could adopt but later take on to other places - as they did with this one in the UN system. There were many of those.

If you go back and look at the records of that period, from 1975 to 1990 the use of Commonwealth brain power to look at international issues that were impacting on mankind in one shape or another, pioneering work in some instances, was really quite remarkable. It was something to which I hope the Commonwealth will return frankly, because in the last few years we've not seen the Commonwealth playing that kind of dynamic role.

SO: How was the membership of these special groups selected? You emphasise that it was the best of Commonwealth brains, but was this the particular political approach of the Secretary General and his team at the Commonwealth Secretariat, or were these solicited recommendations from governments? How were the experts chosen?

RS: I'm not sure how he did it and I think it would be an interesting question to raise with him. But I would suspect, knowing how he operated, that even if Ramphal had come upon people in the countries that he thought were outstanding, he would have run it by some people in the government - not that he would have taken a veto from them but he would have run by governments whom they would recommend for participation in this. But I think ultimately he and the Secretariat team would have used their own resources to find the best people they could from the countries and then clear it with the governments. 'The other way round' is what I'm saying, basically.

SO: You've made reference to the particular personal characteristics of Sir Sonny Ramphal as a passionate advocate, his charisma, his legal background, his internationalist outlook. How important do you think, at this particular time, was the persona of the Secretary General as well as his ability to exploit the authority of his office?

RS: I think very important. I think the Secretary General had to be a man that would command the respect of the heads of government. If the Secretary General were a mere Secretary, then I don't think he would have been able to do any of these things frankly. The initiative would have had to come from governments and they would have had to drive what was going forward if they had had a supine Secretary General. The fact that they had a Secretary General whom they knew, whom they respected, who worked and had been tested, I think, was important because they could trust him. And they could rely on him. Of course he angered a number of them, such as former prime minister of New Zealand, Robert Muldoon. Robert Muldoon once got so angry about Sonny's activist role that he said "You must remember the Secretary General's role is to take notes!" [laughter], Well, I think that was the reaction of most people: they laughed! But the point is that he did anger people and I think Mrs Thatcher was on more than one occasion discomforted by the fact that he had such an activist position.

SO: I know Lord Carrington was severely disapproving.

RS: Carrington was particularly caustic. He said he would swim the Atlantic Ocean twice to stop Sonny becoming the Secretary-General of the UN when his name was posed as a possibility. And Carrington's thing was simply because he wanted his own way on Zimbabwe; he wanted to foist a deal on people that was going to have repercussions down the road. And so Ramphal wasn't going to have any of that. He was an international lawyer, with an expert view on the constitutions as well having drafted a few himself. So I think he was a real nemesis for the British Government.

SO: But Ramphal had also held political office.

RS: He had been a politician of sorts because I think he will argue that while he was Minister of Foreign Affairs, an Attorney General and Minister of Justice, he wasn't an activist politician in the domestic sense.

SO: Did he see himself as more of a technocrat?

RS: He wasn't a member of a political party, no. He didn't campaign and he didn't talk on political meetings and so on. He was an international politician, that's true.

SO: You also made reference to his team. The Commonwealth Secretariat at that particular time was smaller but what was your view of the calibre of its staff?

RS: Well, I don't know that it was smaller! I think that the team expanded considerably under Sonny from what he inherited from Arnold Smith. But then of course it had taken on a larger mandate and many more tasks than it had under Smith. But the calibre of the staff was unquestionably good. And you know, here is a thing: Ramphal recognised that he came from a developing country. It was therefore necessary, in his view - and I think it was demonstrated in the way he did it - to have representatives of the developed countries as part of his team, particularly those who paid 70% of the cost of running the show. So he always had a Deputy Secretary General from Britain and he always made sure that the mandarin the British sent him wasn't simply somebody foisted on him, but somebody with good Commonwealth connections and who believed in the Commonwealth. But it was also important that this person should be a good envoy to Whitehall, and from Whitehall back to Marlborough House. And so he had people like Sir Peter Marshall who were outstanding Commonwealth people in themselves and yet they had this connection to Britain; this was a very important connection because when Ramphal needed a messenger to deliver a message that was tough, he had good guys to do it.

He also always had a Canadian. Almost from the beginning, there was always a Canadian in charge of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, for instance. And there was always an Australian in the International Affairs Division.

SO: Why?

RS: Well, because he figured balance was important. But it went further than this. Ramphal was from a developing country and heading the show. He had an Indian Assistant Secretary General in Moni Malhortra. He had an African Deputy Secretary in Emeka Anyaoku. It was therefore necessary to ensure that he also had around him and as part of the team good Commonwealth people from the developed Commonwealth as well. Because they brought a perspective to the show that the others didn't have, but they also could take back the consensus message to their own governments which was critical if you wanted to carry the Commonwealth along. There was no way in which you could do it by isolating these people. Everybody had to be involved and particularly because - even though they didn't like what the Commonwealth was doing in some instances - these people were paying the greater percentage of the bills: Australia, Britain and Canada.

SO: So Ramphal needed a messenger that the people were going to listen to, not shoot?

RS: Yes, exactly. So it was very critical to have those. You look at the Secretariat today and you don't see that same kind of mix. The team isn't the same. I think that's a mistake. In my own view.

SO: So it's a question of the calibre of the team, but also the networking that the team can provide also has changed over time?

RS: Yes, and you cannot neglect the fact that three countries pay 70% of the budget. I mean, that's a reality; I'm not saying they should control the show, but they should at least be able to present their point of view in a way which that they can be assured it will be taken on board.

SO: Towards the latter part of the 1980s, in addition to the rising challenge of South Africa and its transition to black majority rule, there were other particular points of tension, such as flash points around Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth because of the two coups in 1987, and also the question of Pakistan's membership of the Commonwealth. How decisive do you remember these particular issues as being, or did they merely pale into insignificance because of the prime importance of South Africa?

RS: I don't think Pakistan's re-entry was decisive at all. Again, Sonny Ramphal had met Benazir Bhutto at a conference at Oxford University when they were debating whether Pakistan should re-enter the Commonwealth or not. He debated that it should, she debated that it shouldn't. I don't remember which side won the debate. But in any event, in the end she certainly was for it. Rajiv Gandhi had come into office, and he was far more willing to accept Pakistan back in the Commonwealth if it wanted to come in. Benazir Bhutto demonstrated an interest in doing so and when she became prime minister again Ramphal engineered the re-entry of Pakistan, recognising that the only country that would have objected with any seriousness would have been India. But he cleared that with Rajiv Gandhi. I don't remember that being a decisive period at all. I think if anything people were happy that we had a country like Pakistan that had withdrawn from the Commonwealth itself but had decided to come back in. Representing the large numbers of people that it did and with the possibility that its return to the Commonwealth would improve relations with India, I think this was a moment of celebration.

SO: Was India's position particularly decisive in Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth? Just given the size of the Indian community in the country?

RS: Yes, I think it would have been. But in any event the Commonwealth had already taken up the position that the overthrow of governments was not acceptable. So whether India had had a position on it or not, I think Fiji disqualified itself by the very act that it had violated the accepted principles of the Commonwealth.. So there was no question that Fiji could remain.

SO: By 1987 you had left London for the first time and returned again in 1996, after a stint in the private sector. What was your own view of the changes within the Commonwealth in that time? How did you feel that as an organisation it was starting to shift direction and looking for a new role following the Harare Declaration of 1991? In what ways were there changes with the advent of a new Secretary General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku?

RS: It's greatest achievement in my view was to get the developing countries of the Commonwealth to understand that constitutional overthrows of government is not going to be an acceptable thing; that they had to move in the direction of democracy; that the Commonwealth had to actually stand up for the values that it said it had. And I think the Harare Declaration was a remarkable achievement. It must have been very difficult to put it through and

I admire the fact that he (Emeka Anyaoku) was able to do that. I think the creation of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group in 1995 was also a significant development. Emeka was lucky in that sense that Ken Saro-Wiwa was assassinated during the Auckland CHOGM meeting. President Mandela of South Africa was incensed by it and demanded that something be done. And it is out of this that the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group was formed. It's role as you will recall was to bring to book those governments that violated the principles for which the Commonwealth said it stood. All of that was a great achievement. As I said, Emeka was lucky that he had Mandela because if it weren't for Mandela with his stature and demanding it happen, I don't think it might have got through, despite the fact that Ken Sara-Wiwa was assassinated.

SO: Please could you comment on Chief Emeka as Secretary General, in terms of his particular persona and his use of the authority of office? Obviously he had been a long term diplomat at the Commonwealth Secretariat dating back to 1966. He'd been Deputy Secretary General, paralleling Sonny Ramphal's own occupation of office. But how was he different, and in what ways, from Sonny Ramphal as SG?

RS: I think he was different in two ways. Ramphal was a very amiable and very likeable man and very charismatic, as well as very bright - and those are characteristics you couldn't miss, within two seconds in a room with him. Emeka was a diplomat, schooled and cautious and not open, altogether much more careful.

SO: Highly discreet though?

RS: Yes, highly discreet, but more than that: highly cautious. So I don't think he would've been as adventurous as Ramphal. He wouldn't have pushed forward as Ramphal did, and he certainly wouldn't have done it unless he knew he had enormous support to do it; but he was nonetheless effective. I think we saw the effectiveness in principally the Harare Declaration but also in the creation of CMAG. You know when this idea we had - that we should establish a Commissioner for Democracy for Human Law and Human Rights in the second EPG group - we weren't reinventing the wheel. This is an idea which had been put to Commonwealth conferences previously and been rejected. And we knew that, even as we were suggesting it. We were just hoping that it was an idea whose time had finally come, given the state of the world and the fact that we'd had the 'Arab Spring' in the spring of the very year that we were putting a report forward. Unfortunately it wasn't to be. But I mentioned it only to say that you know Emeka would have had considerable resistance to things like the Harare principles. The fact that he got it through was an enormous tribute to him.

SO: Do you know anything of the diplomacy behind this, persuading various African leaders to step down to introduce multi-party democracy such as the increasing moves in Kenya under President Daniel Arap Moi? There were 29 Commonwealth observer groups who were monitoring elections in the 1990s.

RS: I have to say that during that period I was not following closely the Commonwealth's affairs, so I couldn't really remark on what Emeka was doing, diplomatically with others. When I came back here it was in his final

two years as Secretary General and by then I think he had done most of what he had to do.

SO: You mentioned you were appointed as Ambassador to the WTO in 1997. Was the Commonwealth a particular diplomatic actor in that organisation?

RS: No. And I think it should be and I think the fact that it is not is a sadness, both for the Commonwealth and for the world. One of the things that we suggested for instance in the EPG report, is that a Commonwealth trade ministers meeting ought to be convened. There has never been a formal meeting of Commonwealth trade ministers in the history of the Commonwealth. Yet the Commonwealth Heads of Government have made various declarations on trade, but there has been no effective or meaningful follow up. We've had the round of negotiations going on now at the WTO for almost a decade. It has been stalled and going nowhere and nobody is able to break the logjam. The EPG was of the view that if the Commonwealth could establish an expert group - again the best brains on trade from around the Commonwealth - to sit down and produce a report that could look at what the obstacles are, how the log jam could be broken and how you could devise some system of making the WTO more effective than it is for all its constituent parts. This report could go to a meeting of Commonwealth trade ministers; they don't have to do anything more than arrive at a consensus on what should happen and take that forward into the World Trade Organisation negotiations. It may in fact help.

The Commonwealth is uniquely placed to do that. It has countries in the G20: five countries that are in the G20 so the Commonwealth makes up a quarter of the G20. It has countries in the OECD, countries that are in the G7, a country that is in NAFTA, countries that are in the Organisation of American States and the African Union, in ASEAN. You name it, we've got a country there! You identify any multinational agency, the Commonwealth is there. They represent big countries, small countries, little islands, atolls. If they could reach a consensus then surely that consensus can be saleable in the world community. It certainly would have the weight of an awful lot of humanity behind it. That didn't go anywhere either in the recommendations we put forward.

SO: Why not?

RS: Yes I know, I puzzle over it myself. I don't know frankly why it didn't go anywhere. I see that the foreign ministers who met in New York said that they agreed with the recommendations subject to the availability of resources. What the hell that means I don't know. Because there is nothing wrong with taking a chunk of money out of some programme that's going nowhere right now and putting it into an expert group, because that would be the only cost. That, and the convening of a meeting. So why it hasn't gone anywhere, I don't know. The point is it hasn't gone anywhere, and it is a sadness because it is a unique contribution that the Commonwealth could make at this point and they're not doing it.

SO: So you haven't heard of any informal briefings or lack of informal briefings, so that you have no sense of the politics behind the resistance to this idea? You are suggesting it is simply inertia? A lack of

political investment and interest in this, which is necessary from governments?

RS: Lack of leadership. Let me put it to you this way. If the Secretary General were interested in this, seriously interested, I would have thought he would have put it on the agenda in a serious way and lobbied governments to pursue it. I am equally perplexed about the treatment of another suggestion that the EPG made: that there should be an expert group to look at the countries now most affected by global warming and climate change. The countries that are imperilled by it, immediately imperilled. We had suggested that an expert group should be set up to identify what countries those are; what are their immediate needs for adaptation; how serious the problem is and how serious will it become in time frames; what it would cost to start to put the process of adaptation in place and where would the money come from. That's not happened either and for the life of me I don't understand why not. And for the life of me, I don't understand why the countries that are most effected didn't argue for it.

SO: Yes, those who have the greatest interest in this?

RS: That is the biggest puzzle of my mind. I can understand why others might say, 'Well you know, we've got other bigger fish to fry.' But why would the countries that are most affected by this not stand up to fight? I've no idea. Maybe something is happening in the world that I'm not aware of in this matter - that can address it.

SO: There's no diplomatic push that you know of from Kiribati, from the Bahamas, from Bangladesh, from the Maldives - as you say the most imperilled countries trying to build up a head of steam, lobbying behind the scenes trying to establish some sort of leadership on this particular issue?

RS: Not that I'm aware of. Not in the Commonwealth. I don't know if they're doing it somewhere else, but they're not doing it in the Commonwealth.

SO: Sounds to me as if they're missing a trick there.

RS: But it makes me wonder why. The organisation (The Commonwealth Secretariat) is going through a traumatic period. I understand that governments are not going to put any more money into it. Some governments have said they will put money into it if they see performance. The Secretariat argues that it can't perform unless it has the money, so it's a vicious circle. But you know I come from a small place and because I come from a small place, I know it is possible to do big things with little - if you have the resolve to do it. So I'm not entirely convinced that you need vast resources to do things. I think what you do when you have little resources is that you decide on a priority, and you focus on those priorities and you forget the rest. Because if you can produce on the priorities, the kinds of outcomes people cannot resist because they are so successful, then they may invest more to allow you to do other things. But at the moment we're caught in a situation in which the circular argument prevails.

SO: Within the Commonwealth as a heterogeneous organisation which is multi ethnic, and multi centred, but which puts itself forward as a values based organisation, you are identifying here a particular agenda of

small states and the possibility of using the Commonwealth platform to enhance their particular clout in the International community: specifically, to use its leverage and its diplomatic forum. Do you think there has been, though, a relative success in terms of the Commonwealth enhancing the voice of the small states?

RS: I think so. It has been. There is no question about that, but you know we can't live on the past. There used to be a Ministerial Group on Small States that met regularly before CHOGMs to look at the particular issues of small states. That disappeared some years ago. At Perth - I gather that because of the insistence the EPG had put on it - they (Heads of Government) decided to re-establish the ministerial group; whether they ever met or have done anything since then, I don't know. It's something I must look up myself. But the point is that in the Commonwealth Secretariat, while they will tell you that small states permeate all of their work, there is only one person assigned to small states. One! But they will tell you that small states are probably most of their work so that even though they don't have a small states person in Health, a small states person in Education, etc., that might be true. But the reality is that if small states are important, and they should be because they are 36 members of the 54 Nation Commonwealth - there really ought to be a more specific agenda for small states.

And let me put it this way. I don't think at any time since these countries started becoming independent in the mid 1960s, has there been a more terrible or testing time for small states than now. And it is on a variety of issues. Debt, particularly; erosion of their terms of trade, which is giving them bigger and bigger deficits, so they've got debt and they got bad terms of trade. They've got global warming; you have hurricanes that are becoming more intense and more frequent, causing more and more damage every year. But forget the hurricanes; global warming itself is bringing sea level rise and that is bringing erosion of beaches and habitats and tourism facilities and so on. And then on top of that you've got things like food security. Where you've got islands, food isn't secure. You've got the transactional costs of things which are getting higher. Yet we have a World Trade Organisation that treats a Small State like St Kitts, which has 50,000 people in the Caribbean, in exactly the same way that it treats India, or Japan, or the United States of America. Something has got to be wrong with that kind of thinking.

We've got the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that says these are middle income countries and therefore should not get concessional financing. Yet without concessional financing, how are these states to cope? In a sense they're being penalised for doing well. But that wellness is not going to continue. Right now, as you and I speak, the European Union is threatening to introduce a differentiated approach to aid. They're saying that middle income countries will no longer be a beneficiary of European aid, except for certain thematic programmes.

They've applied that already to a number of countries and it's going to drift shortly into the European Development Fund (EDF) under which African, Caribbean and Pacific countries in the Commonwealth get aid. When the migration of that concept reaches the EDF, many of the middle income countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific will not get European aid. So you've got debt, aid investment, trade, climate change, no access to conditional financing, all facing these countries at this time. You have to ask yourself, 'Whose idea is that?' If this case isn't being argued in the

Commonwealth effectively and forcefully and being argued in the international community by the Commonwealth on their behalf, who's doing it?

SO: Sir Ron, this ties back very closely into your work on the EPG which was set up at the CHOGM at Port of Spain in 2009. How were your colleagues selected to join this particular EPG?

RS: I think the Secretary General did the choosing. I know in my case I was arrived at out of a discussion within the Secretariat itself on who would be a good person from a Small State to be on the group. And I suspect it was because I had written and published on small states; but more than that as I had been High Commissioner in London twice and I was at the World Trade Organisation. I had a wide experience of what small states went through, so they chose me. I think that was generally how it happened. The Secretariat decided on who the people would be. They might have, in the case of Britain, asked Britain to recommend somebody.

SO: Which is why Malcolm Rifkind was selected, as a former Foreign Secretary and 'man of the Commonwealth'?

RS: Yes.

SO: So each was a politician of particular political standing, a consensual politician with particular skills that they brought to the EPG group discussion? You presented your report to the CHOGM Perth. Did you circulate it beforehand? I made reference to the first 1986 EPG report on South Africa being circulated beforehand.

RS: No, it wasn't circulated beforehand, even though in the letter of transmittal to the Secretary General, the EPG members had made it very clear under the hand of our Chairman, Tun Abdullah Badawi, the former prime minister of Malaysia, that we wanted the report to be distributed beforehand to the public. It wasn't. We were told by the Secretariat that the Secretary General had conveyed the request to the chairman in office who was at the time the prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Kamla Persad Bissessar. She herself had only come to office recently, had no experience of the Commonwealth as a head of government, had never attended a Commonwealth meeting, had a High Commissioner in London who was only recently appointed himself and again had had very little experience of the Commonwealth. But we were told that the government of Trinidad and Tobago had decided that the report should not be issued beforehand. And therefore the Secretariat did not issue it beforehand.

The incoming chair in office, the prime minister of Australia Julia Gillard did say that if it was within her remit she would have released it, but that she respected the decision of her predecessor in not releasing it.

SO: Was the report presented to the Heads of Government at Perth, or what route did it take beforehand?

RS: It went to governments in July. All the governments had that report in July 2011. So it was in the hands of High Commissioners in London and one assumes in the hands of all the governments in July. And they had, August, September, three months in which to think about it.

SO: What was the first venue that discussed the EPG report?

RS: The Commonwealth High Commissioners in London.

SO: And then at Perth, was it Heads of Government or was it the foreign ministers?

RS: Foreign ministers discussed it which was really quite a remarkable thing. You know in the way in which Commonwealth meetings were held; it was only under Don McKinnon who was a foreign minister himself that Foreign Ministers started meeting at CHOGMs. This never used to happen before. It never happened under Smith, never happened under Ramphal, who also was a foreign minister incidentally. It didn't happen under Emeka Anyaoku. It started under Don McKinnon. The foreign ministers met and looked at the agenda for the Commonwealth, for Heads of Government. And I think that's a big mistake.

SO: Did that also match the contraction of time devoted to CHOGM meetings, which obviously limits discussion?

RS: Yes it does. It does contract it, because if the Heads think their foreign ministers are looking at issues, they don't have to trouble themselves with them. I don't know why they (foreign ministers) felt they had to look at the EPG report because the EPG report was commissioned by Heads of, not by foreign ministers, and it was written <u>for</u> Heads of Government. There are parts of that report in which we talk about 'you' being the Heads of Government because we were responding to 'them' directly.

Now the Foreign Ministers Meeting in Perth as far as I was concerned was an absolute disaster. Because we had a meeting of foreign ministers that focused on only two issues: the Charter and the recommendation on the Commissioner for Democracy and Human Rights. All of the two sessions that they had were devoted to those two issues only. It was only when the report went to Heads of Government and said what they'd decided on the Charter, what they'd decided on the Commissioner, and said that they'd put the other 104 recommendations in abeyance for a meeting they were going to have in New York during the course of 2012, that Heads of Government said 'No, this is not acceptable. We want to hear what you think about this thing. Reconvene and look at it.' So they had to reconvene at midnight on the first day of the Heads of Government meeting – the actual Heads of Government meeting - to look at it.

Strangely enough one of the recommendations that was rejected concerned a direct mandate to the EPG – to recommend ways in which ministerial meetings could be improved. Now we sat down and looked at how meetings were held in the past; how long their agendas were; what kind of communiques were issued; how much time was devoted; the way in which they were conducted. And we suggested that Ministers ought to really just focus on a handful of issues that were of the moment, not on things all over the place, and that were of particular concern to the Commonwealth; and that they should, as far as possible, have those discussions amongst themselves. And their communiques ought to be brief and only address the issues that they actually discussed, not things that they hadn't. We said the same thing of Commonwealth Head of Governments meetings and we suggested that the Retreat should be reintroduced as a serious proposition. And if they talked

about less things, they could focus more on things that were meaningful, and the communique could be shorter and more meaningful, more impactful on the lives of people. Well, the foreign ministers rejected those out of hand.

SO: There was no discussion about the importance of 'back to basics', of the importance of informality of small group discussion?

RS: The only thing they said was that we were micro-managing them.

SO: No one spoke up to this?

RS: Not a soul. And so that was the end of that. Rejected.

SO: Has there ever been any informal comeback to you from various quarters within the Commonwealth saying 'This is a very important point to reintroduce the informality of private discussion', and as you say, sharing of concerns, issues of the moment and that you shouldn't have grand standing and great rhetorical statements?

RS: No, it's never come back to me personally. The only thing that's happened is that since the November meeting the Secretary General did write to the EPG to tell us how the recommendations were being treated, but only in a very general way.

SO: You also had a determined approach of trying to energise grass root attitudes towards the Commonwealth in stimulating national discussion on the Charter. Where was the resistance to that idea?

RS: Let me back this up and tell you how this whole idea of a charter started. It became fashionable after we'd done the report, and in fact even before the report was done, because we took a conscious decision that we would be transparent in everything we did. So at the end of every one of our meetings we put out a statement saying this is what we discussed, this is the direction which we were going; and very early in those discussions we indicated that a charter was in our thinking. Now as soon as we said there was a charter in our thinking, we recognised that there was governmental resistance to the idea. There was a great deal of support from the civil society organisations but governmental resistance. The reason for it came out later. The idea of a charter, some of them said, was an imperialist notion. And it came from Britain and Australia and Canada who wanted to impose this charter on the rest of the Commonwealth. I'm serious! This is what was being said.

The truth of the matter is the person who suggested that we should have a charter was our Chairman, Tun Abdullah Badawi, the former prime minister of Malaysia. That's where the idea originated. And why did it originate with him? He was prime minister of Malaysia when ASEAN adopted a charter, very much a Malaysian idea. And he saw the success of that charter in the ASEAN complex and therefore felt it was something that the Commonwealth could also adopt. Now he wanted more than just a charter that had a declaration of various things. He wanted a kind of organisational charter, something that defined the role of the Secretariat, defined the role of the Secretary General - you know went into that kind of detail, which is what I think the ASEAN charter does. There were some of us there, me included, who didn't think this was a good idea at all. The reason I didn't think it was a good idea - and as I said to Tun Abdullah Badawi for whom I have the utmost respect and regard

both as a friend and as a leader – is the difference between ASEAN and the Commonwealth. ASEAN is a treaty organisation. So it has a legal personality and therefore should have a charter, should have something that guides it as a treaty organisation. The Commonwealth is not. It's a voluntary organisation of people who have decided they will remain in this club because they want to. And that these are the values that they hold this club to be responsible for. So I said to Tun Abdullah Badawi, a charter would be meaningless to the Commonwealth. Even if you had a Commonwealth charter binding on no one, it's not a treaty organisation and can't be legally enforced, so why have it?

Well, there were people who would say 'Yes, you know we should have the charter. At least what we could do with it is that we could bring together all of the declarations that the Commonwealth has made and the things that the Commonwealth says it stands for. Starting from the Singapore Declaration of 1971 and bringing it all the way up to the affirmation of Trinidad and Tobago in 2009, into a single document so that there would be this thing that you could go to for all Commonwealth acts.' Again I argued that in my view this was unnecessary as it brought no added value to the Commonwealth. I agreed to the charter on one condition only and that was that it would become a matter of consultation in each Commonwealth country. I saw two values being added to the Commonwealth by this process.

1. God knows that the Commonwealth is little enough known about in these Commonwealth countries and less and less known about by young people in Commonwealth countries. If the Commonwealth were to have any resurgence of awareness of knowledge in these countries, a good way to do it would've been to discuss, in town hall meetings, in civil society groups, in youth groups, in Parliament and everywhere in each of these 54 countries, the Commonwealth and the charter. What would you like to see in a charter? What do you know about the Commonwealth that you would like to see reflected in this charter? That would at least create an awareness.

2. If all of these ideas were then distilled into a group of people, in the Commonwealth to come up with a charter, it at least and at last would be a people's charter: something that people actually said we want, rather than something that a group of people sit down, as happened with all of these other declarations, which have all emerged out of the Commonwealth Secretariat in one way or another. So it's the Commonwealth Secretariat officials' writing what the values are. People would be saying what their values are and, for me, that would have been great value added. It still would not have been binding legally on anybody.

SO: But it's an affirmation of values.

RS: Exactly. It would've been something that at least the people of the Commonwealth said they stand for. Well, that is not going to happen. We're going to have a 27 paragraph charter that was drafted by Commonwealth Secretariat officials and that have been approved by High Commissions here and foreign ministers in New York and that Heads of Government will ratify and hand to the Queen as a charter in March 2013. For me it is a great disappointment because it has not added any value to the Commonwealth.

SO: Who else opposed the idea of a charter within the EPG? You said that Tun Abdullah Badawi had put it forward because of the ASEAN

precedent, but what was the balance within the EPG about something as important and as foundational as trying to give constitutional frameworks to the Commonwealth?

RS: There were some people in the EPG who had no view on it one way or the other. Michael Kirby from Australia actually did produce a draft which we appended to our report at the end that suggested that it was only a draft and a draft for discussion. That's what we said. Here's a draft that you could take, you need something to start the discussion. Here is a draft done by a good legal mind and all that he has done is taken your own declarations and strung it together into something. And Michael did a very good job of that, I have to say. He worked very hard at it and you know a few of us sat down and refined it as best we could. Hugh Segal and I, in particular made suggestions about how we could improve and refine that thing that Michael produced. But at the end of the day all that we said it was, was a draft and we made it clear. Here is a draft from one of our members that we're suggesting you could use as a basis for discussion.

What's emerged is not ideal. We're not serving the Commonwealth well in the end.

SO: The Commonwealth itself is also changing because it's expanding. Has this been a contentious issue within its existing members?

RS: I must tell you that the majority of people in the EPG didn't want to see any further expansion of the Commonwealth, from non-English speaking countries. We're not happy about the fact that non-English speaking countries with a culture completely different from the Commonwealth had been introduced into the Commonwealth. I am one of those frankly. Not that I have anything against Cameroon and the ones that have come into the Commonwealth.

SO: Such as Rwanda, and Mozambique.

RS: I don't have anything against them. All I'm saying is that it's changed the character of the relationship. And if the Commonwealth continues to do this, it is not going to be the same organisation. It might just as well become just another international body. We were incidentally much more keen on Ireland coming back into the Commonwealth.

SO: Ireland left in 1949.

RS: Yes, and in fact we had actually drafted text in the report that laid out the argument for why Ireland should be encouraged to. If you wish, I will send you the draft of that so you have it.

SO: Please.

RS: We actually drafted a text in which we said this, but it was taken out of our report on the very last day of our meeting.

SO: Why?

RS: Well, there was a feeling by some members - there may have been justification for it - that Ireland had to reach a decision about re-entering the

Commonwealth on its own. That if the text was included, if the idea was seen to be foisted upon them or pushed upon them, then they may resist it. And then of course some education needed to occur in Ireland about Commonwealth membership before the idea was mooted at the level at which we would've been mooting it and in an EPG report. I suspect that had it been included in the report, it would've been the headline story.

SO: Indeed! How much has this been a fringe issue, lurking in the wings during your involvement in the Commonwealth, or has it just gradually gathered momentum since the 90s that the reintroduction of Ireland within the Commonwealth would be a force for support for human rights, support for democracy, a support for the smaller states which have achieved extraordinary developmental progress?

RS: I don't think that was their thinking. Let me tell you what the thinking was. It was completely different. The thinking about Ireland is that as far as we were concerned it shouldn't have left in the first place. It left because it thought that Republican status would be incompatible with Commonwealth membership - and the fact that, of course, there was animosity toward the British Monarchy at the time. But that animosity I think over time has waned. The Queen's own visit to Ireland which was hugely successful, demonstrated that the fact that the Queen as the Head of the Commonwealth, should no longer be an issue. Being a member of the Commonwealth in no way infringes upon Ireland's sovereignty and its right to do precisely what it wishes to do as a nation. But its connections with the Commonwealth countries are centuries old and are still maintained today, even though Ireland is not a member of the Commonwealth. Ireland remains an English speaking country, the only one apart from England in Europe that shares all of these things that with other Commonwealth countries that we regard as values and traditions, and there's every reason why it should be a member of the Commonwealth.

So we wanted to encourage it on that basis, though as you say its membership would have brought another developed country into the organisation, another country that's part of the OECD, another country that's part of the European Union and therefore would've been able to reflect the views of other Commonwealth countries that are not in those organisations in an effective way. So there were genuine benefits to be gained from Ireland's membership and benefits to be gained for Ireland, too, because its diplomacy in these countries would then become a very cheap form of diplomacy if it had contact with all of the Commonwealth countries without having to establish embassies in every one of them. It could attend Commonwealth High Commissioners meetings here; it could go to Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings. Its ministers would go to Commonwealth ministerial meetings. So you know its diplomacy for Irish causes would have been spread as well. It was a no-brainer that this was a good thing.

SO: Thinking of two other former Commonwealth countries that are either suspended or have withdrawn voluntarily: Zimbabwe and Fiji: what is your knowledge of the extent to which these two issues have been contentious within the private diplomacy of the Commonwealth?

RS: I don't think they have been. I think people would like to see them both back in. There is of course some element of contention over Zimbabwe: but nobody chased Zimbabwe, Mugabe took it out. You know on the day that he decided he was withdrawing, efforts were being made by serious people,

Obasanjo of Nigeria, PJ Patterson of Jamaica, Mbeki of South Africa: these three men sat down as a representative group of the Commonwealth to see if they could talk Mugabe into not pursuing some of the policies that he was implementing, that were inimical to his own interests, to Zimbabwe's interests and to the interests of the Commonwealth, and said to him 'You want these things and you know we can find an accommodation, we can find ways of helping you.' Mugabe wasn't interested and he withdrew. People were sympathetic to the point he was making - that the land was owned by a minority group of white people, the British and American Governments had not met their commitment to him to finance the purchasing of that land and therefore he was left with the problem, but it couldn't continue. People were sympathetic to that issue. But the way in which he set about doing it was simply not acceptable. And unfortunately Mugabe had gone too far in what he was doing to retreat from it and he regarded anything the Commonwealth was going to do at that point as interference.

Now I'm sure that there is sympathy for his position in Africa, but it couldn't stand and in the end it was his decision to withdraw. Now what he's done since then in terms of the treatment of his own people has really become quite unacceptable. His soldiers raping women and brutalising children and so on as part of a tactic and a strategy, I think it goes beyond the pale at that point.

SO: Has there been to your knowledge any private diplomacy by the Commonwealth, by the Secretary General, to try to ameliorate the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe? To support constitution building, and to try to step forward to support reconfiguring the electoral roll? To encourage Mugabe/ZANU (PF) and also MDC to establish an acceptable process between them for renewed elections?

RS: Under McKinnon nothing happened, because McKinnon took the view that Zimbabwe is no longer a member of the Commonwealth and therefore he had no responsibility. That was clear and simple. To the extent that the present Secretary General has been involved, I have no idea. I know that he would because he's indicated that he would if he had the opportunity, so he is not against that idea. And I think he's indicated quite clearly to Fiji in very clear terms and publically that the Commonwealth remains ready to help them to return to constitutional rule. So I assume that through talking to other prime ministers in the area, Heads of Government in the area, that message will have gone to Bainimarama directly from the Secretary General. He has made no declaration on that, and I am sure that if he had the opportunity to send similar messages to Mugabe he would do it, because that's part of what he's doing in Fiji. There is no reason why he shouldn't do it in Zimbabwe.

SO: While we're talking about the comparative approach of Don McKinnon and Kamalesh Sharma in addressing particular issues, what's your view of the particular persona and authority of office while they were Secretary General? You've talked about how Sonny Ramphal had particular characteristics which he drew upon and exploited - the authority of office, his own energy and vision of what was the point of the Secretary Generalship. You said Emeka adopted a rather different, more cautious stance. But what's your view of those two Secretaries General, and their contribution to Commonwealth diplomacy?

RS: I'll tell you where McKinnon was of tremendous importance. He was from New Zealand, and foreign minister of that country. New Zealand is a member of the OECD, and during his stewardship of the Secretariat, small states in the Commonwealth, in the Pacific and in the Caribbean had a serious problem with the OECD, over what they call harmful tax competition and their efforts to sanction countries that had offshore financial institutions. The OECD had tagged almost all of them as tax havens but they'd also accused them under the Financial Action Task Force of facilitating money laundering. These were not tags that were correct in every instance. And even if they were correct in some instances, they were correctable. In the effort to engage the OECD in these matters Don McKinnon was extremely useful and was useful because he was a foreign minister in New Zealand and therefore had direct access to people in Australia and that kind of thing; and to the Director General of the OECD who was a Canadian at the time. And an Australian was the Ambassador who'd chaired the Committee that had oversight on this matter.

So McKinnon was very helpful in getting the OECD to understand that there was a perspective of this that they had to take into account. He actually commissioned work by the Secretariat on this whole matter of the OECD and harmful tax competition that helped to address some of the worries of the OECD, but also some of the negotiating positions of the other countries. So I think he was very helpful in that area, and if I were to mark him for something that was outstanding in his stewardship, I would say that was it. I think the benefit he brought to the Secretary Generalship is that he did have access to the OECD countries as one of them, even while he was arguing for other members of the Commonwealth and that was good value.

SO: What of the current Secretary General who has a different career background as a long serving Indian diplomat? You made reference to Don McKinnon having been foreign minister of New Zealand. How much do you think that there's also in Sharma's case, the question of the culture of the nationality of the SG which comes subtly into play in how people address or use the office?

RS: I think everybody is a creature of their training and their background and their culture. And I think Kamalesh Sharma is certainly an example of that. He is not a flamboyant character, in the Sonny Ramphal frame. He doesn't have the experience of Africa that Emeka Anyaoku did, and Emeka did have a reach to Caribbean countries as well. At the time because he'd been there so long, Emeka had begun to understand the nature of small states, also the region of the Pacific. And people respected him. McKinnon also had a reach in small states because of course New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific was critical. He was foreign minister there, he knew the story. But before he became Secretary General, just a couple of years before that, he was a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Committee on Small States and chaired that meeting after the meeting held in New Zealand.

When we had set up a group of ministers from the Commonwealth to advocate small states' issues in the World Bank, Don McKinnon joined that group and he joined it with people like Owen Arthur who was then prime minister of Barbados. And they recognised him as being a champion for Small States. When his election came up, he had small states' support, completely. There was no question that he was a shoe-in. And McKinnon was faithful to the small states issue, so much so that when he became Secretary General

he made his first Deputy Secretary General a Barbadian and when that Barbadian left, he replaced him with a Jamaican. In other words, the Caribbean was rewarded for its support in that position which was responsible for CFTC and development.

So McKinnon was conscious of that and people trusted him; they got to know him personally so they trusted him and that link to the OECD was his greatest strength for small countries. Now to come back to the present Secretary General: I don't know. I think we'll have to wait to see what happens in this next term to judge what legacy the present Secretary General will leave.

SO: Was there any private discussion, any mooting of a possible replacement when Kamalesh Shama was coming up for renewal of his post in 2011?

RS: No discussion. People talked about it, people said 'The Secretary General's post should come up', but where did that discussion occur? It occurred more in London amongst Commonwealth organisations than amongst governments of the Commonwealth. And you must remember that Kamalesh is a Secretary General from India. India is a growing power in the world. I don't think anybody would have tossed up a candidate against India in either of those two election periods. India has become real, its economic power is growing, it's in the G20, it's becoming increasingly a nation to be reckoned with, it wants a seat on the Security Council of the UN, and will probably get it. You can't put India to one side any more.

SO: How important do you feel has been the Queen's leadership, her headship of the Commonwealth, to the organisation's cohesion and enduring existence?

RS: I don't know about its cohesion, we'll come back to cohesion in a minute. But I think she's been enormously important to the Commonwealth as an organisation. You know, she has been a very inexpensive head. We've never had to pay a penny for her. A Heads of Governments conference is held and the Queen turns up and speaks and hosts a dinner and does all the things that she does. The Commonwealth has never paid a penny for that. The Queen went to the United Nations two years ago and spoke as Head of the Commonwealth - we didn't pay for it. And the message she always takes is the message of the Commonwealth as a voluntary organisation of people who have values and interests and traditions that they hold in common and that they feel are an example for the world, or should be.

She is known everywhere in the world and when she says 'I am the Head of the Commonwealth', it gives the Commonwealth some meaning to people who are not of the Commonwealth and even the people who are of the Commonwealth. So as that symbol of the Commonwealth, it's star quality that has come at no cost at all. If we were to replace the Queen with somebody who had to be elected as Head of the Commonwealth, we'd also have to pay for that person. I hope somebody knows where the money would come from to keep them in a house, to pay their servants, to pay their staff, to pay their travel! It could mount up to quite a bit of money. And the question is would they be willing to pay for that? I don't think so somehow. But in any event the Queen's commitment to the Commonwealth has been a remarkable thing. She meets these Commonwealth Heads of Government at conferences on a one-to-one basis, Heads of Government whom she's not met before, or she

hasn't seen for a while. I do not know a single one of them who has not been delighted to accept her invitation, who has not been absolutely charmed by her, has not been fascinated by the breadth of her knowledge and has not left her company glad that she's the Head of the Commonwealth.

So she has been a tremendous boon. So if we talk about cohesion, she may not have been cohesive for the Commonwealth in the ordinary understanding of that, but she has been cohesive in terms of where she has managed to keep all the other Heads of Government of Commonwealth countries committed to her as the Head of the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth itself.

SO: How far do you think she contributes to an ameliorating atmosphere? Let's face it, Britain was at odds with the Commonwealth over South Africa, or the Rhodesia issue?

RS: I think when she made the decision that she was going to Zambia despite Mrs Thatcher's advice, that endeared her to an awful lot of people. Not only to leaders but to people all over the world who saw the woman as courageous and taking the job of Head of the Commonwealth seriously. That she wasn't just going to listen to the advice of one of her prime ministers, but that she would listen to the advice of as many of them as possible. That's what she did in deciding to go and I think that was probably the single most important act of her entire stretch as Head of the Commonwealth: the ability to show that she took that job seriously.

SO: So the question of embodying values of duty, service and commitment?

RS: I also think that she and the Royal Family are significant in the way they relate to people of all races and cultures. You get the distinct impression that these are not people who are hung up on those issues; that they really do see people as people and that they value the quality of human life. I think the Queen - and I think this has been revealed over time - was as upset about racism and its brutality, and apartheid in South Africa, as any decent human being would be. She reflected that by going to Zambia, despite the advice of Margaret Thatcher.

SO: The only CHOGM conference she didn't attend was the Singapore meeting in 1971, on the recommendation of her prime minister, Edward Heath.

RS: And it will be interesting to see if she goes to Sri Lanka, when the Heads of Governments conference is held there.

SO: How much private debate was there behind the scenes on the wisdom of that selection of venue?

RS: A lot! Of course this thing turns again on a North/South divide in the Commonwealth which still exists: the reason it exists is usually translated into race but really even the people who say that, know it has nothing to do with race. Developing countries which have these difficulties of human rights and address them in ways that should no longer be acceptable, fear that if one country is punished for its human rights violations or its lack of democracy that they're opening themselves to the same treatment. So they close ranks. I

suspect that the countries that closed ranks behind Sri Lanka on this issue have closed ranks because they fear that one day they may be there.

In my view it is utterly the wrong approach to the matter. Everybody should be trying to see how best they can run their affairs so that democracy, human rights and the rule of law prevail. But once this mentality exists that democracy is something being imposed from outside and particularly by the white Commonwealth countries, there will be resistance to it. Not all developing countries think that way but unfortunately some of the more influential ones still do. And they do it for internal reasons. They've got particular complications in their own countries that they feel they are vulnerable to accusations of a lack of democracy or rights. So they protect themselves, basically.

SO: Was there a particular bloc within Africa, the Caribbean or within South East Asia on the issue of the venue? I'm wondering how the cards fell on supporting the selection of Sri Lanka as the next venue, and those who spoke in favour?

RS: I think key countries in Africa and Asia. Key countries in Africa and Asia were for protecting Sri Lanka.

SO: Which were those key countries?

RS: I think South Africa was certainly one of them. India was another. And those two were enough in a sense. There would've been others but some people don't speak because they hide behind the loudness of voice of others; they don't have to say anything because it's already said.

SO: The classic behaviour of smaller states?

RS: Yes. The point is if you've got somebody shouting what you would like to shout and you don't have to say it, so you don't endanger yourself.

SO: Sir Ron, as a final question before bringing this discussion to a conclusion: how has the Commonwealth survived and why has it survived, do you believe?

RS: I think it survived up until the last few years on the basis that it actually did have value. There is no question that from the inception of its Secretariat until quite recently, the Commonwealth actually did play a role in apartheid, international economic issues, trade matters, fighting for small states. For those countries it played a role.

For countries like Britain, Canada and Australia: up until it started running for a seat in the Security Council of the United Nations, Australia never had the kind of diplomatic outreach into the Caribbean and Africa and so on, except through the Commonwealth. So these countries all benefit from a cheap form of diplomacy. You don't have to establish embassies everywhere because you know you are meeting these people on a regular basis in ministerial meetings and so on. So from that standpoint, what the Commonwealth cost them in terms of membership and what they would have had to pay otherwise for such diplomatic relationships, it's peanuts. So it has that value and it's not expensive, so it survives for that reason for them.

For small states, it survives because small states need the Commonwealth more than the Commonwealth needs small states. Without the Commonwealth, the prime minister of Barbados would have no access to the prime minister of India, Canada, Australia, Britain, New Zealand, South Africa on a one-to-one basis for three or four days, as he would in the Commonwealth. He has a chance to sit in the same room, to tell the guy to his face what he thinks about things, to try - out of his own intellect - to bring him to a position of understanding. That's tremendous value for a small country. That they can go in and lay their case down to an OECD and a G20 country is very important. That's a value - apart from the fact of course that CFTC's budget is spent on them so that they get the financial benefit out of it as well.

For countries like India: I think the Commonwealth has a value in defensive terms. It's what the Commonwealth must not do as distinct from what it should do. I don't recall India being activist in Commonwealth affairs at anytime other than over apartheid in South Africa. When Rajiv Gandhi was part of that core group that pushed the issue forward, he, Bob Hawke and Brian Mulroney acted with the Africans to do this. But I think India regards its membership of the Commonwealth as a constraining influence; it would stop it from doing certain things. You don't encourage it to do things that are not in India's interest. However, if you look at the trade statistics on Commonwealth trade, India is one of the three principal beneficiaries of Commonwealth trade. It should therefore have a bigger interest in the Commonwealth that it does, because it's actually bringing money into the country and could bring much more. So I think from that stand point there are benefits for everybody in some way, shape or form.

A country like Britain continues to exert an influence on a wide group of humanity in every continent in the world through the Commonwealth, a reach it wouldn't otherwise have any more; the remnant of its impact is the Commonwealth and there it can still be heard. I think Britain has been cautious about its role in the Commonwealth because it's fearful of being accused of continuing an imperialist position and the white man trying to impose his view on the black peoples of this world. That in a sense stops Britain from being more forthright in the Commonwealth than it could be.

SO: But it's also to try to step away from the labelling of "the British Commonwealth".

RS: But this hasn't been the British Commonwealth for many, many years, although people I know still call it that.

SO: I accept that it hasn't been, but I'm talking about enduring perceptions.

RS: Yes. I think in a sense that's the fault of the Secretariat. Because if I were heading the Communications Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, one of the things I would want to be stressing constantly is this is a Commonwealth of 54 nations, all of them as equal members, and each of them bringing a certain importance to its totality. The diversity, the complexity of it, all of that is what the Commonwealth is about - and it's not British, although there are things British that underlay it. But those things that are British are things that we have accepted in each of our countries. We haven't rejected them. The ones that we've rejected are long gone but the things we

inherited from Britain that we value we held onto. We've held onto the value of British education for instance, of British standards in that regard.

SO: A decreasing number of Heads of Government and the political, economic and legal elite are no longer educated in this country.

RS: And that again is Britain's fault. If you go back to Commonwealth Heads of Government's conferences up to the 1970s, practically every Head of Government in a Commonwealth Heads of Government conference would have been educated or trained in Britain. Today that's not so and therefore those people who had a kind of kinship with Britain, a kind of familiarity with it, an understanding of it, an empathy with it, they don't exist anymore. I cannot think, for instance, of a single Caribbean prime minister who was educated in Britain, except the prime minister of St Vincent who did his doctorate at Manchester. He was previously educated in the University of the West Indies, but I can't think of any apart from him who has been trained in this country. And I am sure if we go to Africa we would find the same thing is so.

SO: That's a historical development from 1983, when Mrs Thatcher's government tightened student visas and Commonwealth education in this country.

RS: Well, two things. I think one of them was immigration but the other one is the ridiculous situation today - I call it ridiculous in my view - in which Britain opens itself to people from the European Union who don't speak English, have not grown up in an English tradition, you've fought battles with them. Some of them disrespect the place in any event, but they are citizens here and you've got the Commonwealth citizens who've grown up with Britain, who fought on Britain's side who are rejected from coming into Britain. It's perverse and ridiculous because it's certainly not in Britain's interest. But nonetheless that's the reality of your situation today. But it does mean, it has in the process of time weakened the kind of Commonwealth that we have and Britain's own voice in it.

SO: So the Commonwealth as an effective soft power organisation then is a diminishing asset?

RS: It shouldn't be and if people used it properly, that soft power would increase frankly not be decreased. But soft power to do what? And is it a soft power of the Commonwealth, we're talking about? Or the soft power of the Commonwealth members, different story. If it is the soft power of the Commonwealth, it shouldn't be diminished in any way as long as there's a Commonwealth consensus and people are willing to take that thing forward into the international community; it should be an increasing power because more and more Commonwealth countries are becoming important. India is now an important country in the world. It's no longer just Canada, Britain and Australia. You've got South Africa, you've got Nigeria, there's Malaysia, there's Singapore. Singapore is now the leading country in Commonwealth trade in both goods and services in the world. Singapore is numbered amongst the top 10 along with India and Malaysia. So Commonwealth countries are themselves important, so collectively their soft power should be greater. The issue boils down to whether they are willing to act together or not. That's all it boils down to, or whether they believe other interests that they have, outside of the Commonwealth, are more important than the Commonwealth interests.

SO: Is this also tied to the proliferation of international organisations? The Commonwealth has become one international organisation among many. You talked about the multiplicity of overlaying international meetings and interests, with their different focus, be it economic, be it trade, be it finance. So the Commonwealth doesn't have that distinctive identity?

RS: No, it doesn't. But the value that it has, and this is what seems to be escaping its governments, it didn't escape us on the EPG, and we emphasised it. The value that it has is that essentially, if you take out Cameroon, Rwanda and Mozambique, these are countries with connections which go back centuries. They speak the same language, they grew up on the same literature, their mindset, their thinking is set in a certain way. And therefore they have so much in common that it's different from what they have with other people. This is the only unique organisation of its kind. Britain doesn't have the same relationship in the European Union that it has with the Commonwealth. Canada does not have the same relationship with Mexico, even though it's part of NAFTA, that it has with the Commonwealth. Australia doesn't have the same relationship with China, even though it is its biggest trading partner, that it does with the Commonwealth. When they come into that room - I remember long discussions between John Howard, prime minister of Australia and the prime minister of Antigua sitting next to each other over cricket: debating who was a better batsman at what point, at which period, and who was the better bowler. How the hell could he talk to the Chinese about that? That's what sets the glue and that's the thing that they should be using as soft power: fellows who think alike or ladies or both out there in the International community selling the idea that we come to, we think is good for us but good for you too. And if we're not doing that, if that's not what the Commonwealth is doing then it might as well close up.

SO: Sir Ron, thank you very much indeed.

[END OF AUDIOFILE PART ONE]