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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Sir Don McKinnon (Part One)

Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
DM: Sir Don McKinnon (Respondent)

Part One:

SO: This is Sue Onslow, interviewing Sir Don McKinnon, former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, at Senate House on Monday, 27th February 2013. Sir Don, thank you very much for your kind agreement to be interviewed for our Oral History Project. In your autobiography, *In the Ring*, which has just been published, you emphasise very much the contentious political issues you had to deal with, rather than what you see as the successes of the Commonwealth during your time as SG. Is this a fair reflection of the diplomacy of the Commonwealth during your time?

DM: In my book, I talk about the issues that I, as Secretary General, had to concentrate on, and these were the big Commonwealth political issues always. There was the future of Pakistan, or Fiji, Zimbabwe and other political ones. So, they took up a lot of my time. But, of course, you are very conscious that there are 300 people at the Secretariat; there are 300 consultants around the world just doing things all the time, which had nothing to do with the political issues that I had. I felt if I had written my book and then finished it with only the political issues, I would have all the staff saying, “What about the stuff that I am doing?” So, I said, “Well, I had better do this non-political stuff at the end and really, just for the record, to acknowledge good works, more than anything else.”

SO: So, your role was very much focused on those challenging political issues?

DM: I felt that was my role. My role was to hold the Commonwealth together, obviously – [to] not let it be divided on trenchant issues. It was to pursue those issues which were expected of the Secretary General, where countries would come on to a CMAG agenda or something like that. So, we inherited the slipstream of Nigeria being suspended for that period of time, which did set a rough precedent for other actions along the way. So, the way we dealt with Pakistan, the way we dealt with Zimbabwe was largely codified by the way we had dealt with Nigeria, given it had been suspended since 1997.

SO: You were Foreign Minister during the Auckland 1995 CHOGM. How much input did you have? I appreciate that you were Foreign Minister, rather than head of state, but did you have any input into the Millbrook Declaration?

DM: None at all. That was just leaders. It was just leaders, and the man who was probably more responsible for writing those words of Millbrook was the scholar who used to be head of the economics division in the Secretariat, SK Rao. A brilliant guy: a brilliant economist and long-time Commonwealth star of battling out this sort of thing; and he was the one in Millbrook with the Secretary General at the time, Anyaoku, when the whole Millbrook thing and the response to Nigeria's CMAG was discussed. He and Anyaoku were undoubtedly the authors of Millbrook.

SO: The other prominent issue that was causing complications in the Commonwealth while you were Foreign Minister was New Zealand's desire for a nuclear-free Pacific.

DM: Yes, which John Major found very, very difficult to deal with. We had a lot of tete-a-tetes with him on that one. And you just knew that he was fed up with Thatcher looking over his shoulder all the time. Remember the actions of France and the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland were still fresh in our minds – actions that were never criticised by the British Government.

SO: Did it cause tension with the Americans as well, though?

DM: Not as much with them. They were always considered to be the bogeyman of the Pacific on nuclear issues, but the British were possibly tougher in many ways because of the French, I think. The Americans said, "Look, we know what you are trying to do, but it is the high seas and we don't actually need to observe it but we are not going to rub it in your face."

SO: What was the diplomacy within the Pacific Island Forum on this issue?

DM: I will have to go back to my notes on that one, but I mean, generally, they were pretty supportive of it. We were in the throes of dealing with Fiji at the same time, and although Fiji did come back into the Commonwealth at the 1997 CHOGM, people like Prime Minister Rabuka and that were keen on having the United States naval vessels come into Lautoka.

SO: And that beautiful deep water harbour in Suva.

DM: Lautoka or Suva. There were a lot of big spending Americans.

SO: Well, indeed. America's financial support for Fiji right now isn't exactly helping good governance and the restoration of democracy in Fiji, is it?

DM: That's right.

SO: When you were elected or selected at the Durban CHOGM in 1999, how much of a handover was there between you and Chief Emeka?

DM: Nothing much there, but I came to London and had two useful meetings with Anyaoku. Well, no-one knew what was going to happen. They had Sonny Ramphal for 15 years or something as Secretary General – probably 16, it would have been an even number – and then Anyaoku took over. At the Cyprus CHOGM of 1993, there was a lot of angst between Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, I think – and I was very peripheral to this – about Anyaoku's performance. Clearly, the more agitated they got about Anyaoku, the more support he got from the developing countries. He wasn't anywhere near the same person as Sonny Ramphal was. I think Anyaoku was more like the current Secretary General – more of a quiet diplomat. The result of that [was], because his had been an open ended contract when he was selected in 1989, leaders said, "Right, we are now going to finalise a termination to your contract. You will get two more two-year periods. In other words, you will terminate in 1999." But no one knew when he was going to stop work. So, in 1999, I was elected. They elect you first and then they say you are appointed. So, he then decided that he would not leave office until 31st March 2000, which again got people all fired up. I just happened to say, "Look, I am the incoming Secretary General. I am not going to fight this one. If he wants to stay, then let him stay."

SO: You started on 1st April?

DM: So, I started on 1st April. I came to London on, I think, about 20th March, so he and I had about a week where I met with him probably for an hour or an hour and a half, occasionally, and we would talk about the different issues that he wanted me to know about and so that I could ask questions about these issues. So, that was about the strength of the handover.

SO: How were his relations with Nigeria at that particular point?

DM: Much improved. Well, they had come back at that point. Did they come back at that Durban CHOGM? Yes, they did come back at that CHOGM. So, they came back as a full member.

SO: In May 1999.

DM: Well, they were informed after all [the] appeals concerning the election had been exhausted – about May or June 1999 – that they would come back as a full member at the 1999 CHOGM. So, he would have felt pretty good about that, and they went on to CMAG at the same time.

SO: That was a speedy restitution?

DM: That was very speedy, and I thought that was his one last way of smoothing things.

SO: Of course. At the same time as you were the incoming Secretary General, Thabo Mbeki was the first Commonwealth Chairperson in office. Did that cause tensions between your assigned roles, or not?

DM: No, we really haven't worked that one out very well. It is kind of there, and I got quite enthusiastic about it thinking, "Look, if we don't do anything, the South Africans won't do anything. So, we have got to give Thabo some tasks as chairperson in office." I don't think we did, actually. You see, we could see earlier on that the only people who can speak at the UN are heads of government or a head of state, and to that extent we could say to Thabo, "Well, you are speaking at the UN once a year when everyone else does, so we would like you to spend some time talking about the Commonwealth." But it never actually came to very much; we didn't really get the full advantage of it. Now, that is what I call the formal part of it. How do you make use of your Chairperson in office?

SO: But surely he was concentrating so much on African Renaissance and the shift from the OAU to the AU at the time?

DM: Yes, he just wasn't going to play, so I didn't lose sleep on this one. I was still thinking [that] we have got to do something to enhance this Chairperson in office, and I don't really think I ever succeeded in achieving much at all. But I can tell you this, in the case of Thabo and the case of John Howard and the case, certainly, of Obasanjo, each one of them I went to one or two times and said, "Look, I have got a real problem. This is my way of getting out of it. What do you think?" So, it gave me a sounding board and in all cases they were pretty useful. I went to Thabo and I said, "Look, we have got this problem in Fiji. It is not going to be fixed by anyone that Fiji knows" – because we had Ratu Mara there still, with arrogance and all that sort of thing.

SO: All six foot eight inches of him!

DM: All six foot eight of him, and so I spoke to Thabo and said, "I think if you can provide me with a judge, I can then take that person to Fiji and say, 'Look we can help you out here'." They nominated three judges, and one of them was the Constitutional Judge Pius Langa. I spoke to them all on the phone and I thought, "No, this is the guy. This one will be good." I sent a message to Ratu Mara that I was sending an eminent South African judge for the purpose of helping Fiji get through this current problem. Well, I got, "What does a South African know about Fiji?" So, I said to Pius, "It is going to be uphill." He just put that big smile on his face and said, "Oh, well, we will see what happens." He did very well, because Pius Langa had huge intellect.

SO: Ratu Mara would have respected that.

DM: Yes, ultimately he did. Ultimately he did. He knew that he was dealing with someone substantial, that this guy wasn't just an African chief.

SO: He wasn't a cypher.

DM: No, and of course, Pius had done all this work in Lesotho, too, on peace-building there. So, Pius Langa went to Fiji a few times and he would just sit down with Ratu Mara and he would sit down with other leaders and talk to them, and it was useful. So, in that way, that was an indirect way of using him – the Chairperson in office, that is. It was hooking them into the role, saying, "I am approaching you because you are Chairperson in office and I need you to help me." And in all cases, they played ball well.

SO: What was the impact of 9/11 on the actual diplomacy of the Commonwealth, particularly towards Pakistan?

DM: Well, of course Pakistan turned right around.

SO: Suddenly General Musharraf became 'the good guy'?

DM: Yes. I think I made mention of that. Everyone suddenly wanted to invite Musharraf to dinner. There was no problem about postponing the CHOGM: everyone realised that leaders had more to worry about than to go to the CHOGM at that time, in the very close aftermath [of 9/11]. I think I flew straight to Australia. There were about three leaders who rang me almost within 24 hours of one another and just said, "Look, Don, I just can't get away from my country at this time." Then I knew it was all over, so I pulled the plug on it. The funny thing about the Commonwealth is that they were all asked locally, "Are you going to go ahead with CHOGM?" "Well, of course we will go to CHOGM." "Well, what if no one is there?" "Well, that's entirely up to the Secretary General." So, I just knew that I could pull the plug and they would all agree that I should pull the plug. None of them asked me to pull the plug, but I knew they wanted me to pull the plug!

SO: As you say in your book, suddenly Britain wanted Pakistan as a regional 'anchor state'. So, it became enormously important to the British government in their calculations of the 'War on Terror' and the launching of the coalition to tackle the Taliban. Did that complicate your relationship to the Blair government as you tried to encourage Pakistan to return to democracy?

DM: Well, I had some arguments with FCO at the time. I said, "Now, let me be quite clear here. You are going to treat Pakistan differently as a bilateral relationship [compared] to how you are dealing with it with us [the Commonwealth] as a multilateral relationship." They were not on…Were they on CMAG at the time? We took Britain off CMAG. probably at Coolum, I think. We could not have sustained their dual position.

SO: In 2002?

DM: Yes, you see, they had been members of CMAG since 1995, right through. And I assisted that. I said, "Look, we have got to rotate this CMAG." And I told, I think, Robin Cook that they were going to be coming off the CMAG.

SO: Your book makes specific mention of how this supremely irritated the Foreign Office and the Blair government.

DM: The Foreign Office, very much so.

SO: Was there a feeling that Britain should have a permanent representative on CMAG, rather like the UK's permanent seat on the UN Security Council?

DM: Well, yes, but they got used to it. When I talked with Boutros-Ghali, who was wanting to set up a similar sort of CMAG-type thing in *La Francophonie*, he asked me about it and I explained to him the rotating membership of CMAG.

He said, “I could never believe that we [*La Francophonie*] could have a CMAG in which France wouldn’t want to be a permanent member.”

SO: That’s interesting!

DM: I said, “Well, I can understand it, but I have insisted that there has got to be rotation.” Now, whether I explained in the book, but I thought the only way I will get away with this is [by making] sure that those four, old Commonwealth countries, as long as two of them are properly there, we must keep rotating their group around all the time. That is everlasting.

SO: So that was your sop?

DM: Your words. Mine [would be] “strategy”, yes, to satisfy everyone.

SO: How about your broader relations with the Blair government and their attitude to the Commonwealth?

DM: Oh, it was hot and cold. I got very angry with them a few times, and one time we had a CMAG here in London. Ministers turned up from all over from the Commonwealth for this meeting of CMAG, and not one of the British Ministers could even walk across St James’s Park.

SO: And it wasn’t even raining, don’t tell me?

DM: They had a Foreign Secretary and I think there were three Foreign Office ministers at the time, and I really tore into Michael Jay at the time. I said, “Don’t send your officials to my officials telling me how you have to be on CMAG when you can’t even perform when you are on CMAG.”

SO: Did you feel a certain discomfort when you were elected at Durban? After all, your Prime Minister couldn’t be there because there were elections in New Zealand. You were just saying about poor indications of dedication to the Commonwealth there.

DM: Yes, well, you see, I was aware that New Zealand always has November elections. CHOGM is always November, so we always miss out on CHOGM about every third time.

SO: Just as well America isn’t also involved in Commonwealth affairs!

DM: I’ve sat with Americans at many international meetings – APEC, ASEAN Regional Forum, etc. Wonderful people but I’m glad they’re not in the Commonwealth.

Yes, we also missed out on Cyprus, so my friend Philip Burdon – as a senior Minister in a safe seat – was there. It is just one of those things, and occasionally it hits Australia too, because normally Australia and [New Zealand] have elections in the October-November period, as [happened] in Kampala. So, either one of us tend to miss out occasionally.

SO: Talking about the complicated attitudes of certain countries toward the Commonwealth, I want to moving on to India. India has been a core member of the Commonwealth since 1949. It could be described as

‘Nehru’s Commonwealth’, until the expansion with the Afro-Asian countries which changed the organisation dramatically by 1965. It always strikes me that India hasn’t used the Commonwealth to the extent that it could have done, given the pattern of the Indian diaspora and given India’s own strength,

DM: India post-Nehru went very anti-colonial, and they really wanted to rid themselves of any association with the Commonwealth. I don’t know where the turning point was: maybe the Bandung conference setting up the Non-Aligned Movement…

SO: So, choosing to focus more on the UN and Non-Aligned Movement?

DM: The Non-Aligned Movement was everything. The Commonwealth? Everything but that. The old phrase [from Matthew 7: v.15-20], “by their fruits ye shall know them.” If you track back and see when Indian prime ministers actually went to CHOGM, we see a huge gap there – back in the 1970s, 1980s. It was Prime Minister IK Gujral that really, I think, got it moving again. Vajpayee, I don’t know – I would have to check the records – but certainly Gujral in the late 1990s was very active. When I came in, Vajpayee said to me, “I was fighting the British in 1947. I wasn’t holding any candle for the Commonwealth at all.” But, he says, “I now know what they do and they do a lot of good things. I am prepared to go along with this.” Prior to Gujral was Narasimha Rao, and he was the one that started the move to turn India’s economy totally around, using Manmohan Singh as his Minister of Finance. So, he was more outward looking, too. Up until Narasimha Rao, there were very few Indian Prime Ministers in general who were pro-Commonwealth. And, of course, this coincided with the diminishing of the Non-Aligned Movement anyway in the early 1990s.

SO: So, it was only at the end of the Cold War – with the parallel diminution of the significance of Non-Aligned Movement – that India started waking up again to the value of the Commonwealth?

DM: It was waking up to its external relationship generally, I think, and the Non-Aligned Movement wasn’t going to go anywhere.

SO: But how much of it was also the product of a limited Indian bureaucracy, in terms of the relatively small size of its Foreign Affairs department? Given the size of the country, it could be said that India has a remarkably small foreign service and representation. How far has India marshalled its forces and focussed on the UN, sending only the ‘B Team’ to the Commonwealth? Was this also compounded by a culture of ‘discuss and delay’? So, you have got three factors which would limit India’s active engagement in the political affairs of the Commonwealth.

DM: Yes, I know! But they have never been very helpful. I also parallel that with the fact that, which one of their neighbours do they really get along with very well? None of them! Now, surely, the first element of diplomacy is at least get along with your neighbours.

SO: It is basic diplomacy driven by geography.

DM: I know. They just seem to have an inability to get along with their neighbours.

SO: Surely that had become even more problematic by 1999, in terms of the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship, as Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons. Did this cause you complications in managing tensions within the Commonwealth? You have made reference to Musharraf as the 'favoured ally', post-9/11.

DM: Not really. I was the Foreign Minister at the time, [and] I had to bring in the Indian High Commissioner and complain bitterly about the fact that they had just detonated nuclear weapons and they had become a nuclear power. And, of course, the same thing happened with Pakistan. The day they became a nuclear power, everyone was screaming at each other.

SO: Well, they had achieved membership of the 'great power club', hadn't they?

DM: So, as everyone knows now, India was developing that bomb way back, and Pakistan was too, as we now know.

SO: So, there was a certain degree of cynicism, then, in your reprimand?

DM: Oh, yes.

SO: Just going back to the beginning of your term of office as SG, how much of your time did indeed go to Zimbabwe? Obviously you spent a great deal of time discussing it in your book, but did this really consume your energies in your first term of office?

DM: It just took up a hell of a lot of time. It didn't have me lying awake at three o'clock in the morning – which, you know, when that happens, it is something you have got to do something about! All the time, I was trying to work out ways to resolve it. I was convinced we have got to get ahead of this issue. Not be trailing it all the time, not just reacting to it: we have got to get ahead of it somehow. I spent a lot of time on the phone with Kofi Annan, with other African leaders, with World Bank and IMF people. I felt that, if we had all coalesced together on this, we could put the appropriate pressure on Mugabe. But holding that bunch together was like herding cats, really.

SO: How much of the Zimbabwe problem would you attribute to Mbeki? In your book, you say he was trying to "hold the Commonwealth at arm's length".

DM: Yes, well, you see, when I talked to other African leaders, I pushed them quite hard, and if I pushed them too hard, they would say, "Look, Don, this is Thabo's area." In other words, Thabo was saying, "Southern Africa is mine. You stick to West Africa, you stick to East Africa; Southern Africa is mine."

SO: Was that also because you were a New Zealander?

DM: A little bit of that, yes.

SO: As if to say, "You are not the 'anchor state' in this region; I am."

DM: Oh, yes, and he seemed to grumble continually to his staff. “If I hear Don McKinnon talk about CMAG or Zimbabwe one more time…”, or something like that. Later, President George W Bush acknowledged Thabo’s role in Southern Africa, and so the US stepped aside from criticising Zimbabwe or Mugabe. But he wasn’t a good political leader, Thabo. I was told the story that there was one of those late night meetings with Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisilu as to who was going to succeed Mandela. It was felt that the weighting was with Cyril Ramaphosa, but then one of those events where someone drops a cup or something and someone says, “Let’s get this over with and go with Govan’s son, Thabo.” And that was it. It was just one way into the campaign for the ANC.

SO: I have to say, though, I do think that history is going to be kinder to Thabo Mbeki’s attempt at quiet diplomacy with Mugabe than perhaps the press was at the time.

DM: I thought the British press was cruel on that, all the time demanding, “Why isn’t Thabo beating up on Mugabe?” Well, he’s not going to. He is not going to. I would get asked this all the time, and I would say Thabo also did not have the confidence of others such as Obasanjo, Bakili Muluzi, Levy Mwanawasa or Yoweri Museveni to publicly criticise. And Neighbours don’t generally criticise each other. I would say [in response to questions], “Can I remind you, when the French blew up Rainbow Warrior in the Auckland harbour, the British government never criticised the French.”

SO: No, they didn’t, did they.

DM: No. That is neighbours, looking after each other. Not that it was reciprocated by Mugabe.

SO: It is, but it is also part of ‘the armed struggle’, the wider ideological respect for Mugabe. So, there were all sorts of complicating factors.

DM: The annoying thing for Thabo was that Mugabe was still the front line state leader for a long time. He was still held in high regard, only second to Mandela, but higher than Mbeki. Again, I used to tell audiences here and in my home country and elsewhere, [that] I always remember going to Thabo’s inauguration. And when Mandela came in there was huge applause. When Mugabe came in, it was even bigger. You have just got to understand those values and events in that make up of Africa.

SO: As you say, the prestige and standing of the old man.

DM: He’s still there.

SO: Yes, without a doubt. Do you know what Zimbabwe had agreed with the Thatcher and John Major governments, before Labour came into power in 1997?

DM: It was an ad hoc, year-by-year arrangement. Buying farms, paying money, buying more farms, but then, of course…

SO: So, there was a degree of accelerated compulsory purchase?

DM: Yes, but of course, the Major government realised that also the farms were just ending up with Mugabe's cronies, which they didn't want to happen. Then there was this big debate. Well, how do you really break out of this? I still say that their policy was wrong, because you were dealing with a feudal structure of a single, white family owning a huge amount of land and employing a whole lot of 500 or 600 peasants. They were one degree above slave labour, and that was never going to translate to black ownership and sustain the same operation. Hence my argument was that you actually had to allow the Zimbabwe land policy to break down. Let people own their piece of land; let them do what they want on that piece of land. They can sell it, they can lease it, they can farm it – and then, ultimately, you start building up a new agricultural structure.

SO: Given the importance of the agricultural cash-crop sector to the Zimbabwean economy, that really is a 'break down' plan?

DM: It was a break down plan and there was no other way you could do it.

SO: Because no other way would have been politically acceptable?

DM: You had the white farmers who had a lot of knowledge of farming and agriculture. It wasn't being translated through to the black farmers. They just became what my friend in Uganda called 'briefcase farmers', and therefore you didn't have the same agricultural division. It still remained feudal.

SO: You had an intense argument with Robin Cook about this, didn't you?

DM: Yes. He said, "I don't want to go back to peasant farming." I said, "That's the starting point. You start with peasant farming and then you slowly build up."

SO: Well, Zimbabwe under ZANU-PF seems to have been intent on its process of decolonisation, and that requires expunging white settler capitalism.

DM: Look, in a hundred years it will be different again, but if the similar size properties in the United States or Australia are compared, they all have 12,000 acre properties there that they could be growing anything on, but you won't have 500 or 600 people living on them. You will just bring in ten big combine harvesters and the whole job is done.

SO: What was the feeling among the other members of the Troika – aside from Mbeki – about this critical question of the land issue? Did they feel that resolving the land issue was all part of supporting Zimbabwe's return to the Commonwealth?

DM: They knew that the land issue had to be resolved. They all knew that very clearly. Obasanjo said many, many times that, "the land issue is not the only issue, but it is the fundamental issue and it has got to be resolved." You still had Zimbabwe white farmers actually believing that if we hang in there…

SO: The international community will come to our aid?

DM: Of course, with big pay-outs. And, unfortunately, some got killed in the process.

SO: They did, indeed. Were you sending expert groups down there to try and conduct a land audit?

DM: We did. We did it with the UN, and I was so pleased that Kofi Annan was so enthusiastic about this. He said, “Look, Don, we will both go there together – UN and Commonwealth – and we will start doing a whole process on reconfiguration of the land ownership.” And we did. We had people there and it just started to get too dangerous and we knew it. They weren’t met by friendly white farmers at all, and they weren’t met by friendly African civil servants.

SO: Shot at by both sides? Do you remember when that was?

DM: No, but it was well documented. So, we had to pull them out. They might have been there three or four months. In fact, one of them – a gentleman I sent – was there six months.

SO: What was the relationship between Mbeki and Obasanjo, as two leading Africans and key members on that Troika?

DM: Obasanjo had won [his] stripes as a general and political leader, and Mbeki wasn’t a general. There were times that Obasanjo treated him as a corporal and Mbeki didn’t like that.

SO: So, he pulled rank?

DM: There were three really dominant ranking Africans and they were Mugabe, Obasanjo and Museveni. They probably all see each other as equals in a funny sort of way. Thabo went away to university; he didn’t fight in the bush.

SO: So, he was firmly second tier? How about their relationship with John Howard?

DM: John is an incredibly remarkable, successful politician, but he was old Commonwealth. He is six months younger than me, but, frankly, he was my father’s generation that came to this view of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and the Monarchy. Really, he was my father’s generation.

SO: Was that a reflection of his personal outlook or actually his politics?

DM: I think it was very personal, the way he saw it. I would ring him up and say, “John, this is the issue, so and so and so and so.” “Well, what’s Blair or Chrétien saying?” He would never say, what does Uganda and Museveni say? What’s Trinidad or Barbados saying?”

SO: What underpinned that? Was it also because there is the intelligence network which has got a Commonwealth label attached to it?

DM: There would be a bit of that in it, but he just was old style. He came out of the stable of Robert Menzies and that sort of thing. Frankly, he is one of the most successful politicians we have ever had. He saw off four members of his own party [and] beat four prospective Labor prime ministers. He did extremely well on the Zimbabwe issue. He just listened very carefully to both, in the Troika, of Obasanjo and Mbeki. He would ask very pointed questions and he would get very straight answers, and he would accept them. He was expecting something different, but he knew that the great strength of the Troika was the fact they had two major African powers. Anything less than that and it just wouldn't have flown.

SO: And in Obasanjo, you have one very 'big hitter'?

DM: A big hitter, and he knew African politics, and when we had that last Troika press conference they didn't want to be seen to lead there. So, we arranged that the three of us – Obasanjo, Mbeki, and myself – would sit down with John Howard as the chair. [He then] took the lead at the press conference so that they didn't have to answer questions.

SO: In the run up to the Abuja meeting in 2003, Mugabe had launched something of a counter-strike against you.

DM: Very much so. He infuriated Obasanjo, too. The same sort of thing. Mugabe just flailed out: "How dare anyone suggest the Commonwealth is going to do anything with me? How dare there be a Commonwealth meeting on African soil and I am not there?" Obasanjo put in hours of effort with him and the last roll of the dice was when Mugabe said to Obasanjo, "You invite me and I will decline to come."

SO: So, that was the deal?

DM: Obasanjo just said, "I wouldn't trust him". So, he wasn't invited. He just knew that if he invited him, Mugabe would turn up, even if he privately declined.

SO: Yes, something like his photo opportunity shaking Prince Charles' hand at the funeral of the Pope.

DM: Yes. People underestimate how smart that guy is. He is an absolutely phenomenal politician.

SO: Would you agree with commentators who say that Mugabe hasn't changed one bit, but instead it is the international climate around him that has changed?

DM: Yes, that is probably right, actually. I haven't spoken to him for probably five years now, but he was always as sharp as a tack. He could out-think all his ministers within the first ten minutes of every day. He would be well ahead.

SO: So, it is not a question of people controlling information going to Mugabe? Or is it a case of him being surrounded by ambitious politicians – all powerful in their own right within ZANU-PF – who were 'working towards' Mugabe?

DM: He is surrounded by people who realise they are caught up with his future.

SO: Like those surrounding Saddam Hussein?

DM: And [they] know that they cannot leave him or they will suffer. They all know he is doing a lot of things wrong, but they are caught up in the fervour of

‘Africa for Africans’, and they just don’t see it any other way. So, that will stick with them. He is so smart. He rings them, calls them over one by one to his office and tells them that, actually, they are the one, the person that he is anointing to take over from him.

SO: That is very flattering.

DM: So, they go out with a highly inflated chest of oxygen and, ten minutes later, someone else comes along and is told the same thing. He plays them all one against each other.

SO: Divide and rule?

DM: Yes. He does extremely well. You have got to hand it to the guy. The sad thing is [that] he did a tremendous lot of good for Zimbabwe probably up to about 1996–97, and, of course, the economy started running against him.

SO: It is the tragedy of the man, as well as the tragedy of the country.

DM: Yes. So, they have just got to pick themselves up, which they will. They are a hard-working, resolute sort of people.

SO: But he was certainly lobbying against your second term of office?

DM: Oh, yes; furiously.

SO: And you made reference to the fact that it was because of the Pacific island block that was wholeheartedly behind you.

DM: Well, Africa was divided, too, you see. [Mugabe] convinced Mbeki; Mbeki was his front man on Africa. Mbeki had this late night meeting – it was literally a midnight meeting – and Mbeki called all the African countries together and said, “Look, this is a critical thing tomorrow. We have got a good candidate for Secretary General. It’s Lakshman Kadirgamar from Sri Lanka. We have got to get rid of McKinnon.” Now, the people who reported this to me obviously might have been guilty of gilding the lily a little bit. They talked about some other things leading up to this, but then they started to get onto this issue of Secretary General and the voting for the Secretary General, and it was Thabo who led – started talking about it, pushing the discussion. Once that started in earnest, about a third of the African leaders left the room and duly reported to my African staff.

SO: Really? They got up and left?

DM: Yes; they just left the room. Which is a very African thing, you see: rather than take it head on, just withdraw, quietly withdraw. They had Caribbean leaders there, too, you see, because Patterson, the Jamaican, was a long-standing friend of Mugabe. The Caribbeans happened to say, “Well, look, we are not voting this other guy,” and then I think they realised that this business was because of Mugabe. Thabo had been saying, “I will deliver all the African votes for the Sri Lankan candidate,” and Obasanjo and others said, “No, he is not delivering my vote.” So, the strategy frankly all fell apart, but the effort by the Zimbabwe diplomats to pursue the objective was formidable. They had about 30 key diplomats in Abuja at the time. Even though they weren't at CHOGM, they were all around that town; they were in every hotel.

SO: On the periphery?

DM: They were in every hotel.

SO: From the wreckage of Abuja – with Zimbabwe deliberately withdrawing from the Commonwealth and refusing to listen to the Troika – how much did you make a determined and conscious decision to say, "We will put down the Latimer House Declaration as part of the communiqué"? Coming out of Abuja, you emphasised the positive by going for the Latimer House principles.

DM: I did not see wreckage. Calmness remained. However, Latimer House… Well, this is quite delicate, and I don't want to trip anyone up. It was in one of the Retreat sessions. Look, I wouldn't even be sure whether it was a Retreat session or if it was an executive session, because Retreat was leaders only. I can see the location. I think it was an executive session. It was at an executive session, and we were all there at two o'clock and Obasanjo wasn't there. I could see there was a bit of agitation around the room, and there were about four agenda items which were pretty light ones. So, at about 2:20, I just took a deep breath and said, "Look, in advance of President Obasanjo coming, there are three of four little items here that I think are worthy of discussion and they are not very complicated, but it helps keep things moving." One of them was the Latimer House principles, which I made sure were on that agenda, even though many people thought we would never get them past CHOGM.

Anyway, so we got through the three other little ones. They were slightly more than housekeeping, but they were just things had had to go on to be discussed at the executive session. Then I said that the next one was the Latimer House principles. I said, "You have all been aware of this. It has been around for about three or four years. Your Justice Ministers have all been addressing this for the last twelve months. What you have here is a consolidation of their views and an agreement for you to now address. I hope you can endorse these because…", blah, blah, blah, sort of thing. I frankly held my breath, thinking this could go either way. It was Dr Kenny Anthony from St Lucia, a tall guy; he said with that sort of Caribbean accent, "Don, we have had a look at this." He was a lawyer, anyway, and he said, "I am not sure that we really want to push this now." I thought, "Damn it!" I said, "Well" – I called him by his first name, I think – "it has been around all your officials, your ministers." Which it had been, because I had got them marshalled together at a conference of Justice Ministers in St Vincent & Grenadines some time beforehand. I wasn't fresh to this. I could see here was another good, solid series of foundation blocks to underpin Commonwealth values – that separation of those powers. Anyway, I said my part, [and] he said, "Oh, that's okay." And it went through. His was the only question I got, so I just said it has been approved. That was it.

SO: And thereafter, it was a deliberate policy and strategy of yours to emphasise that: the Harare Declaration and now the Latimer House principles.

DM: Yes.

SO: So, as you are talking, you are emphasising very much the question of personalities in politics. How much do you think this is key to the way that the Commonwealth works?

DM: Well, I am a politician, and we only survive through working with others: understanding other personalities. We are driven more by relationships than, possibly, we are by policies, sometimes.

SO: How far do you feel that the role of the Secretary General demands a politician rather than a high-ranking civil servant?

DM: I'm not about to criticise the CHOGM's decision, but it's a real point.

SO: Yes, of course.

DM: To be quite candid, I was very hopeful that a Minister would have got the job. In fact, I canvassed possible Ministers in Malaysia, India and ultimately Malta. Yes, the runner-up, Michael Frendo, would have been very good. I realized that a number of major countries would support India, [and] then was told it wasn't the Indian strategy to support a politician, despite my plea to Manmohan Singh. To me, it is a political job, because as a senior politician you are treating the leaders as equals, and they see you as close to one of them.

SO: So, you have to be their equal?

DM: You have got to be their equal. I have noticed that those who come from the civil service will always defer to ministers, presidents and prime ministers.

SO: But is that also the professional culture from which they are coming?

DM: Yes, that is right. Therefore they are just not prepared to sometimes say to leaders, "You have got to do it better than that." Or, "You have got to be tougher. You have got to do this; you have got to do that."

SO: To be more of the General than the Secretary?

DM: Yes, that is right. There are times you have got to be the General and ninety-nine times they don't mind, as long as you know that they are not going to be too upset. You have got to make a political judgement on those sorts of things. I knew that my successor was going to come from Asia, simply because if you look at the past, okay, and I looked very carefully. Singaporeans – we're not interested. Brunei – wouldn't stand a chance. Malaysia – yes, a possibility. Bangladesh – no; vetoed. My opposition was Bangladesh. Pakistan – suspended; no chance. Maldives – forget it. Sri Lanka – too many internal problems. India – yes, okay. So, I spoke to the Indian Prime Minister and I spoke to the Malaysian Prime Minister. I said, "Your ability to produce the next Secretary General is very high and these are the reasons." I didn't tell them I was talking to the other one; I just said India and Malaysia could both do it. I picked out a minister in both administrations whom I felt would do it and I spoke to those ministers. One was the minister of women's affairs in Malaysia.

SO: A woman SG would have been an innovation.

DM: She was a most attractive personality. She was a Muslim woman, she was outgoing, she was assertive…

SO: She ticked every box?

DM: She ticked every box. I don't know whether you know Rafidah Aziz, who was the trade minister in Malaysia. Well this was a woman minister who was moving into that area that Rafidah had held. The Indian minister that impressed me was the Indian minister for youth affairs, and I spoke to him and he had a great deal of interest. In fact, I began to wonder whether I should have even encouraged him, because he turned up in London about three days later and he said, "I have just come to visit the office." I thought, this guy is going to be measuring the curtains! Then he asked me about the salary and the benefits and the rest of it and I thought, hang on, are you really clear? Anyway, Abdullah Badawi, who was then Prime Minister of Malaysia, clearly didn't want to lose that women's minister, and so that one didn't get off the ground. The thing is, I was talking to Kamalesh about the Indian minister, because he was the High Commissioner here, and it was only afterwards I realised the Indian bureaucracy is so powerful. They will say who is going to be the next Secretary General. It won't come from the political classes.

SO: It is embedded hierarchies?

DM: Manmohan Singh, he accepted what I said. He said, "I understand the need for someone from politics." I thought, that is good; you understand it. Then I heard that they had nominated Kamalesh Sharma and I thought, "My God, here is a guy who had retired from the Indian Foreign Service, who was already my age." He retired from the Indian Foreign Service but he was a close friend of Rajiv Gandhi, so he had remained a close friend of Sonia Gandhi. So, he was out of the Indian Foreign Service, and his last position was as permanent representative in New York. So, then he finished that, so Kofi Annan appointed him to head up the UN mission in East Timor. He was prepared to do it, so he came out of retirement for that. Then, when he finished that job, Sonia Gandhi then asked him to be High Commissioner in London. So, he was just perfectly positioned to pull the strings at the right time and get nominated.

SO: Indeed, he did indeed.

DM: So, my poor little Indian politician just disappeared. Of course, Michael Frendo, who was the Maltese candidate, just didn't cross the line at the end, although he worked very hard. He would have been a far more energetic, active Secretary General.

SO: So, he just hadn't got the political votes behind him, coming from Malta?

DM: Africa, particularly, turned around, and India went round Africa and reminded the Africans just how much aid they were doing for their countries; things like that. It wasn't a hard sell. Malta was just another European candidate, really, in their eyes.

SO: Just moving on to other issues, two of the dark clouds hanging over your arrival as Secretary General were the issues of finances and the question of staffing at the Secretariat. You make reference in the book, also, to there being some tension between African appointments and Asian appointments. In terms of managing the diplomatic machine necessary to support your political activities, these frictions would have been of critical importance in trying to get the machine working well.

DM: Yes, and I realised [that], earlier on in my previous life, when I had employed a lot of people, you can interview people for hours and hours and hours and in the end you have just got to make a decision. More than often you end up by interviewing three really good people [and] waiting for one of them to make a mistake, just to help make that decision. I came to the conclusion [that], if you have got three really good candidates [and] the difference between them is actually very little, that is when you have got to say to yourself, "Well, here's the Economics Division. Of the top four, three are Asian. I have got two candidates in front of me, one is Asian and one is African. The African is going to win." It is just as simple as that.

SO: How much did what was going on at the Secretariat act as a drag anchor to what you were trying to do? When I was reading your autobiography, I was particularly struck by the tangled issue of the finances. The extraordinary way of budget allocation made me blink.

DM: Well, the auditors had tagged it for years. That took a few years to get straightened out.

SO: I'll bet it did. But also the whole question of shifting to payment for position, rather than longevity of service?

DM: Yes, then all moving up the ladder so you end up with a whole lot of Chiefs and no Indians out there.

SO: How much did you feel that that affected the Secretariat's dynamism during your term?

DM: My wife said to me – she used to come down to the Secretariat occasionally – and she said, "Do you know what this place is missing?" "What?" "There is no energy. There is no energy here. I walk in and someone gradually gets out of their seat." And she was absolutely right. So many people have been here so long, and the old guard, they wander in at ten o'clock in the morning. They are leaving at three o'clock sometimes.

SO: In your book, you made reference to a coup and…

DM: Yes, Fiji, and at eight am, no one was there! So, when I decided to make all those changes, I tell you, two years after the changes started you really felt it. People were walking faster, they were moving faster, they were doing things, they were trying things out, and I realised you bring in a new person to the job and they want to prove that they are pretty good. They will work harder, they will bring ideas, they will innovate and they will do things like that, and it becomes a little infectious. Suddenly, they are going to sit up and…I think I lost a lot of people who got pushed out – who didn't really want to be pushed out – but they had been there a long time. They had dug into a far too comfortable position.

SO: Was there an element of staff saying, “We are settled, our families are settled,” as well as a degree of “the job’s for life” syndrome?

DM: Yes, and I can fully understand it. You have got yourself a job in the Secretariat. It may not be paying the best, but you are here, your kids are getting an education in England, then suddenly this bloke from New Zealand comes along and sends you back to Tanzania or somewhere and you are not very happy about that. And they weren’t very happy about that, so I lost a lot of people which was no real loss to the Secretariat. As collateral damage, I lost three or four good ones, too.

SO: I was going to say, you lost knowledge as well?

DM: We lost a few, yes. By forcing the pace, we did lose some. But funnily enough, of the three or four good people I lost, one of them came back two years later on applying for a new job. I am not sure my successor followed it through; I think he let it get away a little bit.

SO: Towards the end of the book, as I said before we started, you talk about success stories at the Commonwealth. You list work in Sierra Leone among the RUF, the question of Ghana’s shift towards multi-party elections, work in Papua New Guinea to reconfigure the defence force, governance issues in the Caribbean, [and the] electoral system in Lesotho. On balance, though, you have talked a lot about the problems with the Commonwealth and what took up your energies. Where would you put in a scale the successes versus the failures in your time?

DM: I guess you have got to look at how many people are affected by what you do. If you can get a better electoral system in Ghana, [with its population of] 30 or 40 million people, then that is probably a very good result. If you have done a similar thing in Lesotho, it only affects a smaller number of people, doesn’t it?

SO: Well, Ghana is also now being held up as one of the beacons of hope in West Africa in terms of development.

DM: To me, it still comes down to getting your governance right. It is getting the balance between your executive, your judiciary, your legislature. All these democratic models are different, really; they all carry a local flavour. One of the reasons we went down the route we did in Lesotho was they had a ‘first-past-the-post’ system running for a while there and, of course, the result was that all the traditional leaders missed out and they were not happy. And I thought, “Why the hell are they trying to overturn a thousand years of chieftainship?” You wouldn’t get rid of the House of Lords overnight even if you wanted to. In devising the Lesotho electoral system, the issue was, how do you create a system more broadly representative, bringing the chiefs in – probably not on a personal voting but more of a proportional representation basis? To me, that is the way to do it. You have just got to look at the population and you think, well, what should the legislature look like? There is the population in front of you, what should it look like in the Parliament? Some suggest it should look like two houses, some could be one house, some could be proportionally elected, some could be first-past-the-post, [and] some could be multi-member constituencies. The mix of the population will tell you which is going to give you the best result. What's there now, hopefully, will be sustained and supported.

SO: Towards the end of your tenure, did Kenya cause you intense concern?

DM: Oh, I was angry with Kenya and Mwai Kibaki. I just tore into him on the phone one night; I really was so angry. I know there was something to the man: look, he was the hope of the side after Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, and he had all the right credentials. Then, if you remember, about three months before the election he had a horrific car accident, and without a doubt it affected him. I am not a medical person, but you know enough about these things. He clearly suffered enough to affect his brain and everything. So, suddenly, he slowed right down, lost his concentration. His thinking was slower; he spoke more slowly – you always felt he was five minutes behind the conversation. But he was the leader and he was managing things. Anyway, six months out from the election, I said to him, "Look, there is one thing you have got to do and that is to appoint far more independent members to the Electoral Commission. Nine of the members" – these numbers might be wrong – "nine of the electoral commission out of the twelve are your party. You have just got to, frankly, take a bit of a risk. Be open; put together an electoral commission that actually is more reflective of the whole country." "Yes," he said, "I will go and do that, Secretary General." Well, he didn't do a damn thing. And, of course, they really did continue to walk on the wrong side of the centre line.

Anyway, it all looked pretty reasonable going into the election, apart from these sorts of thing. Now, Raila Odinga had really run a very good campaign, and so when the polls opened, clearly they were getting a tremendous amount of support. I think that this trend was noticed during the day and panic broke out in the minds of Kibaki's ministers, all of whom were very determined to make sure they got their jobs back and, to me, were not serving Kibaki very well at all. They were just setting their own personal interests. Literally, when they started counting the votes, they realised that they were about to lose and that was when the corruption of the ballot boxes began.

SO: Stephen Chan argues that that was when the highly sophisticated election fraud in those key constituencies in the Rift Valley kicked in. I've heard him say, "I don't know *how* they did it, but..."

DM: They did it. They just knew what the numbers were going to be and they got all those into the ballot box. It was only a sliver of a margin; they scraped through, actually. I got up and rang Kibaki. That is the one annoying thing: there is Kenya, with everything going for it and it just cannot get it right. This should be the major hub of East Africa, with an airport like Singapore. It is major, but never rises to the occasion. It should be well ahead of everything.

SO: Which is why these upcoming elections [in March 2013] are so important.

DM: Oh, yes. But what they can do this time, I don't know. When you have got young Uhuru Kenyatta who …

SO: Yes, and William Ruto, also, being indicted by the ICC.

DM: Yes. Many challenges, many accusations. There are issues there that really have a long way to go before they're play out. There is a lot of maturing to occur.

SO: Indeed, and if only they would stop appealing to groups on the basis of their supposed ethnic groupings, rather than focussing on the issues.

DM: Yes, that's a hard one. You have it here in Scotland, don't you?

SO: I didn't say that Britain was any better! I think Alex Salmond is going to play the 2014 Commonwealth Games for what he can, and probably *Braveheart* will be on the television every night for six weeks before the referendum.

DM: You are probably right, yes.

SO: So, if I could also ask you about your relationship with the Queen and the Royal Family – with Buckingham Palace. How much do you think the Queen has been part of the invisible glue for the Commonwealth since 1965? That is the start of this project, which is why I am using that particular date.

DM: I think a lot. She is the unchanging element, the permanent element, that is there all the time. I like the line – I have got it in the book there – it was Obasanjo again who said, "We don't feel diminished by having the head of the Commonwealth as our former colonial ruler. We don't feel diminished that our former colonial ruler is the head of the Commonwealth." It is a very good line. Whereas for many, even in Australia and New Zealand, "Oh, why should we have to put up with it?" In other words, they feel diminished.

SO: Do you think so, even in New Zealand?

DM: Well, I'm just saying. If Obasanjo was prepared to say, "I don't feel diminished by the fact that she is there..."

SO: A question of sufficient national self-confidence?

DM: Yes. And yet, in our part of the world, we still say, "Surely we can move on?" Then I think that he [Obasanjo] is probably showing that much more maturity. As I said this morning on *Start the Week*, I talked with a lot of Commonwealth leaders just like this: "Can I talk to you privately for a moment, Mr President?" And I would say, "Succession, what do you think?" And then it would inevitably go round in the same circle and come back to where we started: that actually to produce a chairperson, a permanent head of the Commonwealth, or even semi-permanent head of the Commonwealth, would just be too difficult.

SO: So, that is the benefit of inertia on the issue of future headship?

DM: Everyone would just take their turn. and what have you achieved? It reminds me a bit of the Malaysian monarchs. Do you know who the King of Malaysia is? I haven't got a clue who the King of Malaysia is.

SO: You are right; I don't know either.

DM: Probably because it changes, I think, every five years.

SO: For the British, though, that would have been problematic during your time as Secretary General. How much had the FCO put together a contingency plan for an announcement with the accession document?

DM: You may remember there was a CHOGM in Auckland in 1995. The officials were sent away to look at new membership. Mozambique and Cameroon joined at Auckland, largely because Mandela said, "I would like to see them there." His authority was just in the stratosphere, so everyone said, "Yes." Now, having done that, clearly there was a lot of [thinking], "Well, where the hell is all this going to lead?" So, a whole bunch of us and the officials were sent off to come back with some thoughts on succession, and they went away and it was chaired by the then-New Zealand High Commissioner. It was done by the High Commissioners representing the public, and they came down with a report of which the British were very proud. They had got into that report that the head of the Commonwealth shall be the British monarch. So, that report came back to CHOGM in Edinburgh in 1997. Leaders looked at it and said, "Good report. Leave it on the table." And there it sat.

So, when I came in in 1999, I asked about this and I was told, "That's the report, sitting on the table." So, it has no value. I thought, "What do we do about these countries that want to join?" Rwanda was knocking on the door, others were knocking on the door. We had about seven wanting to join. We identified about seven countries – no, four or five countries – that were wanting to join, and we could see that there was probably another three. We could put Algeria – Bouteflika had requested of Obasanjo – as one possibility. Anyway, I then talked to a few leaders about this and I said, "This is an uncertain area and we don't want to suddenly get trapped again with another Mozambique/Cameroon which catches everyone sideways," sort of thing. So, I said to leaders in 2005 in Malta…Well, when I say leaders, I would have got two leaders to suggest…[*Laughter*]

SO: Okay. [*Laughter*] That's the politician in you!

DM: Yes. Two leaders to suggest that we try and sort this out. So, the Secretary General was designated to go, and so then I put together a really good team of people to look at this issue of where goeth the Commonwealth in terms of future leadership. I got PJ Patterson, who was the former Prime Minister of Jamaica, and I really handpicked the people I felt would be useful to come up with a very informed view. One was the former Finance and Foreign Minister of India; one was the former High Commissioner of the South African High Commission, here in London, Cheryl Carolus – a very bright, sharp lady. Anyway, Baroness Amos was on that particular committee, and I also commandeered my friend at Christchurch, New Zealand, David McIntyre – a long time Commonwealth scholar. So, when they came together, David gave them an extraordinary kaleidoscope: where it began, and where it is now. It was a great history lesson which informed everyone excellently, and they went ahead and they put it all together and I forget how they left the British monarchy. It was left a bit ambiguous, I think: a bit square bracket sort of thing. So, it came to CHOGM in Uganda and I had to work pretty hard amongst some key people. I just said, "Look, we don't want to lose it again.

We lost it back in Edinburgh, but that was ten years ago." So, it came up on the agenda …

SO: Are you allowed to tell me who those key people were?

DM: I could probably remember, but right now I would have to think pretty hard. In every likelihood, I would get it wrong, because, like I said, I had four projects that came out of the previous CHOGM. Maybe I was just trying to finish my stewardship with great flourish.

SO: Well, you would be less than human if you weren't!

DM: Yes. We had that tolerance and understanding commission; we had the membership commission; we had two others going and they really kept the whole Secretariat very busy. So, there is a danger I will mix up members with different ones. Museveni was rather good, because he was the sort of chairman that didn't really follow things very intimately. He had a good political antennae, but he was letting me run the Retreat as much as anything. "What is the next subject, Mr Secretary?" And he would say, "Well, you tell me all about it so I can then tell them all about it." So, I said, "Well, look, you may recollect the membership thing was looked at." I said, "Here it is, I think about as good as we will ever get. It doesn't open the door very wide, but it does open the door." He then asked me to address all the leaders. I went on, "It doesn't allow a prospective country to force their way in. They have got to cross a number of hurdles to get into it. It underpins our values, underpins the linkages with another Commonwealth country." And I said, "On the issue of the head of the Commonwealth, that is within your gift, and I just suggest to you we recognise that the current head of the Commonwealth is Queen Elizabeth II." And, so, that is about where it ended up. Two members said, "Do we have to do this now?" I said, "You put it off ten years ago!" [*Laughter*] I really cajoled them into it, "No, we have got to sign this one off now." Not, "Please will you sign it off," but, "You have got to sign this one off now!"

SO: One thing I am very struck by is the fact that the war in Iraq is not mentioned in that CHOGM.

DM: No. It got a mention – where was it? I can't remember, but the feeling was that to bring that into a CHOGM was going to be very divisive, because you had all these Muslim states that were very sensitive about it. And, of course, it would only be probably Britain and the old Commonwealth taking a different line…

SO: Did you make a conscious political decision to encourage people to keep it off the agenda?

DM: I didn't have to, really. The British didn't want to talk about it. Clearly, the Muslim countries didn't want to talk about it. This is a case where you use international organisations for their best advantage, not their disadvantages. You go somewhere else. If you have got a problem and you think, "Where best to pursue this one?", well, this is not the place to deal with this one. We would rather deal with this somewhere else, and that's all about making use of international organisations to their own advantage.

SO: So if you decided that it would not be a topic for discussion at the CHOGM of 2003, did you think that it would be appropriate to raise it at the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers meeting that you instituted at New York, before the General Assembly with the UN?

DM: Well, you see, to raise it would be to lift an expectation of some kind of resolution at the end. What resolution were you going to get which everyone could agree to? The first item on the communiqué was that the sky is blue, the grass is green and after that you were on to problems.

SO: So, anybody looking at a communiqué coming out of the CHOGM should look to the last items as the most divisive ones?

DM: I am not sure about that.

SO: Okay, the first ones on the agenda aren't necessarily the most contentious ones?

DM: No, it depends on the timing, you see. I remember Obasanjo – or was it Lawrence Gonzi in Malta? There was an issue which I said to them, "This is contentious. Let's do it first." Do it while they are fresh, otherwise if we do it at the end of the last day they are all cantankerous, you know, asking what the hell we are doing this for now? That sort of thing. I said, "I think we can get a better result if we just do this one straight up, while we are fresh."

SO: So, there is an awareness of the possibility that a certain issue could be contentious, and then an agreement – a quiet agreement – that this should be risked?

DM: Yes, I always think it probably…I mean, I don't think we specifically ever thought about it. It would have just been the Islamic states and Britain and Canada – was Canada in on the coalition of the willing? It is just one of those discussions you can only have when you know full well it isn't going to be contentious.

SO: Sir, I haven't asked you about the whole question of Commonwealth trade and finance under your stewardship – of helping leaders contact foreign banks to repatriate funds that had been syphoned out of their country.

DM: That was something that, certainly, Obasanjo was very, very concerned about, and he was keen to get that resolution through whatever – possibly in the 2003 CHOGM, I guess. Well aware that he was still chasing the former military President Abacha for millions or billions. So, that is one of the good things about a CHOGM. You can sort of get that kind of resolution which is fairly non-specific, but it gives that leader an extra bit of leverage when they want to go and do it. That particular resolution meant nothing to a New Zealander or Australia or a host of countries, but for Bangladesh, for Pakistan, for Nigeria, it was hugely significant. I am trying to think if there is any other one where huge billions were taken out… So, it gives them a pretty good platform to stand on, and it was well used by some of them.

SO: The other issue which you talk a lot about in the book is your battle with the OECD countries. It sounded as if there was an element of ‘David tilting at Goliath’?

DM: [*Laughter*] Yes. They so annoyed me!

SO: [*Laughter*] Oh, they got your political dander up?

DM: Well, they did! I thought, “Who is the OECD?” They had no sovereign authority whatsoever over these small states, and here they were telling us this is what you should be doing and why you should be doing it. As I say, mostly they got it only about half right, anyway, because none of them were prepared to really decide what was absolutely illegal about offshore banking in the Caribbean as opposed to what was legal. For them, it was, “Everything is illegal”.

SO: Because it didn’t suit them?

DM: It didn’t suit them. The banking interests of this city [i.e. London] are pretty powerful. They are very powerful. Again, I abstracted information out at a little later date, but what money gets laundered through this city on one day is probably laundered through the Caribbean in a year. It was going on all the time. The other thing was that the OECD didn’t seem to have any ability to control Luxembourg, Lichtenstein, Switzerland and, I think, Belgium. I said, “How can you come here and beat up on Barbados and Antigua and these countries because they are little?” So, we had some huge fights at that time. I must say, the Caribbean leaders were very pleased with my actions on that one. But you just had to really take the OECD head on. The funniest thing of all was their issue of unfair taxation. The OECD were concerned that these so-called ‘tax havens’ were only charging 28% taxation. So, a year of haggling, then [there is] an election in the USA. George W Bush comes to power and he appoints a new ambassador to the OECD. At the first meeting in Paris, he says, “What is wrong with low taxation?” The whole thing just melted away. I just loved that.

SO: Did you think of making a political issue of migration within the Commonwealth?

DM: We talked a lot about it. In fact, my head of economics at the time – Indrajit Coomaraswamy – was very strong on this one, and we used to push it occasionally, but we used to run into problems there. As the developing countries say, “You want free movement of capital? You want free movement of goods and services? What about free movement of people?” That was well hidden under the sand. I always used to be amused by Nigerian audiences, especialy. The Nigerians are so aggressive and in your face – they are the Brahmins of Africa, as far as they are concerned. They would go on, “Why shouldn’t they? If I am a member of the Commonwealth I should be able to live in any country in the Commonwealth.” And so on, and so on.

SO: Well, they used to be able to.

DM: They used to, that’s right. Then, suddenly, Britain has got this [idea that] there are too many chickens coming home to roost. You have got to be quite careful about it, you know, as the British public are saying. Every country is going to be brandishing its own migration policy.

SO: It was just the very poignant way that you were describing the current situation in Nauru. I used to live in Fiji in the late 1970s, and at that point, Nauru was the wealthiest nation in the Pacific, with its own airline and impressive per capita income. You suggest maybe the best solution for this problem would be for Australia to moderate its migration policy, but I must admit, I can't see that happening.

DM: Well, they don't have a place for asylum seekers, do they?

SO: Unfortunately, they don't. The policy at the moment seems to be to push them to an island offshore.

Sir, in conclusion, why do you think the Commonwealth has survived?

DM: It has more than survived, and those members that make use of it get a good return on their investment. Particularly if you are a small country, you need a network of external interests to survive, and if you can join organisations which offer to extend your external relationship, you will join them. The Commonwealth is much more intimate than the UN. Where else does a small state leader have a chance to meet other leaders of varying sizes other than at a CHOGM? You don't get that at the UN. That is just a bun fight every September and you will be lucky if you meet half the people you want to meet. When you meet them at CHOGM, it is like an old family get-together. They all have so much in common. I use the line when I say that it's not just the English language we have in common, it is the institutions we have in common that really holds it together: your parliamentary systems, judicial systems, education systems, health systems, custom systems, taxation systems. They are all very similar.

SO: Sport systems, too?

DM: Probably the most well-known use of the name 'Commonwealth' is the four-yearly Commonwealth Games. So, they have that in common. They have a linkage which is appreciated by those who take advantage of it. It is not understood by outsiders at all. I will tell you one thing. When I was campaigning for New Zealand to get a Security Council seat in 1992, I realised what a huge advantage we had being Commonwealth members. So, we have fifty-three countries that we can go to as friends and say, "Look, we want you to support us for this particular job." And I thought, we in New Zealand were up against Spain and Sweden, and I thought the Spanish will have all the Latin American countries, fine. But I thought, Sweden…they have got five friends in the Nordics. That is all. Our Commonwealth is what I would call 'family friends', and we have this huge advantage, and some countries play it fully and play it well. Others, frankly, don't even get round to thinking about it.

SO: But did that also work, for instance, for South Africa when they were trying to get the first African seat on the UN Security Council? Were you aware that they were also using their Commonwealth strength?

DM: They did use it. Not to the extent I think they could have. Mbeki played more the African hand, but, you see, a Security Council seat has the vote of the whole of the General Assembly. Yes, you are part of a group, a regional group, and the African group has two seats, I think, but you still want the other votes.

SO: Yes, you do.

DM: Africa is actually fine. They have just taken two seats.

SO: Okay, for small states, this is hard-headed politics, then, being a member of the Commonwealth. A calculation of, "What can the Commonwealth do for me?"

DM: Yes.

SO: But for the great powers? The 'old Commonwealth' countries?

DM: Well, I think Gordon Brown picked up pretty fast. He understood the Commonwealth better than Tony Blair did, because he was always going to Commonwealth Finance Ministers [Meetings], and what he realised very early on was that if he wanted to initiate something in the IMF or the World Bank, take advantage of the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting a week before the bank and fund meetings. Go along there, get fifty-four votes in your back pocket – and, of course, they are not fifty-four regional votes, they are global votes. So, I go to Mr President of the World Bank and I suggest this and I have got fifty-four votes here and they are African votes, they are Caribbean votes, they are Asian votes… The bigger players have learned very much to make use of it. Now, if the UK are going to make use of it, you can't just turn up once every five years…

SO: You have to "walk across St James's Park"?

DM: Yes.

SO: Sir Don, thank you very much for talking to me.

[END OF AUDIOFILE PART ONE]