VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Kaliopate Tavola

Key:
SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
KT: Kaliopate Tavola (Respondent)

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Ambassador Kaliopate Tavola in Suva on 10th April 2014. Sir, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to take part in this project. I wonder if you could please begin by reflecting generally on Fiji and the Commonwealth. When you came into politics, and then into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, what was your general view and feeling towards the Commonwealth, and Fiji's relationship with the Commonwealth?

KT: The Commonwealth, at the time, had a special significance for Fiji. Fiji, at the time, was very proud to be a member of the Commonwealth and it goes back to the early history of Fiji. In 1874, the chiefs of Fiji decided to cede the country to Britain. It was not taken over by an act of war or anything like that, so it has a personal significance.

SO: So this was a commitment by the paramount chief, Ratu Seru Cakobau?

KT: Yes, to cede Fiji to Great Britain. Queen Victoria was on the throne at the time. After three requests, she finally decided to accept the Deed of Cession and that was signed in 1874. And that has a lot of significance in the Fijian psyche. So, we have that special relationship and, of course, the members of the Royal Family have been visiting Fiji from the early days. There was the Coronation visit by Queen Elizabeth II. Soon after her Coronation, she came to Fiji in December 1953 and our chiefs have always welcomed any members of the Royal Family coming to Fiji or going to London and being hosted there. So, Fiji was a proud member of the Commonwealth. What happened in 1987 was a disappointment for a lot of Fijians. We had this nice relationship and that came to an end by way of a coup, which was totally unknown in the Fiji vocabulary. I mean, people were even pronouncing it 'coop' and things like that – because it was not in our language. It was something unusual.

SO: So there is no word for 'coup' in the Fijian language?

KT: Oh, there is the word *vuaviri*. We had had coups traditionally, but in modern history and in the Pacific a coup was something we associated with Africa and places like that. But in the Pacific it was something unusual.

SO: Sir, you were in London as Political Counsellor at the High Commission.

KT: I was in London in 1987 when it [the coup] took place. And I was in a Commonwealth grouping – the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau. We were down on the southern coast. My wife was in London and she rang up that morning and said, "Check out the television." And there it was: a coup in Fiji. I couldn't believe it. But the television announced it and made quite a programme out of it, and when I went to breakfast that morning all my African colleagues greeted me, "Welcome to the club." [*Laughter*].

SO: Oh dear.

KT: Yes, that was in 1987.

SO: Yes, there were two coups in 1987.

KT: In May and then September. This was the May one. 19th May.

SO: Sir, obviously, you were part of the Fiji Foreign Service, working on agriculture at this particular point. Did it affect your work in any way?

KT: Well, I had to check [it] out. I was chairing the council of the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau, and I had to check it out whether Fiji was still qualified to be part of the CAB. There was no problem with that. I chaired the CAB during its transition from being a CAB to CABI – the 'International' – and then Prince Charles was coming to open the new headquarters, so I had to make sure that we moved from London to the new headquarters.

SO: I think the new HQ is in Oxford.

KT: Yes. And Prince Charles came to be the guest speaker and Chief Guest. I was the chair of the Group. But that was late in 1987. I think that was afterwards. But I had to check out whether I was still able to chair the council and Fiji's membership of the CABI. So, it presented no problem at the time, but I think to a lot of people – diplomats, Fijians – it was a bit of a disappointment, almost an embarrassment, that we were part of a group that was regarded highly in Fiji and we are now no longer part of that. We had the coup, which dirtied our reputation.

SO: So, Sir, did you have intense discussion with your High Commissioner about Fiji's particular position that you remember? Did you have discussions among the wider diplomatic fraternity in London about Fiji's position, about what was going on back here in Suva?

KT: Well, I was a Counsellor at the time and yes, we talked about it, and I think the realisation was that we were there representing the government – whatever government came into authority – and, being diplomats, we just had to do what we were told. But I know the fact that we had a coup and the possibility of being not part of the Commonwealth was obviously part of the discussions that took place. We did enquire, you know, with the authorities at the time – that, given the situation in Fiji, would Fiji still be qualified to be part

of the council of CABI, for instance? Or, to get the invitation to the Garden Party, and to Buckingham Palace? We did try to find out, and there was no problem. And I remember meeting Her Majesty and the Royal Family at that time. We were still being invited to Buckingham Palace for the receptions and I think there was a little exchange: "I hope everything is well in Fiji", something like that. [So] we did get the invitation, but I think there was a feeling of disappointment, embarrassment, to some extent.

SO: So, after Fiji was suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth at the Vancouver Heads of Government meeting…

KT: Yes.

SO: …did that, in any way, alter your diplomatic relationship, that you recall?

KT: At the diplomatic level, I recall there was very little change, because we were still getting the invitation to the garden party. We went to Buckingham Palace for the reception, and my membership of CABI was still there. But we were, obviously, not part of the council and a subject that had to be addressed at the CMAG…well, the CMAG came later, I think…

SO: Yes it did. Sir, in 1988 you were transferred to Brussels and were appointed as ambassador to Belgium.

KT: Yes.

SO: Were you also accredited to the European Community at that point?

KT: Yes.

SO: So was this part of, then, a particular approach by Fiji to concentrate more on the EC than on Britain at this time?

KT: Yes. I switched completely, and in Brussels I had no role to play as far as the Commonwealth was concerned. But we were part of the Lomé Convention at the time…and I think the sanctions did apply at the time, as far as Fiji was concerned. So, we had to talk about the situation in Fiji, because I think, under the Lomé convention, at the time, we had committed a breach of the agreement. So there were sanctions that were applied and we had to explain the situation to the authorities.

SO: So, was there a redirection of Fiji's foreign policy at this point? Because, if you were suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth, how far did the South Pacific Forum become more important for you, or the EC? I'm just wondering how much value was attached in Fiji to getting back into the Commonwealth.

KT: Well, I was not in the country at the time, but I think there was obviously an attempt to regularize the situation and to get back to the Commonwealth. But in Brussels, of course, my responsibilities were related to membership of the ACP Group. But that was in 1988, and after the suspension of Fiji from the Commonwealth.

SO: Sir, can I just ask about the way that Fiji foreign policy is formed? Who is the key driver in terms of the ministerial portfolio for Fiji's foreign policy? Because, obviously, it varies from country to country…

KT: Yes.

SO: How much latitude does the Foreign Minister have? How much responsibility does the Prime Minister have?

KT: Well, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is, obviously, the driver of foreign policies.

SO: In day-to-day management of international affairs, or actual strategy?

KT: Day-to-day and in terms of strategy and policies, yes. He will take policies to Cabinet to determine the direction for foreign policies. So, the Minister at that time would have been quite active in that respect.

SO: Yes, okay. So, when Fiji was readmitted to the Commonwealth…

KT: What year was that?

SO: In 1997, just before the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh. So, you were still in Brussels?

KT: In 1997 I was still in Brussels.

SO: Were you pulled in to come along to the Edinburgh meeting?

KT: No. I was not involved in any Commonwealth discussions at the time. It was 1998 when I came back to Fiji, and then I got involved in politics in 2000, after the coup of 2000. And that's when I really got involved in the Commonwealth.

SO: Sir, please could you talk about the events of 2000, then? Obviously, there was the George Speight-led coup in which MPs were held hostage in the Parliament Building. Were you here in Suva?

KT: I was in Suva. I was working for the Fiji Sugar Marketing Company at the time, and then I was asked to be part of the interim government. I talked about it with my bosses at the time and it really was because of the interest in our sugar markets and my background in sugar markets that I got the nod from my sugar bosses: "Yes, I think it would be good, if you're going in as Foreign Affairs Minister, that you'll still be looking after the sugar market." So, it really was the sugar interest that persuaded my bosses in the sugar industry to release me.

SO: How important was sugar to Fiji's foreign exchange earnings at this point? I know that tourism had dramatically increased in terms of the sector's contribution to Fiji's foreign earnings, but where was sugar at this point?

KT: Sugar was obviously the major agricultural export for Fiji and I think the sugar industry, at that time, as a percentage of GDP, was quite high. It's not as high now. I think it was 18% to 20%. But what was an important consideration was that we used to use the figure [that] about a quarter of the population of Fiji - 20% to 25% – were dependent on the sugar industry in one way or another.

So, in terms of the economy, it was a big industry – very, very important – and we needed to sustain the industry. So, that was one consideration that was important for the sugar industry to release me to go to the interim government at the time – as caretaker, Foreign Minister, in the interim government. So, I was there from 2000 to 2005... No, 2001, I think, was the General Elections. So, I came back to the sugar industry and I said, "Look, I've done my interim job, what do you think?" And again, my bosses said, "Okay, you stay in politics." So I fought the General Elections and got a seat in parliament.

SO: For the United Fiji Party?

KT: For the SDL Party, at the time.

SO: I apologise, my notes are wrong here, because I have you as a candidate for the United Fiji Party to represent Lami…

KT: No, the SDL Party, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua, which is now the SODELPA Party. And I represented the Lami Open constituency. So, I stayed in Parliament for five years and also in the Cabinet as Minister of Foreign Affairs; it was at a time when I did a lot of work for the Commonwealth and tried to get Fiji back into the Commonwealth. I remember, still, attending a lot of Commonwealth meetings – even the Heads of Government meetings, the one that was held in Australia…

SO: In Coolum?

KT: …yes, Coolum. I attended the one in Nigeria in Abuja. And it was after the Abuja meeting that Don McKinnon asked me to attend a special CMAG in London where I had to make a submission on behalf of the Fiji Government. It was at that CMAG meeting where the decision was taken to return Fiji to the Commonwealth. Now, what year was that…that was after the Abuja meeting? 2003.

SO: So often the significance of the Abuja CHOGM is attached to Zimbabwe, because this was when Robert Mugabe announced Zimbabwe's immediate withdrawal from the Commonwealth.

KT: It was confirmed after the Abuja meeting, in London.

SO: So that's May 2004. Does that sound about right?

KT: Yes, in London.

SO: Sir, if I could please just take you back to the time of the interim government. I would very much like to ask you about these discussions at Coolum and Abuja, as well. You were involved in the interim government…

KT: Yes.

SO: How much foreign activity were you involved with? Were you required to deal with foreign visitors – be they the Secretary General, be they representatives of Australia or New Zealand – who were trying to encourage or pressure Fiji's return to democracy? Or, were you in fact concentrating on other political aspects of Fiji's foreign relations?

KT: Well, I think one of my main tasks in the interim government at the time was to try to regularize the relations with Australia, with New Zealand, and we were still attending the Commonwealth meetings because I think we were still a member of the council at the time…

SO: Yes, Fiji was not suspended until June of 2000.

KT: 2000.

SO: The Speight putsch was 19 May – 13 July of 2000. Were you in discussion with the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group before June of 2000, or were you involved afterwards? Do you recall?

KT: It would have been afterwards, I would think. I attended a couple of CMAG meetings. One was in New York, at the margin of the General Assembly…

SO: Yes, in September.

KT: …in September, and that one in London after the Abuja meeting, and it was after that submission where the decision was made to allow Fiji to re-enter the Commonwealth.

SO: Can you tell me please, Sir, what was your view of the CMAG process?

KT: It's a good mechanism. I mean, we would support the role of the CMAG. If a member has breached the rules, then that member needs to be interrogated; and, after the sentence had been applied, it created an avenue – an opportunity – for Fiji to be heard, to be still heard. And I remember, in Abuja, Don McKinnon asked me specifically to be present at the London meeting. Yes. In Abuja, Fiji was not at the margin; Fiji was part of the Commonwealth. We sat in the…

SO: You sat in the Executive session?

KT: Yes. And I queued up to meet Her Majesty again, so I didn't feel as if I was being at the margin or being excluded.

SO: That's very interesting, because official Commonwealth story likes to present itself as sending Fiji 'to Coventry' – to use that English expression.

KT: Yes. Well, when you front up to the CMAG, you feel as if you are under the spotlight. But at the Heads of the Commonwealth meeting, it was just normal. I mean, I was there. We met Her Majesty. So there was no problem. I was in the photograph, for instance.

SO: The politics of photographs always intrigues me. Who were you allowed to stand next to? You weren't pushed right to the end?

KT: No, no! There was free standing for most of us. I met with Her Majesty and she enquired about Fiji and I said we were doing our best to get back to the Commonwealth. Something like that, yes.

SO: Yes. That would have pleased her.

KT: Yes, yes. It is this special relationship that Fiji has with the Commonwealth and with the Royal Family. They have this personal interest; they want to know about Fiji and all that, and so…

SO: Even after Fiji declared itself a republic?

KT: That was in 1989. Yes.

SO: But there is still an ongoing sense of a particular relationship with the Queen, because of the cession?

KT: Yes. Well, you know, when Rabuka declared a republic, that was not a popular declaration. Pictures of the Queen in many Fijian homes didn't come down and they are still there.

SO: They stayed up?

KT: They stayed up and they're kept in very visible places, in all Fijian homes. You go to Fijian homes and the Royal Family photos are there. They didn't come down when we were declared a republic. But it created a lot of confusion, too, because we became a republic but the people still regarded the Queen as the Head of state, when she was no longer under the legal arrangement that we had at the time. So, again, it just emphasises that special relationship, the bond, that Fiji has with the Crown. And that bond is still there.

SO: If I could ask, is that bond still there for a particular generation, or have the ties loosened with younger Fijians?

KT: Yes, I think it is loosening a bit with the younger generations coming in. But the history never changes, and so people who read about the history and all that, they would certainly develop that personal relationship and interest in it.

SO: Sir, if I could take you back to being involved in the CMAG process, were you invited to make a written submission beforehand?

KT: Yes.

SO: So, you and your staff put together argumentation on Fiji's process towards democracy…

KT: Yes.

SO: …and constitutionalism?

KT: Yes.

SO: Is that how it works?

KT: The report had to indicate what we were doing to return Fiji to a democracy. And that was the kind of thing that had to be reflected in the report and, I think, in London, after the Abuja meeting, there were a lot of positive developments. We had created the coalition government, at the time, under the Constitution – the formation of a coalition government, involving the

opposition, and that was a blast for Fiji. So, it was on the basis of the positive steps that were being taken at the time, CMAG made the decision to lift the suspension.

SO: Sir, I would be grateful if you could reflect on Fiji's experience of the CMAG process.

KT: I think CMAG, as a process… I think it is needed. You cannot debate on that. A member of the group has breached the constitution of the group, and that member is subject to interrogations and the enquiry and all that; that's fine. We didn't have any problem with that; we looked at it positively. We agreed that it [the CMAG process] was an avenue that we could pursue to get back into the Commonwealth and we did use it positively. So, as I was saying, we took the opportunity to write the report to reflect the processes and the measures that we were taking to regularize the situation in Fiji. And I fronted up to CMAG. One was in New York, at the margin of the General Assembly, and the one in London, after the Abuja Heads of Government meeting. And so we used the opportunity of the CMAG to tell our stories. Part of the work I was doing – when I got into government and into Cabinet – was to tell the story of what we were trying to do to return the country to democracy. And we were very much aware of that and we wanted to take full advantage of that opportunity and that avenue that was open to us, through the CMAG: to go and tell the Commonwealth the story, the good things that we were doing.

SO: Sir, was this controversial in Cabinet? Were there those who were critical of Fiji's attempts to rejoin the Commonwealth? And who felt Fiji was suspended and that the country should concentrate its energies elsewhere and in other diplomatic forums?

KT: In Cabinet, we were united: we were once a trusted member of the Commonwealth, and we wanted to get back in. So, we were trying to do everything we could to regularize the situation – to regularize the situation with Australia and New Zealand, very important.

SO: How were you trying to do this?

KT: Through the various missions. For instance, the Australian High Commissioner at the time was Sue Boyd, a good friend of mine, and we used to dialogue quite a lot. And Sue would ring up and say, "Look, I can't come to you publicly, but I've got a nice bottle of red here. I'll come to your place." So, she would come home and we would talk, and that would go back to Canberra. And, similarly, with New Zealand. So, we were open to discussions, because the Interim government at that time – and the government that came in after the 2001 Election – wanted to regularize the situation.

SO: You seem to be describing more of a regional South Pacific Forum/Pacific Islands Forum way of encouraging Fiji's re-engagement with the Commonwealth?

KT: As I said, it was because of the personal relationship that Fiji has with the Commonwealth, so we were united that we needed to get back to the Commonwealth. So, it was Fiji's own initiative to get back.

SO: Sir, did you have much engagement with the Secretary General, Don McKinnon, on this? You said that he had invited you to come to the CMAG meeting…

KT: Yes.

SO: …in London, after the Abuja Heads of Government meeting. Did you also have contacts with the Secretariat? Was Don McKinnon phoning you up to give suggestions of what might be included in the report? Were there any other inputs in that way?

KT: Through the Secretary General. He sent envoys to come to Fiji just to assess the situation, and I think the envoy did come twice when…

SO: This is Pius Langa, from South Africa?

KT: He came at one time. Sir Paul Reeves came twice, I think, and that was on the initiative of the Secretary General. And we welcomed the envoys when they came.

SO: I've heard that Ratu Mara, who was still President at this point, was initially rather sceptical of their input, suggesting that Pius Langa would not have known – as a South African – much about the particular Fijian context?

KT: Yes. Well, maybe that was his private attitude and view, but we in the Cabinet welcomed him, and we didn't have any difficulties with him making an evaluation of the situation in Fiji at the time.

SO: Obviously, Ratu Mara, as the leading politician before and after Fiji's independence, had an enormous authority and experience here in Fiji. How much executive power did he have as President?

KT: The President of Fiji has very little executive power, so it was left to the Cabinet – and particularly to the initiative of the Foreign Minister – to determine the foreign policies for the country.

SO: I was just wondering, Sir, that if Ratu Mara had little formal executive power, whether he could still have an enormous amount of informal influence and input?

KT: I think, at the time, he had probably decided, "I've done my bit. The others that are coming in now, they can do what they can without my intervention." So, I didn't feel at the time that he was trying to look and pull strings from the top.

SO: So, Sir, did you have much contact and engagement with Pius Langa and Sir Paul Reeves?

KT: Yes, when they came we were the host Ministry. We had to look after them and, again, we had to tell the story from the ministerial perspective. Both listened and we facilitated their visit and all their meetings. And it was quite open. They met who they wanted to meet, and we didn't get in the way.

SO: And would they then report back to you on the outcome of their discussions? Obviously, they were the Secretary General's envoys, but I just wondered about the diplomatic courtesies?

KT: There would be a debriefing at the end of the visit, but their report would go to the Secretary General.

SO: How useful did you find this process of Special Envoy engagement?

KT: I think it was useful for us in having an outsider looking in at what we were doing – because we were keen, we were determined, to regularize the situation. And that is why we welcomed the envoys to come in and make their own assessments. And we didn't see anything wrong with that because we were determined to do the right thing and to regularize, to get back into normality and into the Commonwealth organisation and all that; so, I think it was a great help.

SO: Sir, as Foreign Minister from 2001 to 2005, you had to defend Fiji's international position about the treatment of those who were involved in the coup of 2000. Did particular criticism come from the Commonwealth, or from the Pacific region?

KT: We defended what was right – human rights, for instance – and we acknowledged if there was anything wrong. Certainly, we didn't justify the coup. It was unconstitutional and was wrong. So, the focus really was just to do the right thing. And to regularize our relations and to make good the situation that was bad. So, that was really our focus and we would acknowledge what was good and we would say, truthfully, what was wrong. I remember saying, "You cannot support the coup. It's unconstitutional and it is not right. But that is the past. That is the situation we are facing. What we want to do now is to make good. Regularize it. Get it better."

SO: Were there any particular countries or governments who were critical of Fiji's perceived lenience, to which you had to give particular energy and attention?

KT: Well, Australia and New Zealand, because we faced sanctions at the time. And so a major part of our effort was directed at Australia and New Zealand and the Forum was very much involved in that, to facilitate the meeting. I remember…was it in 2000?...the first ever meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers of the Forum was held in Samoa. And the Solomon Islands, also, was in the bad book in those days, because of the riot there. So, the Foreign Minister of the Solomon Islands and I… I think that was the first ever meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers, which was in August of 2000 in Apia. We were asked specifically to be there to answer to the interrogation.

SO: So did the Forum, in any way, adopt a CMAG-style process?

KT: Well, that was an interesting one, because it was a new development. As I said, it was the first ever meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers and then, at that meeting, it lead to the Biketawa Declaration. The Biketawa Declaration was declared in October 2000 by the leaders – after that first meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers in Apia. And so the Biketawa Declaration was declared, and that became the guideline. It was kind of a CMAG approach: to subject the country that was at fault to some enquiries. And Fiji is still under

that Biketawa Declaration. The Ministerial Contact Group was here not long ago.

SO: So, how far do you think that the Commonwealth, then, had been a pilot fish in developing international institutions, international input, [and] international criticism in an organised forum?

KT: The relevant documentation of the group that was there provided the guidelines for behaviour as part of a group. So, that was a good thing about the Commonwealth. There were rules to observe, and if you don't follow the rules, then you are subject to some enquiries. I think that is something that the Commonwealth can teach to other organisations. I know at the Lomé Convention we have that same kind of arrangement: under Article 96 of Lomé, where, if you breach the Lomé accord, then you would be subject to enquiries. I was also subjected to that, and had to go to Brussels to explain the situation we were facing in Fiji and try to lift the sanctions. So, there were parallel kinds of situations existing at the time.

SO: Sir, was there any UN oversight, sanction and input? Or was this really dealt with on a regional basis and an institutional basis through Lomé, as you say?

KT: Yes. The effort was, obviously, under the Commonwealth – because we were being watched by CMAG – and under the Lomé Convention, because we had breached the agreement. So we had a kind of CMAG-arrangement, too; because under Article 96, at the time, we had to go and tell our story and to justify what we are doing so that the sanctions under the Lomé Convention could be lifted.

So, I had sessions with CMAG. I had sessions with the Article 96 Committee in Brussels and, of course, with the UN. When you are in front of the General Assembly, you've got to explain it in the way it is unfolding in the country; you can't go out there and tell lies. The whole world is watching you.

SO: Sir, how much was foreign affairs an important domestic issue here in Fiji?

KT: Domestically, obviously, there's an interest in what Fiji is doing under the Lomé Convention and under the Commonwealth. I explained that in Cabinet, for instance, and sometimes it came up in parliament. So, it was something that people wished to know: the various policies we have, as against our friends abroad. But if you go down the street and then talk about foreign policies, they wouldn't even understand it. So, when I say there is interest, it was in the institutions: in Cabinet, obviously; in Parliament, some questions do come up, which the Minister of Foreign Affairs has to answer. So, at that level: at the institutional level.

SO: What about the relationship with China? I know that this was part of your particular strategy when you were Foreign Minister – to improve bilateral relations with the PRC, to improve trade and to improve investment. How problematic was this?

KT: By the time I got into parliament, there was already a declaration of the 'Look North' Policy. The 'Look North' Policy started after the coup of 1987 and it was coined during that time. When I got into Cabinet in 2000, it was there and

we just put a lot of focus on it. We enlarged the concept, and I recall saying publicly that the 'Look North' Policy is not so much a break away from Australia and New Zealand: I referred to it as a diversification of our foreign policies. It may say, 'Look North', but it is, 'Look North, Look East, and Look West.' So we were open to new alignments and new partnerships.

SO: Exploiting the compass…

KT: Yes.

SO: …rather than emphasising one particular axis?

KT: That's right. People were referring to 'Look North' as just China, but I had to clarify on a few occasions that 'Look North' is a diversification of our own foreign policies. We may be looking away from Australia and New Zealand, because of what has happened, but we are open to creating new partnerships, new alignments and all that. So, while China was very much prominent and very visible, we were looking at other alignments and other partnerships.

SO: Was this primarily in the trade and educational sectors, or were you also thinking of it in a security dimension?

KT: The 'Look North' policy was very much driven by an economic desire on our part: to find new markets, to find new sources of ODA, technical assistance and all that. I think geopolitics really didn't feature prominently at the time.

SO: Even after 9/11, there wasn't a new political interest from Washington?

KT: Well, it did increase in terms of its status and importance and, especially, with interest from America, from the USA, because the USA used to be strong in the region. It had a cooling off session, it disappeared, and then with China coming in, it came back. So, with China coming in, and America trying to reassert itself, that's when the geopolitics became more prominent.

SO: Sir, when did you have a realisation of this geopolitical contestation, here in the mid-Pacific?

KT: I think it was the reference to the Cold War, when the US had a strong focus on the Pacific. After the Cold War, it receded, and there was a vacuum that was created. I talked about that when I was Minister at the time. I was critical of the US taking a back seat view of the Pacific, and I did say that they were creating a vacuum. I think the vacuum was created and then China increased its presence. It was only after America was really trying to reassert itself that the geopolitical aspects of it became more prominent in our thinking; and then, of course, the China/Taiwan issue, because we were trying to be friends to both. We had the One China policy, but we wanted to relate to Taiwan at the commercial level, and we did that very well. We've got the presence of the two countries here in Fiji. We observe the One China policy and with Taiwan we created a commercial relationship, which worked well.

SO: I know this caused you problems, as Foreign Minister, with a particular group within Cabinet who wished to have more formal representation and involvement with Taiwan. Did that then complicate the relationship with Beijing?

KT: Yes. It became complicated somewhat, but we were firm in our stance at the time. We believed in the One China policy, and I think, at the time, in the UN as well, that was becoming almost a stance for the UN – to observe the One China policy – which we took up and [went] with that… But we were open to having a commercial relationship with Taiwan. We had a problem with Ratu Mara, who had about nine visits to Taiwan, because he was friendly with the leaders of Taiwan. And, so, there was some sensitivity there. But, from the government's standpoint, One China policy was the way to go; and with Taiwan, it was a commercial relationship.

SO: I have a note saying that you had to deal with some elements within your own government who promoted relations with Taiwan.

KT: Ratu Mara was the one, as President. Even at the time, he was still visiting Taiwan. He had about nine visits to Taiwan, at leaders' level.

SO: Did he also have some supporters within the Cabinet or within your political party on this issue?

KT: There were one or two discussions. One on the China/Taiwan relationship and our stance towards that. But we were firm: One China policy. We were not anti-Taiwan. Taiwan was even present here in Fiji, but the relationship is one of commercial relations.

SO: I know that your Minister of Health, Solome Naivalu, defied your instructions by voting in favour of Observer Status for Taiwan at the World Health Assembly.

KT: Yes.

SO: How did you deal with that one?

KT: Well, I was not happy! [*Laughter*]

SO: I bet you weren't happy! [*Laughter*] It's probably an under-statement.

KT: Yeah. Well, I think there would be some kind of recording of the way that we felt at the Ministry, at the time. I did say publicly my view against that one.

SO: [*Laughter*] I'm sure some sparks flew behind the scenes.

KT: Well, I made the statement and there was no follow-up. So we left it at that. [*Laughter*]

SO: Sir, there were, of course, more events in 2006.

KT: Yes.

SO: Please could you describe how this affected you politically? How did the 2006 events effect Fiji's foreign relations?

KT: In 2006… I was a Minister at that time, but not in parliament. I was in the Senate. I didn't stand for the 2005 elections and I had announced my retirement. That's when my friend sent me a book called 'Retirement's a

Myth', and the Ministry people at the time gave me a fishing rod to go fishing. [*Laughter*]

SO: Wonderful. Now, is this a fly fishing rod?

KT: A casting rod. So, I am now a fisherman! But PM Qarase asked me to come back to Cabinet through the Senate, and I talked about it with my wife and we decided, "Okay, we'll go." And so I was in Cabinet in 2006, as a Senator, and then we had the 2006 coup on 5-6 December.

SO: Did that come out of the blue for you again?

KT: No, I think it was taking a long time to develop, and there were a lot of discussions with Bainimarama at the time. We were concerned about what was happening. There were some discussions to offer him a diplomatic posting – which we did, and he had initially agreed. But then, after taking some other advice, he turned it down. So, to us, that was the indication that he was firm in what he was trying to do. It all happened on 5 December.

SO: So was there a key, core group – surrounding the Prime Minister – who were in negotiations with Bainimarama to try to forestall another coup?

KT: Well, there is the Security Council in Cabinet, and I sat on that Security Council and we were very much aware of what was going on. But we were also aware of the advice that was coming from the Minister of Defence at the time. He was basically saying, "Don't worry. It's not going to happen." But it did happen – yes, and the signs were there, I suppose – on 5 December.

SO: Sir, obviously, you had this looming storm, as you say. You were aware of it in the Security Council and were discussing how to prevent it, based on intelligence from the key minister?

KT: Yes.

SO: Were you also trying to draw on external support and contacts to try to prevent this from happening? Or were you trying to deal with this entirely within Fiji as a domestic issue? Were you attempting to cauterize it internally?

KT: Well, yes. I think it was all domestic. We were trying to resolve [it], and that's why we decided to send him [Bainimarama] as an Ambassador. He had asked. We gave it to him and then he turned it down.

SO: So you didn't contemplate, within the Security Council, the possibility of drawing on, say, the good offices of the Secretary General of the Commonwealth or anyone within the Pacific Islands Forum to mediate, or have a below-the-radar chat?

KT: We were comforted by the advice from the Minister at the time. He was in the Cabinet and he was saying, "There's no support within the military." So we relied on advice.

SO: Sir, immediately after 5 December, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group suspended Fiji from the councils of the Commonwealth, with

immediate effect, on 8 December 2006. Did Don McKinnon call you straight away? How was this message communicated?

KT: Well, at the time, there was the new government. Frank [Bainimarama] was in place. We were totally out of office at the time. He came in and just took over the government. At the time I couldn't even go back to my office to collect my things.

SO: What time of day did this happen?

KT: This was in the afternoon. We were sitting in the Prime Minister's residence at the time having some kava. The military came in to stop us from leaving, surrounded the house, and they took over the machinery of government on 5 December. And so, after a while, we all went home. We were allowed to go home but the Prime Minister, Laisenia Qarase, was under house arrest and he couldn't leave. And so the rest of us had to leave, and that was it. I didn't get back to my office. It was my PA who packed up some of the things that I needed and brought them home. And that was that. I never went back to the office.

SO: So, the Senate was immediately suspended?

KT: Yes. It was a coup, it was a dictatorship, and they declared themselves as the government. It was only later – when it was a judgment of the Court – that it was unconstitutional. And it was after that that Frank Bainimarama abrogated the constitution and stayed on up until now.

SO: I spoke to Mr Sitiveni Rabuka yesterday and he made a distinction between the events of 1987, which he said was not a military coup…

KT: Well, then what was it? [*Laughter*]

SO: …and the events of 2006. Would you agree with that distinction?

KT: A coup is a coup, whoever does it. It is unconstitutional.

SO: Indeed. Sir, in relation to my earlier question about China and the United States, and also this question of 'coups, many coups', how far do you feel that the geopolitical engagement of China and the US here in Fiji and the alternative sources of overseas direct investment have helped to slow down democratisation and a return to democracy here in Fiji?

KT: I don't think the China/US aspect of Fiji's relations with these foreign governments had any impact on the pace of our democratisation. I think it was all internally driven. As I was saying, the dictatorship came into existence. The Court, some years later, made the judgment that it was unconstitutional, and at that point in time, Frank Bainimarama abrogated the constitution. He put in place a five-year road map and then implemented it. In 2009, there was a lot of pressure to have elections, but he was firm in what he wanted to do: he abrogated the constitution, [said] that he needed five years to do what he wanted to do to clean up the country, to clean the various institutions. As he said, it was all corrupt and we were all corrupted and would have to be cleaned out, and that would take five years before the next General Election. So, I think it was internally driven.

SO: I have a note here that the Pacific Islands Forum threatened to suspend Fiji in August 2008 if Bainimarama didn't commit to holding a General Election by March 2009. And then the Special Leaders' meeting at the PIF – held in Papua New Guinea – set a deadline, which he rejected.

KT: Yes, because, when he abrogated the Constitution, he was *the* authority. And he said he needed five years to do what he wanted to do. He wanted to clean the country of corruption. He wanted to remove poverty. He had lots of things he wanted to do! Whether he has done it, I don't know. [*Laughter*]

SO: That's why he argues he needs more time? I'm aware Bainimarama is setting up his Fiji First Party….

KT: Yes.

SO: Sir, were you involved in any private contacts with people trying to use your good offices? …Because of your extensive international experience, your connections in the region with Australia, with New Zealand, and with the Commonwealth. Were there those who were approaching you to see if it was possible to lend any weight to the argument about returning to democracy? I appreciate that it was a dictatorship, but that doesn't mean that there were not private probes.

KT: Yes. I've been involved, in one way or another, in trying to make sure that Frank Bainimarama stays with this road map. Once he made the statement that he needed five years and he put a deadline to it, I think, for most of us, we had to accept that. And we just had to make sure that everything is in place to allow the return to democracy. For instance, I was approached…and I am a member of a think tank looking at foreign policy under Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, and our task there is, basically, to make sure that we do return to democracy. That's what we've been doing in the Foreign Affairs task force.

SO: When was the task force appointed?

KT: It would have been three years ago.

SO: So does this involve consulting foreign or regional opinion, in political and commercial terms?

KT: It is a think tank. It's a bouncing board; Ratu Inoke would bring some issues in there and we talk it over and ensure that they match the drive to return to democracy.

SO: Sir, this is obviously a Fiji initiative, a Fiji forum. But this think tank is drawing on a wide wealth of knowledge. I'm interested that the Minister of Foreign Affairs is doing this when surely they would have expertise 'in-house'?

KT: Yes, it's an initiative of the Minister. I'm a member with some of the current diplomats and some academics. Basically, we are not giving advice directly but the Minister makes use of the discussions there to craft his own view on things.

SO: Is this a public task force?

KT: A private task force.

SO: For a task force to be effective, it has to be relatively small.

KT: Yes. There are about five or six of us.

SO: So, in that case, you act, as you say, as an important, separate sounding board of wider opinion within Fiji. Has recruitment been a problem for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here in Fiji? If Fiji has had a particular style of government, has this eroded intellectual input within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

KT: A lot of people didn't leave the Ministry. The ambassadors who are still there and who were there before stayed in the Ministry and so ensured that there is some continuity in the policy-making and in the views. There are some very powerful diplomats in there. There's Isikeli Mataitoga, now the Ambassador in Japan, who is also a member of our task force and [who] has got strong views on our foreign policies, and so the Minister has benefited from that. So, whilst a person like Isikeli Mataitoga – with his views on the need to return to democracy eventually… and, in the process of doing that, we can also take the opportunity to widen our net, to expand the 'Look North' policy, and that is exactly what is happening. The 'Look North' policy has been extended to include Russia and Turkey and all the new friends that have come on board; but, at the same time, [it has been] expanding the role of Fiji. You know, Fiji is the chair of the Group of 77 and a few other UN agencies like that. It is all part of the advice from people like Mataitoga: "Yes, yes, we can actually go back to democratisation, because we all want to have that. In the meantime, whilst we are outside here, we need friends, so we have to work hard to get friends." Fiji has been very active in the UN and the Group of 77. It's all part of the diversification of our foreign policy.

SO: Sir, would you say that there is a consensus view in the task force about Fiji's future relationship with the Commonwealth?

KT: I think the task force only wishes to regularize the situation and our membership.

SO: How much importance is attached to the Commonwealth?

KT: On the Commonwealth… I think we have sentimental values, which is important. The Commonwealth was involved in many excellent areas of cooperation. I remember the Commonwealth of Learning, with its distant learning, the engagement with the local government administration, women, gender – these are very important sectors and issues for development in the Pacific. So, the Commonwealth has been involved with that and I think the criticism here is [with regard to] what the benefits of Commonwealth engagement are. The Commonwealth is long on ideas, but very short in terms of resources to back up those ideas.

SO: Indeed.

KT: I think that is part of the problem. I think there's still a youth office here in the Pacific. That's good. Excellent issues and sectors of engagement, but they are not backed up with resources.

SO: I have a note here saying that the Commonwealth Fund of Technical Cooperation (CFTC) aid budget is something like £29 million [£29.7m in financial year 2012-2013] at the moment. It's tiny.

KT: Yes, that is the problem with the group. Great ideas – you know, we want ideas, and they do bring ideas. But back it up with resources!

SO: Okay, so if you are going to be an intellectual think tank – as the Commonwealth was under Sonny Ramphal's leadership – you need to have money to back those ideas up.

KT: I think it is money, yes. You have to have back up for ideas. Find financiers who will back up ideas. Maybe that's the approach for the future. The ideas are there: just get a financial backer.

SO: I'm also going to suggest that, if Fiji is looking for bilateral aid, the connection with China might seem particularly attractive – because of its lack of conditionalities, the relative speed of decision-making, the lack of prescriptive clauses that are associated with the major international financial institutions …

KT: Well, that relates mainly to China, for instance, and Russia. With the New Zealand Aid and AusAid, they've got programmes which are multiannual and multi-sectoral and I think that is probably the direction the ODA is taking.

SO: What you're outlining here is, actually, that the Commonwealth has diversified into regionalism: if you're talking about the Pacific Islands Forum, or the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), as well…

KT: Yes. There is a reconfiguration. I've used that term in the Pacific, but I think it is all part of the changes that are necessary and that we have to manage, because it comes down to what our members want. The configuration is taking place, but we have just got the Pacific Plan reviewed. There is a review report that has been out – a very good report – which is taking the Pacific regionalism back to basics: what we wanted to do way back in 2002-03. We've lost our way a little bit, but now the report is taking us back to regional integration and all that. And so this reconfiguration is, I think, good in the long term. We needed that, and regionalism is the way to go for the Pacific. The review of the Pacific Plan is taking us in the right direction. In the meantime, the growth of sub-regionalism – the MSG – is getting stronger and stronger. It has, for instance, the only trade agreement in the Pacific that works: the MSG Trade Agreement. The Pacific Islands Countries' Trade Agreement (PICTA) is not working well. It has not been ratified by all the members, for instance, and it's the MSG that is developing as a strong sub-regional organisation. It's not going to compete with the Forum. The Forum is over-arching and MSG is a sub-regional organisation within Pacific regionalism.

SO: So, it's an inter-governmental organisation with a Secretariat?

KT: Well, yes. But the membership of the MSG includes a political party, the FLNKS.

SO: From New Caledonia?

KT: Yes. It's a government-in-waiting, maybe. Out of the Nouméa Accord. So, the MSG is an inter-governmental body, 'plus'.

SO: How far are the political economies of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as well as the government-in-waiting in New Caledonia, complementary? Do they form a regional political or economic grouping?

KT: They are all part of Melanesia, technically, and that unites the group. The origin of the group was a political alliance that supported the FLNKS; that's how it originated. It was a political alliance. It has become now a sub-regional group that's looking after regional and sub-regional integration and all that. It has a trade agreement, for instance, so it is becoming a sub-regional economic community of sorts.

SO: Does the MSG have a particular relationship to the PRC?

KT: No, the relationship is at the bilateral level. So, the MSG is just a sub-regional organisation that wants to play its part in the Pacific: as a sub-regional body within Pacific regionalism.

SO: So how much authority and autonomy does the Director have? Does he speak for the MSG…

KT: Yes.

SO: …at the Pacific Islands Forum? I was just wondering what his area of responsibility is, if he has a small Secretariat?

KT: Well, he has the authorities of a Secretary General. And part of his terms of reference is to speak for the group in between sessions, for instance.

SO: Yes.

KT: So, a fully-fledged, sub-regional organisation, with suitable authorities for its head, the Secretary General.

SO: Okay. Does the Secretary General have any particular relationship with the Commonwealth Secretariat in London? I am just looking at all the members: Fiji, a currently suspended Commonwealth member; Papua New Guinea, current; the Solomon Islands, current; Vanuatu…

KT: Yes, we do get assistance. The MSG gets technical assistance from the Commonwealth Secretariat. So, it is just like any inter-governmental body in its relationship with the Commonwealth.

SO: Okay. So, has this been another way for Fiji to maintain its relationship with the Commonwealth, or is this just coincidental?

KT: Yes. It is not so much a way back to the Commonwealth, but it is happy to be still in that group and benefiting indirectly from the Commonwealth. The MSG is really a sub-regional initiative in the Pacific, because this is all part of the reconfiguration that is going on: the formation of sub-regional bodies. And, already, there is a sub-regional organisation called the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) that has been in existence for many, many years.

They have been receiving a lot of assistance from the Forum, but it is a sub-regional organisation which is recognised. Every year, the leaders have a summit of small island states that reports to the main Forum Leaders' Summit. MSG is another sub-regional organisation. The Polynesians have also formed a sub-regional body and Samoa is running the Secretariat for that, and the Micronesians have also formed their own regional sub-group. So, the view that we take is that the sub-regional bodies are good, because it is an opportunity to address some of the issues more intimately than you would get at a regional level.

SO: Sir, could I suggest, though, that the Commonwealth – with its particular focus in the early 1980s on the security of small states and the publication of its 1983 Report [*Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society*] – likes to put itself forward as a spokesperson for small states? Indeed, since 1983, the majority of the members of this organisation are small states. And yet, here, you are emphasizing different institutional sub-regional focus and linkages?

KT: That can link to the Commonwealth? Yes, I think the Commonwealth small states initiative is great. And I was part of the delegation of ministers from the Commonwealth small states, promoting small states' interests in the WTO at the time. So, it's a great initiative of the Commonwealth: the focus on small states and the development problems faced by the small states within the WTO, the discussions on the Doha Round, the interests of the small states within the Doha negotiations... So, that's a great initiative.

SO: But, Sir, when you formed part of that delegation – that roving interest group – was this a specific Commonwealth initiative?

KT: Yes. It came from the Abuja discussions in 2003, following the collapse of the Doha discussions at Cancun in September 2001. The Commonwealth heads issued the Aso Rock Statement on Multilateral Trade at the Abuja meeting. It was after that conference that a small group of Ministers was put together to go round and visit some of the capitals around the world. I was part of that.

SO: So this was Don McKinnon's initiative?

KT: Yes.

SO: Okay. Who else was involved in this Commonwealth Trade Ministers Mission?

KT: The Deputy Prime Minister of Barbados, Dame Billie Miller, who was also Head of the Caribbean Region Negotiations on Doha Round and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Barbados. The Mission Chair was Alhaji Idris Waziri, Minister of Commerce in Nigeria;

SO: So you were a group of Commonwealth Trade Ministers that were going around, specifically lobbying or courting opinion? Or to educate other key members on the particular needs of small states?

KT: To educate, and to lobby for the position of the small island states, or small states in the WTO.

SO: So how much did the Secretariat provide the administrative back up for you? In terms of support for the report that you would have been required to write…

KT: We were well received. There was a report that would have gone to the Secretariat.

SO: Did it have any impact?

KT: At the WTO? [*Laughter*] Those negotiators are probably going to die there! The Doha Round has struggled to conclude.

SO: Well, as Henry Kissinger said, "It's all very well having a policy initiative. What's the impact?"

KT: Yes, but it's difficult to change the WTO. You can see what happened at that meeting in Bali. And they're still talking about the Doha Round! I have lost track of what is happening at the WTO.

SO: Obviously, you felt that there was benefit to this idea – to have a quartet of leading and experienced politicians and diplomats from the small island states. But did you think there could be a Commonwealth bloc that could be going forward in the WTO? Or, in fact, were there too many competing agendas here?

KT: The Commonwealth bloc really didn't materialise in the WTO. There were too many other blocs there. There was the Group of 90, the Group of 110. There were too many groups and so the Commonwealth played its role by focusing on the small island states, the small island vulnerable economies, which is recognised under the WTO as a group of concerned countries.

SO: So, you feel that the Commonwealth, in fact, had some input into the WTO recognition? That they were a specific group that had unique interests and needs for their political economies?

KT: Oh yes. Yes, and the Commonwealth did a lot of things, not only financing the Group that went round. They had seminars and they had group discussions on how to negotiate as a small island state. So, a lot of work was done by the Commonwealth and that's a very useful input.

SO: On how to negotiate as a small island state?

KT: Yes, trade agreements.

SO: In what way?

KT: Just the art of negotiating and then strengthening your group, your outlook, and this kind of thing.

SO: Oh, did that include anything revelatory or new to you, as an experienced diplomat?

KT: Well, it was an endorsement of what we had been trying to do all the time, but to me it was just great that the Commonwealth was focusing on these issues on how to negotiate. People would come to the group with wide experience

on how to negotiate, and they had people who were coming there for the first time and not knowing what to do in negotiations. So, I thought that input was very useful.

SO: I'm fascinated by this guidance on how to build a negotiating team. This is capacity building?

KT: It is capacity building. It is learning, because the WTO and all its concepts and conventions… they are not easy. You have got to be there for several years to understand all the different groups and what is going on. The institutions – such as the Green Room and all those groups – can be quite complex and confusing.

SO: Was that unique to the WTO negotiating environment? Or could you use the knowledge and techniques from other settings? For example, would there be a crossover from the culture and negotiating approach of the UN to the WTO, or, in fact, are they too radically different?

KT: Probably different in many ways, and the WTO has its own traditions and systems where you negotiate as a group, then you break away and create your own positions, which you then bring to the plenary. And, once the negotiations have advanced to some extent, they then create a Green Room where you attend by invitation. You are invited to come in and try to reach a common position. If you are not part of the group, you are not invited; you are not part of the Green Room. So, there is some discrimination there.

SO: My goodness, it sounds incredibly arcane! But also very hierarchical?

KT: It's very hierarchical, because of the differing role of the varying members in global trade. The small island states, small vulnerable economies, make up 0.1% of the global trading system.

SO: So, not a lot of leverage?

KT: Very little leverage. So, yes, it's very hierarchical, and we believe that the rules are weighed against the small traders.

SO: So, the pressure is for economic liberalisation from much larger economies or economic units, such as the EU or the United States economy, both with their protectionist barriers?

KT: Well, on liberalisation… We go to the WTO and talk about removing barriers and liberalizing, removing subsidies? Look at the United States with its agricultural subsidies, the CAP with its agricultural policy, and China and Japan are carrying on with their subsidies. And yet subsidies are banned under the WTO. It only works for some, and not for others!

SO: Well, indeed! I remember reading about Thatcher arguing with President Mitterrand saying, "Look, the EU is so protectionist." And he said, "Yes, that's the point." [*Laughter*]

KT: Yeah, so it is the big boys that rule there. We love to say that the WTO is a member-driven organisation. Yes, member-driven, but only the big boys are driving it.

SO: You feel, though, that that was a particular Commonwealth-supported initiative to enable small states' diplomacy – in terms of training, facilitation or to give a greater platform to lobby for your interests – even if, as you say, small states' trade only comprised 0.1%?

KT: Yes.

SO: You made reference to the Commonwealth of Learning and also the Commonwealth Local Government Association initiative. This all indicates that the Commonwealth has evolved dramatically since the inter-governmental emphasis of the early days, and that its role is now in different avenues and fora. Are Commonwealth civil society organisations still operating here in Fiji, below the government-level radar?

KT: Yes, there is an office here of the Commonwealth Local Government organisation.

SO: Yes. So, providing training, providing knowledge transfers on local government administration and practice?

KT: Yes, I don't quite know the details of what they do, but there is an office which is active here; and yet, in Fiji, because of the situation we are in, there's no elected local governance. There are no town councils. There are only town administrators appointed by the government. So, that's a thing we will have to reorganise. Once we get back – and we have to get back – to electing our own councils. At the moment, there are no local councils.

SO: It's individually appointed officials from the central government?

KT: Yes. 'Special Administrators', they are called.

SO: So, Special Administrators appoint their own officials, their own budgetary organisation?

KT: Yeah.

SO: So you have to build, as you say, really from the grass roots then?

KT: Yes. We have to get back to democratising local government, in the same way we are trying to do at the national level.

SO: This is since 2006?

KT: Yeah, after 2006.

SO: So, how much – in this eight year interim period, then – has there been an important leaching of knowledge at local government level?

KT: It's my view that we have had this existence for eight years, and it does create an urge to get back and to do what is necessary to democratise. It is capacity building again, maybe. And just to go back to normal.

SO: So that implies then, at the capacity building level, the Commonwealth would indeed have a…

KT: Have a role.

SO: …have an important role at local Government level. In terms of health, education delivery, sanitation, refuse collection…

KT: A very important role. Yes.

SO: …possibly, also budgetary accounting systems…?

KT: Yes. Those units would still be there. Their role has been somewhat downplayed, I think, but you still need to do some capacity building… of course, apart from democratising the whole system.

SO: How confident are you of these approaching elections, due in September?

KT: Well, I am a keen observer. [*Laughter*]

SO: You are a very experienced observer, Sir, which is why I am asking you.

KT: Frank Bainimarama and the regime have said sufficiently [enough] for people to believe that these General Elections will happen, and so, I think they are committed to that. It's the logistics. We've got a new constitution, which was not driven by the people. It was handed down: top down. And we have a changed electoral system. We have one constituency, so the whole country is one constituency.

SO: So, will the general election be on a party list system?

KT: Well, this is coming out: how the electoral system is going to work at the practical level. The party list system, there has been talk. I haven't seen the new electoral decree, but that just came out last week and it is being studied now: how this is going to pan out. So, it is going to be a smaller parliament with 50 seats, one constituency…

SO: Yes, a unicameral national assembly, with no Senate.

KT: …no Senate. And this is the new system that we have. Voting is not compulsory. They want to do the elections in one day, have it counted that same night, and this is what they are trying to do.

SO: So you have a newly appointed Electoral Commissioner, issues of voter education, voter registration…

KT: Yes. The voter registration is complete.

SO: And that is based on a current census?

KT: Yes. It has been an ongoing process and they've gone overseas to register those who are interested. So, we have electoral rolls…

SO: But I saw in yesterday's paper that it is going to be a question of each candidate being assigned a number, and the voters are expected to vote for the number on their ballot?

KT: That is what is emerging now from the new Electoral Decree: that is providing details of how it's going to work, that's what I've heard. The person you are going to vote for… You have one tick, it has a number, so you look at the list outside of the ballot box…

SO: With an image of the candidate.

KT: Yes, and then you go into the ballot box to tick that number, so you may have the wrong number by the time you get there. You know, "What is the number?"

SO: Because you are not allowed to take any paper, or anything, in with you?

KT: No, you can't write anything on your hand. So, this is the big unknown.

SO: Do you have any idea of the thinking behind allocating a number, rather than a name or a Party?

KT: Well, they have people that have been across to other countries. For example, the people were sent to Australia to be observers there. All these ideas are new.

SO: Yes, they are.

KT: All these ideas are new; so I think the elections will take place. It will probably be too messy, because we are trying to implement a new system completely, and it is complicated.

SO: It is. Is there any degree of proportional representation?

KT: That, again… I haven't seen the electoral system, but it's been talked about.

SO: This is awfully fast. Here we are in April, and the elections are in September.

KT: Yes. The electoral decree has just come out and all the various political parties are looking at the decree and seeing how it is all going to pan out. Some discussions are emerging right now. The logistics: just imagine… The 320 islands, and the villages in the interior, and the islands, and we have to do all that in one day. And they are talking about centralising all the ballot boxes to count that same night. I don't know.

SO: A very tall order.

KT: Yes.

SO: Sir, in the new constitution it states the independence of the judiciary, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press…

KT: Yes.

SO: …so the democratic forms and norms that are required under the Harare Declaration, the Millbrook Declaration and the Latimer House Principles of the Commonwealth are all there?

KT: Yes. And there are a lot more rights that have been highlighted. You know, the rights to housing, etc.

SO: Are indigenous rights embedded in the Constitution?

KT: There are aspects of the indigenous rights reflected: land ownership, for instance. But there is a big question on land ownership: whether [or not] the protection has been weakened under the new Constitution. A lot of people do think that the protection that used to be there in previous constitutions has gone, or has been diluted. So, what will happen now? On land ownership, if there are any issues regarding land, it will be taken to parliament and the parliament will make the decision. In the previous constitution, the matter of land – relating to the indigenous rights – was put to the Senate, and the Senate would make a determination on it. And the Senate would always favour the indigenous people. So, that's all gone.

SO: Sir, is there an issue of 'land hunger' in this country? I am aware I'm using an African expression in a Pacific context, but do you understand the…?

KT: Yes. Not so much 'hunger'. I think the issue in Fiji is somewhat different. You know, you've got landowners and you've got the tenants' communities: The indigenous Fijians are the land owners; the tenant communities, and others, are mainly the Indian-descent Fijians.

SO: Yeah, so it's a freehold/leasehold issue?

KT: Well, there's leasehold, there's freehold, and there's government-owned land. So, those categories are still there and the ownership and the tenancy are very much divided on a racial line, and that has always created sensitivities in land issues in the past. So, the concern, really, is making land available for those who need it, and [ensuring] a fair return to the landowners. I think those are the two main concerns. The hunger? Not so much the hunger, because people do lease and a lot of the cane farmers are leaseholders. The problem of leasing comes up, at times, when the politics get too hot, some politicians would come up [to the landowners] and say, "Don't lease your land to the Indians." And that's when we have problems. But if you don't lease your land, you don't get a return on your assets. So, it is better utilisation of land which, I think, is the concern; and to have it available for those who need it, to develop, to increase the economic growth of the country.

SO: What about the social aspects of informal settlement and urbanisation? If you have rural/urban migration and limited access to land, it also has implications in social policy areas.

KT: Well, there is the problem with the squatters. The squatters go to the landowners and the landowners would accept a bottle of whiskey, or something like that: "Yeah, you can build there."

SO: Is that how that works?

KT: But there is no formalisation of that community. There is no lease. But they get the land, they build their house and the services come in – the water, the electricity – servicing this house on a squatter settlement, for instance. And it becomes difficult, because all the amenities are being supplied and the landowner has given his okay and more people and huts are sprouting up…

SO: Sir, these are shared issues across the Pacific.

KT: The squatter is a problem in other countries. In Papua New Guinea, it is a problem; in Fiji, it is a problem. I think in Micronesia [too]. In Polynesia it is not so bad…the squatter settlements are a problem.

SO: Do you think the Commonwealth – in terms of knowledge transfers or practical capacity support, issues of how to deal with land… Do you think the Commonwealth, because of shared challenges of access to land, has anything to offer? Squatter issues in the Pacific are very similar to informal settlements and social vulnerability in African countries. I'm just thinking, I suppose, of a possible wider think tank role.

KT: Well, they have a presence here already in the Local Government setup…and I would see an increased role of the Commonwealth going through that entity: to look at land settlement, urbanisation, squatter settlements. I would see a role for the Commonwealth there.

SO: Sir, can I just ask you, as a last question, how much do you think the Commonwealth has survived because of Her Majesty, the Queen? And what does this say for the Commonwealth going forward?

KT: It's a special club, the Commonwealth. A special club, with a special head. You don't get that anywhere in the world. So, I think, its existence and its longevity has contributed to this fact.

SO: It's a club with rules though?

KT: There are rules. Well, every club has to have rules.

SO: Indeed. Although some would say that, when they joined the Commonwealth, it didn't have rules, and now this club has rules: this is not what they originally joined or signed up for.

KT: Well, because it's grown.

SO: Is it too big?

KT: 53…The ACP is 81. No, it is not too big.

SO: When you've gone to Commonwealth meetings, though, have you remarked particularly on its informality, the benefit of contact with larger states and their leaders?

KT: Yes, it has its value in networking and knowing, putting a face to the person, and I think that has a value. I'm not the head of a Commonwealth government, but I have attended a number of Heads of Government

meetings, and I am just one of them. I mix around with them. I've lined up for the Queen with them.

SO: But was the table physically too big to involve everybody in the discussion?

KT: No. I managed to make points, and that is the worth of the smaller groups. With the Pacific Group there, they probably take a group position. Small island states have a little group, so…

SO: Did your Prime Minister ask you to come with him to the Retreat when you went to the Abuja and Cyprus meetings?

KT: I attended those Heads of Government meetings, because my Prime Minister was not available at the time.

SO: Oh, so you went to the Retreat?

KT: I went as a representative of the Prime Minister.

SO: How did you find the Retreat?

KT: The Retreat? Was there a Retreat? [*Laughter*] Yes. In the Forum, we have a Retreat, right?

SO: Yes. So you copied that from the Commonwealth?

KT: Yes, I suppose so, yes. When we go to the Leaders' meeting here, Leaders go off for their Retreat. It has become a more informal gathering.

SO: Including 'golf diplomacy'?

KT: Yes, so it is the same thing there. You remove your tie, you remove the formality… and they just sit next to each other and talk.

SO: About what really concerns them, yes?

KT: Yes, yes.

SO: Sir, did you find that beneficial?

KT: For me? I was going and standing in for the Prime Minister. I felt as part of the group, yes…

SO: It has been said that there has been an undertow of resentment among Pacific island states that the Commonwealth was dominated for too long by African issues. Does that strike chords with you?

KT: It didn't occur to me as a personal concern, but I was happy when the interests of the small states became pushed up the agenda. I was very happy with that. And, if it was a concern before, it probably brought some fairness and equity into the whole thing.

SO: Was Don McKinnon also useful, as Secretary General, in arguing the issues of small states? Particularly with the OECD on tax arrangements:

were you kept informed? Were you involved in any of those discussions?

KT: We had not been directly involved, but we would get documentation from the Forum – just to advise us on what's been going on. Don was a good support for Fiji at the time, when we were under the sanctions. So, you would still have that door open here. He would ring up for instance, and talk.

SO: Yes, he's got a very energetic, informal style.

KT: Yes, and we'd have that direct access to Don.

SO: Was that of use to you?

KT: Yes. And, I mean, it was just a good feeling. You know, that we are still being considered as a group member.

SO: Yes. I've interviewed Don McKinnon twice. As a former politician, he has emphasised this very question of informality – good contacts and good chemistry between heads. Politicians are a very particular group, he argues.

KT: Yes.

SO: They're not diplomats, they're politicians!

KT: Yes. Don was great in breaking the formality.

SO: He said he benefited very much from New Zealand being a smaller state that understood a Pacific way of thinking. Would you say that is true?

KT: He certainly had a good grasp of the Pacific and the Forum. And I think that's what attracted him to Fiji and to keep that close relationship; I think he really believed that the Commonwealth can do a lot more for the Pacific and new ideas emerged. But I think the problem with the Commonwealth was really the resources that did not back up the ideas.

SO: Yes. Well, as you've just indicated, one of the key resources of the Commonwealth has been the Queen.

KT: Yes.

SO: What does that then say for the Commonwealth going forward? Do you see it continuing through inertia? Do you see it continuing because it exists, and therefore people will use it? Is it going to become an increasingly insignificant inter-governmental organisation, but with the civil society links being, really, the energy and focus? Is the Headship, do you feel, going to Prince Charles, as the Queen's successor?

KT: Well, the Head creates the sentimental value of the organisation, but that's not going to make the organisation more relevant. I think what is going to make the Commonwealth relevant are the projects and the programmes that it runs. More relevant, more equipped, with resources going forward. We would love to have the Queen stay there forever, but that's impossible. Even if Prince Charles comes in, that is a continuity of the Royal Family's interest in

the Commonwealth. But, I think, going forward, the Commonwealth needs to equip itself with greater resources: because that is what the small countries are waiting for. They love ideas, but if those ideas – and it's happened on a few occasions in the Pacific – are not backed by resources, they are no good. So, the Commonwealth has to become more relevant, and that relevance will come with ideas backed up with resources.

SO: Yes. I agree, Sir. Thank you very much indeed.

KT: I've spoken too much.

SO: On the contrary! Thank you again.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]