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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP The Rt Hon Jim Bolger (Part One)

Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

JB: The Rt Hon Jim Bolger (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow interviewing the former New Zealand Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Jim Bolger in Wellington on 4th April, 2014. Sir, just to set this Commonwealth Oral Histories project in context: we originally envisaged that it would cover the period from the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Perth, Australia, in 2011. However, the interviews now also include material and comment on the recent Sri Lankan heads of government meeting and the ongoing debate about the Headship of the Commonwealth. These interviews underline the extent to which the Commonwealth has evolved since 1965: the various changes of its Secretary General; shifts in the quality and capacity of the Secretariat over time; the extent to which the resources devoted to the Commonwealth have similarly altered; how its own grand strategies of the battle against apartheid and the push for development post-independence have changed; and now the evolution of the push for good governance. The Commonwealth as an association and entity has expanded from the inter-governmental aspect of a much smaller organisation to one which seems to have three – if not four, pillars – with the continuing presence of Commonwealth professional organisations and the growing importance of civil society.

JB: Well, in terms of the Commonwealth's clarity of purpose, if you go back to the period when the apartheid regime in South Africa was centre stage on the Commonwealth agenda, there was very considerable buy-in by a great majority of the Commonwealth. Unfortunately, some – including the UK – were less than totally sure it was the right time to dismember the apartheid government, which they perhaps saw as serving the interests of their country well. In retrospect, I am sure that the countries and governments who were hesitant about supporting a move to genuine democratic government in South Africa now regret their timidity. Today, in 2014, we have different issues which

challenge the unity of the Commonwealth, but with that said, I am sure that there are many areas and many issues on which a united Commonwealth voice can be a powerful instrument to achieve a more just and fair world.

When I was Prime Minister in the 1990s, the Commonwealth was 'modestly important' – not overwhelmingly important – in shaping foreign policy. As a country like New Zealand moved trade more into Asia, we were dealing with more and more countries that don't have Commonwealth links. Many, of course, have strong links to the Commonwealth because, in most cases, they were at one time colonies of the former British Empire. World politics and world trading links are in a period of rapid change, and this of course has an impact on New Zealand's focus. If we go back to 1965, before Britain started negotiating entry into the EEC, then New Zealand's trade focus was almost entirely on Britain in terms of markets. The United Kingdom is now a relatively minor market for New Zealand, and that change in importance has inevitably changed perspective. That noted, there are still important trade links and strong ties of kinship which means that New Zealand still takes a 'family' interest in Britain and is an active member of the Commonwealth.

SO: So, please, could I ask, is the attraction of a continuing British relationship for New Zealand precisely because it's still within the EU?

JB: No. British membership of the EU can be beneficial to New Zealand in the context of having a long-time friend at the table when issues like terms of trade and access policies to the EU are being developed. Britain staying in the EU is a debate for those directly involved to decide. From my perspective, because the EU is Britain's largest market, the overwhelming logic is for Britain to stay in the EU, but that is a decision for Britain to make.

The historic relationship with Britain is still there, but whereas once it was the relationship that underpinned New Zealand's trade and defence policies that is no longer the case. The scale of the change that I have been talking about is stark, and now China, Australia and Asia are our largest markets. Such a shift in interest does have significant implications in terms of focus and policy. Today, the Commonwealth is seen by many – and, I believe, by some governments – as a comfortable gathering for people who have a common linkage, where various issues of common interest can be raised and discussed. There is also an unspoken expectation that because of a broadly common approach, issues like, say, the rule of law will be approached from a common stand point. Sadly, history records that that expectation is not always correct.

That may sound like damning with faint praise, but I don't believe we should see it as that. I believe that my remarks are really just reflecting the world as it is. We are not the world that existed when the Commonwealth was first set up after the demise of the British Empire. So, I find nothing surprising [in] that its role is not as dominant in the minds of many, as it would have been in the beginning.

SO: Sir, when you were elected Prime Minister, there was still the issue of apartheid South Africa as a unifying factor for the Commonwealth. Obviously, de Klerk had given his extraordinary speech to Parliament in

the February of that year, but the 1990-1994 period was still a very important period of transition in South Africa.

JB: The de Klerk speech was extraordinarily important, as well as the manner in which Nelson Mandela was released and, very importantly, Mandela's strong personal commitment to a peaceful transition. I first met Nelson Mandela with Commonwealth Secretary General Chief Anyaoku at the time of CHOGM in Harare, shortly after he had been released after twenty-seven years in prison. I maintained contact with him in various different ways since then, and I went to say a sad farewell to him at his funeral a few weeks back. Nelson Mandela was a remarkable leader and because of his approach and personal standing, South Africa was able to avoid the blood bath that many feared in the transition from the apartheid era.

President de Klerk, having reached the conclusion that apartheid rule in South Africa could not continue – and that was a brave decision, because it was clearly not a popular with many of his party supporters – he then put in place some of the key elements to effect the transition from the racist era of apartheid to an era where all would be treated as equal before the law.

President de Klerk's role in the transition was hugely important, but it was the remarkable Nelson Mandela who was prepared to put behind him all the indignities he had suffered in the preceding [years] and totally commit his now-towering moral authority to effect a transition that was peaceful and just – or, as just as it could be in the circumstances of then South Africa. I know that many question whether sufficient progress has been made since the election in 1994 of the ANC-led government, and I accept that criticism, but at least the evil of treating people differently because of the colour of their skin is gone.

The real question from a Commonwealth perspective is did the Commonwealth do enough to support the new government of South Africa? I believe that the role the Commonwealth played in the lead up to the transition was a very positive and supportive one, and the Commonwealth's active involvement in the debate on the way forward helped to trigger the de Klerk speech. It was the 'road to Damascus'-type speech that was essential to break the deadlock, and I believe that Commonwealth activism helped in the process.

SO: How clearly do you recall the discussion and debate at that Harare CHOGM? Because that, of course, is where the Harare Declaration on good governance – the Commonwealth's ongoing grand strategy to support democracy and its institutions – was articulated and decided. I understand Chief Emeka also used that meeting as a springboard to go down to South Africa to offer Commonwealth assistance in every way, shape or form to transition.

JB: There was, I believe, the hope – if not universal expectation – that the Harare Declaration on good governance would provide an underpinning not only for South Africa, where they'd still had to have general and local elections at that stage, but also to many other countries in the Commonwealth, notably our then host country, Zimbabwe. [There was hope] that they would also pick up and understand the dynamics of good governance and introduce them. It is

sad but true that that hasn't always happened. So, I believe the Harare Declaration was a very useful document in setting out what the Commonwealth expected, or what it hoped, was the approach that would guide Commonwealth countries.

If you jump forward to the 1995 CHOGM in New Zealand, which had President Mandela at the table as South Africa had rejoined the Commonwealth, we saw the Harare Declaration invoked to justify suspending Nigeria from the Commonwealth. Recall that while leaders were in session at the Millbrook Resort, Nigeria murdered nine environmental activists – Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others. After intense debate, led by myself, we suspended Nigeria from the Commonwealth. One of the pillars underpinning the argument to suspend was, in fact, the Harare Declaration. I also remember saying to the gathering from the Chair that, "If the actions of the Nigerian Government were acceptable inside the Commonwealth, then I for one didn't know that I wanted to be inside the Commonwealth." If Commonwealth leaders were going to allow that sort of judicial killing to go on, because leaders or countries didn't like people taking an activist role and pointing out the errors of the government's policy, then what value did the Commonwealth have?

Although most were in agreement in the debate at Millbrook, there were two countries which I knew would be uncomfortable with the concept of an organization like the Commonwealth looking behind a nation's borders and making judgments on various actions. We knew that both Zimbabwe and Malaysia would find the concept of making judgments on internal actions difficult to accept. So, the question was how do we persuade President Mugabe and Prime Minister Mahathir to accept the suspension of Nigeria? From both leaders' perspective, it was a question of retaining the absolute sovereign right to make decisions affecting their own countries.

To achieve the decision I knew [that] the great majority of leaders wanted, I asked President Mandela to work on persuading President Mugabe and I would work to persuade Prime Minister Mahathir. Of course, many others also played a part in helping to achieve the result I believed was necessary to retain the status of the Commonwealth, and in the end, all agreed and we got the consensus resolution that you're familiar with. So, did the Commonwealth play a positive role in this space? Absolutely.

SO: At that time, the Director of Information at the Commonwealth Secretariat was Michael Fathers, himself a New Zealand national. He has suggested to me that, in fact, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Dr Mahathir of Malaysia had been two pillars of the Commonwealth for Chief Emeka Anyaoku as Secretary General. Yet here you are outlining their relatively dated version of the absolute sovereignty of independent states.

JB: Clearly from their perspective it was not a dated version. What I'm telling you is exactly what happened. You've got to remember the discussions I had with President Mandela – he was new at the Commonwealth meeting – and me as Chair inviting him to work alongside me to persuade President Mugabe and so get his agreement on the way forward. I didn't want a split. I wanted a consensus that we should suspend Nigeria, and I said I would also work with

Dr Mahathir with the same objective in mind. The record shows that we achieved a consensus and Nigeria was suspended.

SO: I'm just remarking about the public face of consensus, when actually there was an amount of private dissent and discussion. Isn't there a certain paradox there?

JB: Often public and private faces are different.

SO: Oh, yes! Such is the game of politics. So, in drafting the Millbrook Declaration, did you rely on your own staff and your own drafting to craft that particular declaration, or was the Secretariat very much involved?

JB: My staff would have been working with the Commonwealth Secretariat staff – plus Chief Anyaoku – and would have had a significant input. The Harare Declaration was, in my view, quite specific on what was expected of governments and clearly the actions of the Nigerian Government were far outside the norms of good government.

The reference back to Harare was used to good effect and confirms the importance of setting out principles at the appropriate time. That said, the Commonwealth hasn't acted – to the best of my knowledge – on other egregious actions by some members of the Commonwealth. Failure in the past to take action surely can't be used to excuse unacceptable action in the future, and that was clearly an approach that I adopted.

SO: So, as the host government, you had a particular influence at the 1995 CHOGM – not simply at Auckland, but also at the Retreat. How much of the emergence of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group was also the product of your own intellectual ideas? That was an integral part of Commonwealth oversight: to help correct 'serious and persistent violations'.

JB: Well, it was certainly consistent with my thinking. The Commonwealth, as a gathering of about fifty countries, does not have the opportunity or the time to distill its thinking on challenging and complex issues. A smaller group will have greater focus on issues, and therefore you have a better chance of making progress. It was certainly my hope that this is what would happen.

SO: Did you already have a targeted group in mind? Or did you hope that this would emerge at the Retreat?

JB: You always have the names of key players in mind, but of course it seldom works out exactly as you might anticipate because it's not a single, dictatorial decision. What you need is to have the skills to be able to guide the discussion towards who can contribute in this sort of environment.

SO: In addition to the enormous moral authority of Nelson Mandela as the quintessential former political dissident and now head of state, did you have other key heads who you hoped would be particularly supportive?

JB: I only knew three leaders that could be, in my judgment, challenging in terms of the Commonwealth response to Nigeria's actions. The third one was Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana. He's an interesting leader who I've met many times, in Commonwealth [meetings] and in another organisation. He is always somewhat unpredictable in terms of the outcome at the end of his interventions, but I took the view that he would come down on the right side. Though he would wander widely – which he did precisely – [he] did come down on the right side of the argument, for which I was grateful. With the other two, we had put in far more work to achieve the outcome we sought.

SO: Yes. You were still Prime Minister for the Edinburgh Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1997?

JB: I was. I was asked to depart after I returned from Edinburgh.

SO: Please, if I could ask you, Sir, while you were still Prime Minister, what was your view of Edinburgh as a review meeting on the implementation and progress of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group in the two year intervening period?

JB: Good question. The Edinburgh conference clearly had the imprint of the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who was a consensus operator, and perhaps he had a high level of hope that the way he structured the gathering would lead to a sensible way forward. I've never asked myself this question since then, but from this distance, I would say that there was substantial continuation from Harare/Auckland/Edinburgh in terms of the commitment to the concept that good governance was an underpinning, component part of what was expected of Commonwealth membership.

SO: As I mentioned at the start of the interview, the Commonwealth was itself evolving during the 1990s – with the growing role and voice of civil society, the dramatic changes in the structure of the international system following the end of the Cold War, and the end of apartheid in South Africa. The Commonwealth is unusual in the high degree of access that civil society leaders have to the Commonwealth heads. Heads could argue that they are the democratically-elected and so have the mandate of the people, rather than these unelected members of NGOs. How far do you think that this shift in the Commonwealth has been problematic in diluting that clarity that you made reference to at the start of our discussion?

JB: It's easy to have clarity if you have one big obnoxious issue, like apartheid, which – with some qualifications – everybody could easily sign up and say, "This is wrong. This has to change." We are now into a period where the world is much more complex and multi-faceted, and clarity on how the extraordinary issues the world faces today are dealt with is much more complex. Something that's hit the papers again this last weekend is the inter-governmental panel report on climate change, which is a terrifying read for anybody who reads it with their eyes open. Now, a small percentage of the Commonwealth will read it with eyes open. A small percentage will read it with, "Well, yes, but this is a bit overblown and we don't have to do anything tomorrow," and another percentage will read and say, "Yes, we've heard all this before, but it really is not something we need to bother ourselves with."

We're a high, mountainous country." So, when you're dealing with climate change as compared with apartheid, you will inevitably have a much more graduated level of views. From those who say the clarity of the report means that the report really has to be accepted, the report builds on earlier reports, but there will still be a response along the lines of, "We must do something", to, "Well, not yet," and to, "Maybe we don't ever have to do it."

So, getting a policy commitment that can be implemented or be seen to be implemented is much more challenging with this sort of global issue. That's a challenge for the Commonwealth: is it going to be relevant in dealing with an issue as big as climate change? Every country, as far as I can see, has a different take on what it needs to do, and therefore how will a common position emerge? I was in Bangladesh recently, and Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. It's got 30-40 million people on its huge delta. If the climate change report proves to be accurate and sea levels rise as predicted, they'll have 30-40 million refugees inside their own country – their own people. That concentrates their mind dramatically. Already some rice paddies have been converted into shrimp farms.

In Bhutan, where I also was recently, climate change relates to how much snow is on the mountains and how much ice is in the glaciers, and therefore how much water will be in their rivers next spring and summer. It's broadly the same issue in Nepal. So, no country is in a space where they don't have to factor in the implications of climate change on the scale that was talked about in the report, but the urgency to respond is less in some than others. That's just three countries where I happen to have been in recently, but you could go right around the Commonwealth and get similar examples – right across the board.

SO: Sir, I know your recent tour has been concerned with canvassing support for New Zealand's election to the United Nations Security Council. In the 1990s, New Zealand was also looking to secure its place on the Security Council. To what extent did you and your Foreign Minister Don McKinnon try to use the Commonwealth as a particular vehicle to secure this policy goal?

JB: It was certainly a bond between the countries that we lobbied in 1990 and it is likewise today. It doesn't guarantee [that] x number of countries are going to support you, but it's one of the links that is important in a campaign for a position on the Security Council. I'm sure our Australian cousins did the same when they were elected to the Security Council a couple of years back. But to then answer the second half of that question, the Commonwealth has to have much more than that [bond] to sustain itself as a viable organization. Being able to call on fellow Commonwealth members in a campaign is what I would describe as a valuable 'add-on' to being a member of the Commonwealth.

SO: So, the Commonwealth then becomes part of your 'toolbox' for foreign policy?

JB: Yes, in that terrible terminology! But yes, certainly.

SO: Exactly. Is it 'smart power'?

JB: Well, it's intelligent. Who do you ask other than your friends, or those who understand you best, if you want to do something? In broad terms, the Commonwealth will be high up in that group.

SO: During your seven years as Prime Minister, how important was the Commonwealth compared to other key components of New Zealand foreign policy? There was the continued anti-nuclear policy that you had here in New Zealand, the relationship with the United States and Australia, [and] the push towards East Asia and China, particularly on trade relations. I know this list seems to suggest that the Commonwealth came relatively low down the list of priorities, or is that a misrepresentation?

JB: It's an over-statement. A simple way of putting it is that there was never a discussion where we said, "We won't bother about the Commonwealth because they're no longer of great relevance and therefore we should concentrate on, say, the US and China." Of all of the relationship issues that we have, you picked up one of the more challenging, and that was New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance. That policy was, of course, not a universal Commonwealth position. Our close friends, the Australians, were strongly opposed to the policy at that stage. The British were strongly opposed to the policy at that stage, and there were many other voices in the Commonwealth that disagreed with New Zealand. There were a number of Commonwealth countries who were in support of our policy, but we couldn't just rely on the Commonwealth's voice.

We, of course, explained to Commonwealth members and to the wider world why New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy was a rational and sensible policy that the world should adopt. One of the remarkable things – and I'm not sure how much input individual Commonwealth country members made – is that now, across the world, there is in a much higher level of unanimity on this issue. There should be no nuclear testing, an issue we had huge arguments about down in this part of the world – to stop nuclear testing in the Pacific. We were successful, and so now the world has moved very substantially in the direction that New Zealand led.

Now, we led in defiance of many senior Commonwealth members who thought the policy was wrong. I'm pleased to say that many now agree with the policy. So, the Commonwealth itself was probably less influential in crafting anti-nuclear policies than we might have hoped. For example New Zealand put together the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, working with a range of countries to do that – many were in the Commonwealth, some were not. The Commonwealth can have a valuable input into foreign policy in the sense of saying, "What's the Commonwealth's view on [this] issue?" But of course the answer was often mixed.

SO: To what extent did you identify the Commonwealth as being a valuable forum for small states in the 1990s? You made reference to the Pacific – the South Pacific Forum and the Pacific Island Forum.

JB: Small countries need to gather together for strength or to have their voice heard, so to the extent that they can join themselves into a group like the Commonwealth – the Pacific Forum you noted is a smaller version – of

course that is hugely important. A country of fifteen or twenty-five or three hundred thousand people would have no individual voice of substance, but together they can attract attention.

SO: For example, at last count, there were 10,700 members of Tuvalu.

JB: So, a small states group is essential to add weight to issues that are important to them. The central core of every organisation is that you gain greater strength by collaboration than you do as an individual. That's the reason why people join organisations of the like-minded. So, looking at the Commonwealth, the like-minded come essentially from the British colonial influence. For countries like Mozambique, who joined the Commonwealth [in the] 1990s, there is no such connection.

SO: Well, indeed. There was a serious discussion on Mozambique but an even more intense debate on Rwanda's application to join. Neither of these countries are culturally or historically linked to a wide British world.

JB: Correct. They may, in some way, feel a cultural link, but historically they're not. Culturally only in the sense that they are in geographic proximity to other Commonwealth countries, and that influenced the decision that they could join. Which raises the question – which you are exploring – [of] whether does the Commonwealth go next? Clearly, the legacy of the British Empire – which then morphed into the Commonwealth – was very influential, and may have been even dictatorial in the early stages of the Commonwealth, but the further we move away from that era, the bigger the questions become. "Where to now?"

SO: Could it be said that New Zealand took a particularly strong stance on small state issues? For example, New Zealand tried to contribute to the resolution of conflict on the Bougainville issue in the 1990s, during your Premiership. Was this in a Commonwealth context or was this a specifically bilateral approach?

JB: It was overwhelmingly bilateral, but obviously we worked with other 'like-minded' [countries], to use Foreign Affairs terminology. A country the size of New Zealand, within the broad arc of our neighbourhood, can have a significant influence as a small country with a good reputation. You add to that influence if you're working with other like-minded in the same space. But New Zealand did 'step up', if that's the phrase, and put its mind to that issue.

SO: Indeed. On another multi-lateral issue, it's been noted that the Commonwealth doesn't get the credit for its contribution to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative on debt relief. Can I ask you about this, or was this something in which you didn't take a particular interest?

JB: Most of that happened after I left, but Don McKinnon – who I know was active in that space during his term as Secretary General – will fill you in on the details of that, I'm sure.

- SO: Yes. I'll press him further on that one when I see him again later this week.**
- JB: Again, this was the emerging issue for the Commonwealth at that time. HIPC was a big issue – a defining issue – for a number of small Commonwealth countries, and therefore getting the focus needed required the leadership of the Commonwealth. To achieve results it requires committed leadership and energy, rather than rely [on] a bland declaration from a heads of government meeting.
- SO: Well, indeed. Your description of 'bland declarations' suggests you don't put much weight on such pronouncements, but focus on the question of how you achieve results.**
- JB: The best that the heads of government can do is to identify – with as much clarity as possible and with as much force as possible – the issue that needs to be addressed in an effort to move an issue forward. But Prime Ministers then all go back home to their busy schedules, and they rely almost entirely on their own foreign policy experts and ministries. Of course, implementing policy as identified by heads of government is the core role of the Secretariat.
- SO: Please, could I ask your view on the question of the personal chemistry between heads? When the Commonwealth was in an earlier incarnation, it was a much smaller association. The innovation of the Retreat at the Ottawa Conference in 1973 was thought to be an extraordinarily valuable adjunct to international diplomacy, because the informality and close contact as well as possibilities of personal chemistry helped to establish bonds of trust. Was that as applicable, in your experience, in the 1990s?**
- JB: Yes, because it was at the Retreat that we dealt with the Nigerian question. If it hadn't been for that environment, I doubt whether we'd have achieved the consensus necessary to take action, which was a very high level action, to suspend a country's membership of the Commonwealth.
- SO: And the speed of the decision, as well?**
- JB: And speedy. The Nigerian delegation left the room immediately and bought a lot of golfing gear and played golf at Millbrook.
- SO: I think the diplomacy of golf is much underrated!**
- JB: I've never played it myself. The pro shop was probably quite happy to sell the gear! I believe that the Retreat gathering of heads of government is very important and an essential part of CHOGM. Of course, there are some staff around, but the atmosphere is different and that's important. I can't speak for the last couple of heads' meetings because I haven't been there, but in the 1990s it certainly was a valuable consensus-building, trust-building arrangement.
- SO: And also from the point of view of exchanging ideas globally? Obviously, there has been an acceleration and proliferation of international organizations, and there is a multiplicity of international**

meetings now. In fact, heads seem just to bounce from international meeting to international meeting.

JB: The number of meetings creates its own problem. Inevitably, the next heads of government meeting will – as they did last time and probably the time before – spend an enormous amount of energy and time on global financial matters. I saw the IMF today saying that if we, the world, are not careful, the recession – ‘sub-par growth’, they call it now, you’ve got to get your terminology right – is going to continue.

SO: Yes, I was reading Christine Lagarde’s speech at the School of Advanced International Studies on Wednesday [2 April 2014] and her description of the risks of a ‘low growth trap’.

JB: ‘Sub-par growth’ will continue for years. So, it’s inevitable that’ll be center stage when the heads meet.

SO: Is the Commonwealth the appropriate forum to discuss this, or is it just a useful sounding board?

JB: Although the Commonwealth is clearly not in a decision-making position, the benefit of such discussions will be to compare notes and improve your understanding of what’s happening in other countries. The fact that they are all in the Commonwealth is not as material as that they’re all talking about an issue so as to better understand it.

SO: Please, Sir, if I could ask you a slightly loaded question... What is your particular view of the attributes and the value of Secretary General Chief Emeka – who was an international servant – compared to the subsequent Secretary General from New Zealand, who was much more of a politician, in enhancing the role and influence of the Commonwealth through that office?

JB: It’s very hard to judge, to be perfectly honest, because I wasn’t a Commonwealth leader when Don McKinnon was the Secretary General. I have heard nothing but positives about his capacity to reach out to people, and he is renowned for his skills to reach people and to persuade them. For example, some of that came through when we were both at Nelson Mandela’s funeral. I noticed as I was talking to President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, Don McKinnon was talking to his African colleagues and the interaction, you could see, was very positive. Chief Anyaoku was a more reserved person. His background was more reserved than that of a senior politician who, for many years, had been his country’s Foreign Minister. To be perfectly honest, I don’t think we can generalize. They will all be different – that’s inevitable. The question could be asked as to whether there are benefits in having someone with a political background as Secretary General, since they’re dealing with politicians. The answer, all things being equal, is probably yes, if you get the right person. But the wrong politician, of course, would be the worst choice.

SO: Indeed. So, please, can I just ask your particular view of the role of the contribution of the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth?

JB: The Queen's role as Head of the Commonwealth is, of course, complex. She is the Head of State of a small number of the Commonwealth countries and she is the titular head of the Commonwealth. In the latter role, she is a highly respected person, but consistent with her role as the Monarch of a number of countries she doesn't interfere in the discussions or decision-making. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, she seeks to meet all the heads of government in attendance and she engages with them on all manner of issues. Because she's got such wonderful, long-lived genes, she's been around for a long time and knows many of the leaders and most of their countries as well.

SO: She may live as long as her mother.

JB: Well, I think there's every probability that, with modern medicine, [she will live] a little longer. My mother and the Queen Mother were of the same age, but my mother lasted another couple of years, so I'm going to stay around and annoy people for a long time! At least that is what I threaten them.

All that said, the Queen's role is substantially a symbolic one, reaching back to the era of the British Empire, with no mandated power at all but a persuasive off-the-stage capacity if she chooses to use it. I imagine that's been used more than once, but you and I won't hear about it. She is quite remarkable, and I say that as New Zealand's leading Republican. She's quite a remarkable woman, and it's not conceivable to me that she is therefore not contributing. She will be contributing, but it will be in her own way. She doesn't deliver a speech that says the leaders should do this or that on, say, climate change. That's not her role.

SO: Yes. As for the Commonwealth going forward, how do you account for its survival? To what extent do you predict its continued existence and longevity?

JB: That's a very interesting question: survival. The fact that non-traditional Commonwealth [countries], or countries with little Commonwealth links, want to join is interesting. So, there is something within the organisation that attracts countries like Rwanda and Mozambique, but doesn't attract others that could seek to join because of historic connections. Technically, Ireland would clearly qualify as the British were there for a long time. The Americans could apply, as could Israel on similar grounds.

SO: Indeed, and so could an independent Palestine.

JB: Yes, and that's what I mean when I observe that other countries, in theory, could apply to join. Israel and an independent Palestine, if that emerges, could apply to join. So, we have some countries who could come in and don't, and some countries that have historically had little by way of British connections who have joined. I tease people occasionally that if the historic British connection is weakened, then the Commonwealth could become just a mini-United Nations.

SO: I understand Yasser Arafat made mention – probably half-jocularly – that he might join the Commonwealth.

JB: I hadn't ever heard of that, but I did say at some meeting at the Commonwealth behind closed doors, "Why don't we invite all these countries in?" Get the US in, for that would be good in terms of profile. The Irish might want to re-litigate the past and that could cause a bit of fight. I think if we brought in both the Israelis and the Palestinians they might actually talk to each other. It changed some of the focus of the discussion when, in a light hearted manner, I suggested some of this.

SO: I was going to ask, was this 'light blue touch paper and stand back'?

JB: That's right! Sometimes it helps to take people out of their comfort zone. I don't know if there are any other countries lining up to join. So, your question was, "What underpins its longevity?" It has lasted a long time, and it can only be because governments, through many changes of Heads – there's been Prime Minister after Prime Minister in all the countries – have clearly seen value in joining together once every second year and discussing world issues. That's what really is the core of the business, and their attendance means that they see the Commonwealth as a valuable forum in which to conduct such discussions.

You could ask why they can't have these discussions at the UN or some other international gathering. Frankly, I don't have a good answer to that question, other than there is more engagement by leaders at Commonwealth meetings than at the UN. And sometimes it's hard to stop an organisation that's started and is functioning and meets a need.

SO: Indeed. It exists, so heads use it. Did you ever have a sense that the Commonwealth's success was precisely because it did operate relatively 'below the radar', and that its invisibility was one of its unseen strengths?

JB: If that means that it doesn't attract the critics to the same extent, because its head is not above the parapet – like, say the UN – and hopefully it is doing worthwhile things, then I believe that is helpful. The CHOGM held in Sri Lanka was, I believe, the last time when critics saw something they thought was wrong and should be addressed. South Africa and apartheid was the other big issue where critics rose up in great numbers and asked the question, "What is the Commonwealth doing to bring an end to the evils of apartheid?" At this point, critics seem to believe that the Commonwealth has the capacity to change a member country's policy that the critics find objectionable. The Commonwealth doesn't have that authority, but it can and does put issues into the public arena in a manner that helps bring change about. So, there is an expectation that something can happen. The leaders can support that expectation but they can't impose a different solution.

SO: So, from the Harare Declaration, followed by the Millbrook Declaration and the Latimer House Principles, the Commonwealth has evolved and is evolving very much more to a values-based association, with a Charter, measurements and sanctions, and declared commitments to human rights. In your view, does this become more problematic for countries that joined the Commonwealth before there were these yard sticks of good governance?

JB: If what you're saying is that if the Commonwealth became more intrusive, then the willingness of countries to submit themselves to that intrusion would be challenged more frequently, I am sure that there would be more challenges. Some countries might be tempted to withdraw and say, in effect, "We don't accept that degree of intrusion." That is why the Millbrook decision, in terms of dealing with a very difficult issue, was pivotal in terms of the modern Commonwealth. At Millbrook, we were able to reach an agreement on something that was terribly sensitive to both the region and to the largest country in the region and it was successful.

SO: And, of course, the behavior of the Abacha regime was enormously problematic to the Nigerian Secretary General.

JB: Yes, and to be fair to him, he managed the issue really well.

SO: Indeed, and by the end of his second term of office, Nigeria had – through the fortuitous death of General Abacha – been welcomed back into the councils of the Commonwealth.

JB: Yes. We've had South Africa and Nigeria both out of the Commonwealth and back in again. The details of the reasons were different, but essentially the issues concerned basic human rights.

SO: Well, maybe Fiji will be following that trajectory.

JB: You're right. Fiji has been in the news again. You will have seen over the last 48 hours or so that New Zealand and Australia have removed many of the sanctions against Fiji in the expectation that they were moving in the right direction and were committed to restoring democracy. I find no fault with that. If the path forward continues, as clearly governments in both countries believe it will, then that's all good news.

SO: But Zimbabwe poses a rather greater challenge?

JB: Zimbabwe poses a huge challenge. Ironically, I was watching BBC before I came to do the interview and who appears on the screen looking very fit and well but President Mugabe.

SO: Well, indeed. Perhaps he may live as long as the Queen Mother!

JB: Without question, [it's] possible. Looking out further, I believe [that] as we move into more socially sensitive areas, the challenge to find consensus will be more demanding. There's a growing concern across most countries – and certainly among the NGO community – that the growing disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', to use that old term, must be addressed. This issue will be a real test for the Commonwealth, given that the different political structures in member countries will mean achieving a consensus on what policy mix to promote or endorse; [this] will test both skills and patience. That said, the issue can't be ignored, and of course it is a worldwide issue – not just a Commonwealth issue. It is emerging as one of the big issues in the world. Nobody really believes that the present trajectory, where the number who control most of the world's wealth gets smaller every week, is sustainable long-term. In my view, this issue is going to be one of the great

challenges for big international organisations like the Commonwealth, which over the years has put a focus on social issues in member countries.

SO: Yes. My previous interviewee, Chris Laidlaw, was saying that the Commonwealth as a pioneering organisation faces one of its greatest challenges in the problem of global inequality.

JB: Well, it appears that Chris and I are saying the same thing from different sides of the page. That doesn't surprise me, to be perfectly honest, because I believe it's the world's challenge. It came out about seven weeks back that 185 individuals own or control wealth equal to that owned by the bottom 3.5 billion world citizens.

SO: I find that morally repugnant.

JB: To me, it's obnoxious beyond belief. The wealth disparity is increasing every day, or put the other way, the numbers that own the bulk of the world's wealth are decreasing every day. There is madness abroad in this space.

SO: So, those who argue that the Commonwealth really doesn't matter – because it doesn't have hard power capability, it has no influence, no leverage on the big issues – do they, in fact, fundamentally misunderstand its latent strengths and its benefits?

JB: I believe that is correct. It would be very easy to say, "Well, what has it done?" and, "Let's call it quits." That would be a very simple thing to do. The more challenging option is to say [that] the organisation exists and it has a very wide and very diverse membership – in terms of geographical spread, in terms of ethnicity, in terms of wealth distribution – so how can we harness this diversity to address some of these big world issues? My answer is that the Commonwealth must confront these issues and then concentrate on making progress one step at a time.

SO: So, that's not just the leadership of the Secretary General, it is also the leadership of key heads?

JB: Absolutely. If the key heads won't get in behind this agenda, then it won't happen. It will require some head or heads to step up and lead. Someone has to step up and lead, and normally that means being prepared to be controversial in the minds of some. New Zealand is normally prepared to take a leadership role, even if issues like 'nuclear free' are controversial. To have ongoing relevance, the Commonwealth must be prepared to open up discussion on big issues and confront whatever opposition or controversy such action might entail. If that doesn't happen, then more and more will say, "Why bother?" The mood will turn negative and more will say, "Well, why are we bothering with this organisation?"

SO: Indeed. Sir, thank you very much indeed.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]