VOICE FILE NAME: DPM636

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
SM: Stuart Mole (Respondant)
[s.l. = sounds like]

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Mr Stuart Mole at Exeter University on 1st February 2013. Stuart, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, how did you come to work at the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1984?

SM: I'd been working for David Steel as the head of his office as Leader of the Liberal Party. We'd come through the 1983 election and we'd had great hopes of the SDP Liberal Alliance overtaking Labour, and although it polled well, it didn't do well enough. So I was looking for new employment in 1984 and David Steel was helpful to me in approaching various potential employers. One of them was the Commonwealth Secretariat because Sonny Ramphal was well known and well admired, and a good friend of David Steel. I drafted a letter which David signed which we sent to the Secretariat and that was the beginning. I think the first thing that Sonny did was to talk to me and then he encouraged me to see the Assistant Secretary-General, Moni Malhoutra, who was also head of the SG's office as well. I had an interview with Moni and I remember going along and preparing what I thought was very well by finding all I could about the Commonwealth and doing an awful lot of research.

Moni - an Indian national - was someone who had a fantastic brain, a tremendous intellect, but perhaps was not the strongest on empathy and progressive management techniques. In the course of this interview he just demolished me. By half way through I felt there was no point going any further. He had ripped apart any opinion I'd cared to venture, showed me that any of the research I'd done was completely wrong and I was therefore reduced to silence. I thought, 'Well, that will be the end of that'. I went away and I took all the documents I'd collected about the Commonwealth Secretariat and everything else and I threw them in the wastepaper basket and went on with life. About two months later, completely out of the blue, came a letter on blue note paper appointing me to the position of Assistant Director in the Commonwealth Secretariat as Special Assistant to Sonny Ramphal. This really conditioned how I thought of Marlborough House and the Secretariat from the first few months because for quite a period it seemed

as though some terrible administrative error had been made and that I was there under wholly false pretences.

SO: [Laughter]. He wanted a different Stuart Mole?

SM: Yes, it must have been or my name had somehow got transposed on to the appointment document because the first two or three months I was completely at sea and the Secretariat seemed to be wholly alien to me. It was only when I talked later on to other people about their experiences coming into the Secretariat that I realised they were saying exactly the same thing.

SO: So this was Moni Malhoutra's interviewing style?

SM: Moni Malhoutra's interview left me feeling about two inches tall and with the profound feeling that he had nothing but the utmost contempt for me and my abilities. Therefore I couldn't conceive that he would possibly want to appoint me to anything. But I think that the sense of bewilderment that a lot of people had, and possibly still have, in coming into the Secretariat is to do with other things as well. It's not only to do with a rather arcane appointment procedure which now may be a lot better, a lot more efficient and a lot more ordered, but also to do with being inducted into some fairly strange processes.

SO: What was the arcane appointment procedure when you first arrived?

SM: As far as appointments to the Secretary-General's office were concerned, as this story illustrates, there were no elaborate procedures. It was simply within the fiat of the Secretary-General as to whom he cared to appoint, and you would have to describe those appointment procedures as pretty rudimentary. I was involved in the recent Director of the Secretary-General's office, being invited to sit as an external member on the appointment panel. I found the procedures were a world apart from my experiences then, and much better today. They included written work and exercises and so on which seek to test some of the key characteristics needed of a private office person. So we're in a different world now.

SO: Had that new world started to emerge by the time you left the Secretary-General's office?

SM: It had painfully begun to emerge, yes. Along the way the Secretariat had been subject to periodic external review (and indeed is just emerging from the latest bout) but it also has had internal consultants and internal review too. So gradually the Secretariat has acquired better procedures but it very much depends on the management style of the Secretary-General in terms of what they deem to be proper for the organisation that they're running. Not many have had particular skills in that regard. They're interested in leadership but being a good leader is not the same as being a good manager. I think that to the extent that successive Secretaries-General have been good managers, it is entirely coincidental. Or incidental, perhaps I should say.

SO: So just going back to your arrival back in 1984, this was not a well-oiled diplomatic machine then?

SM: No. It obviously had some fairly established procedures which had been drawn from the British system and so there was a slight sense of stepping

back into a kind of different time. The British civil servants were used quite extensively in the first year or two of the Secretariat's life. They had to help deliver, what in '65-'66, were three Prime Ministers meetings. There was one in 1965; there was the special meeting in Lagos in '66 and then there was another one in the autumn, in September 1966.

SO: Yes, it was back in London.

SM: So that is something that the fledgling Secretariat couldn't possibly cope with alone. So there was a big British influence at the beginning, even though it was an independent Secretariat. I think some of these British practices endured. We always used to have treasury tags and some of the procedures for making copies of things which seemed to me to be from the British system, but probably would have been from a fairly old fashioned British system.

SO: From the India Office?

SM: Yes, that sort of stuff. Sonny is a great man and was a great Secretary-General, and he basically talent-hunted people. He saw people who could make a contribution and he made sure they came to the Secretariat and worked for him. So that's precisely what happened with Sir Peter Marshall, for example. Sonny went to Geneva to discuss the campaign for the Common Fund. Peter Marshall was enthused to work for Sonny but also Sonny spotted him as someone who could be useful to the organisation. Chris Laidlaw, the New Zealander -

SO: Your predecessor.

SM: - my predecessor, yes, he was in a diplomatic position in Paris. He came to work for Sonny at about half the salary; and it was simply because he was head hunted and he wanted to work for such an inspiring figure. It did mean that the management procedures were rather few and far between. I got the impression that the management arrangements were there to make sure that the Secretary-General's wishes were carried out. So the finance department and the personnel department would very much take the guidance of the Secretary-General and what he wanted.

SO: Was the same true of International Affairs Division and Strategic Planning and Evaluation?

SM: Strategic Planning and Evaluation didn't exist at that point. That came in, during Chief Anyaoku's period as a result of the management review following the 1991 High Level Appraisal, I think. So I think that would have been about 1992 or 1993. International Affairs Division was, I think, very much lead by the Secretary-General (and through the private office) setting the agendas. There would have been some things that IAD would have been doing, for instance a regular monitoring presence at the United Nations, various kind of international assignments and contacts that they would have had which they would do as a matter of course. But their agenda, I would have said, was very much set by the Secretary-General.

SO: Was Moni Malhoutra himself recruited by Sonny Ramphal?

SM: Yes indeed. He was at that point running Mrs Gandhi's private office and again I think Sonny spotted someone who could be enormously helpful and duly recruited Moni. Moni was very much Sonny's enforcer and he had the authority and the status to go with it. There were tensions, difficulties resentments with the Deputy Secretaries-General from time to time, but Sonny's leadership was the overriding factor. Moni had a brilliant mind and was, in lots of ways an excellent advisor for the SG but he treated many of his subordinates, including me, in a less than ideal way and some of us still have the scars!

None of this may have mattered except for the fact, in Moni's case, that at the very end of Sonny's term, in '88 or '89, the question of the Deputy Secretary-General (political) position came up, as a vacancy had arisen.

SO: In 1989 it would have been Chief Anyaoku, as he was being proposed for Secretary-General then.

SM: That's right. This was to fill Anyaoku's position and I am sure Sonny wanted Moni to be elected as the Deputy Secretary-General. Now at this point - and this is something that Emeka later changed - Commonwealth governments elected the various Deputy Secretaries-General. So the Secretary-General was elected by governments at CHOGM but the Deputy Secretaries-General were also elected by governments, though at a London inter-governmental meeting Emeka changed that because he said, "Look, I need to have the authority to appoint my own deputies and all my staff." This was an interesting and valuable development but in the case of Sonny that hadn't yet happened. So Moni was proposed, amongst others, to be the next Deputy Secretary-General, but was surprisingly beaten by the Australian nominee, Sir Anthony Siaguru, from Papua New Guinea. Anthony was an absolutely great guy, but was an unlikely candidate in other respects. According to some, this reflected some of the negative feedback which may have flowed into High Commissions from some of Moni's subordinates. That was the story, anyway.

SO: So, by the time then that Kris Srinivasan became Deputy Secretary-General, that was within Chief Anyaoku's control and remit?

SM: That's right, yes. The same was true of Deputy Secretary-General, Dame Veronica Sutherland. Emeka was keen to appoint a woman to the post. I do remember Veronica coming to see Emeka and then returning for a further interview. So once again the interview procedures and appointment procedures were unusual, I think, but within the ambit of the Secretary-General's prerogative.

SO: Stuart, while you were working then at the Commonwealth Secretariat how far was this a well-structured, diplomatic machine? Or was it an organisation in which there appeared to be concentric circles of power, with varying connections and controlled patterns of information sharing - because every organisation has its different forms and norms.

SM: First of all, there was an underlay which had been put in place which reflected British systems. Then on top of that was the fact of it being a multinational and multicultural organisation. So there is no formal quota system for the appointment of staff to the Commonwealth Secretariat but the Secretary-General, in his appointments, is supposed to pay due regard to geographical

balance. That is probably the polite term for making sure that at least all the five regions of the Commonwealth, if not every single country, were adequately represented. Of course, that requirement has also got to be balanced against the quality of the appointee.

Being a multinational Secretariat meant that a backdrop of there being a lot of issues about race and political equality in Commonwealth debates at the time, had their reflection within the Secretariat.

So it was particularly important that a member of staff coming into a Secretariat appointment from Africa or from Asia, say, should feel a position of equality not only in terms and conditions of services and pay, but also as regards their status compared with someone from the old Commonwealth, whether the UK, Canada or New Zealand, or wherever. This may explain why the Secretariat which has never been a large organisation by international standards (having reached 400 personnel at its peak) was none-the-less surprisingly bureaucratic and cumbersome, and probably is to this day. An excessive caution about treating all of the same rank equally did generate, I felt, cumbersome but politically correct processes. This meant that, in its normal working operations, it moves more slowly than it need to.

On top of that were the methods of appointment. First was Arnold Smith, of course, and then there was Sonny. In those early days they were very much headhunting on a personal basis. Arnold was ringing up a Prime Minister and saying "Look, I need a good Head of International Affairs. Who can you give me?" Sonny was no different in that respect, but I think also every Secretary-General - and it was certainly true of Sonny - would want to see a good reflection of their region within the Secretariat. So there was a sense that from the Caribbean and from Guyana in particular - there would be some trusted people close to Sonny. In all fairness to the SG, if he'd left the Secretariat just to chug along as a machine, it would be a fairly slow moving and dysfunctional machine. This may be a bit of a clue to later times when the Secretaries-General may have tried to ignore the Secretariat - or not exactly ignore it, but not to lead it. Sonny's nature was to lead the organisation and to galvanise it into the purposes which he very clearly saw.

So in doing this, he would have a team around him whom he would most rely upon for advice and for implementing action. There might be others whose work was seen to be less immediate; it would be several circles further out. So I think there was a lot of personal chemistry involved that was important to Sonny.

SO: What about Chief Emeka? What was your position once the SG position changed? The Chief was selected in 1989, elected by the Heads of Government at Kuala Lumpur, and came into the office then in 1990. Did that affect your position in any way?

SM: Emeka had asked me to stay on and become the head of his office. So from that point of view it was a fairly seamless transition - to say farewell to Sonny and to be involved in Sonny's departure; and then to welcome Emeka in and to have everything ready when he came. Now I also had experience of doing that when Emeka departed in 1999 and, again, did a lot of work with his fair-welling and with Don McKinnon's arrival. Then I stayed on a few months to see in Don McKinnon. I maybe could have stayed on for a year or so longer,

but felt it was time to go. The difference between McKinnon's entry as Secretary-General and Chief Emeka's was that the Chief consciously took himself away from the Secretariat for quite an extended period of 'retreat'.

SO: Did you stay in touch with him?

SM: He didn't stay in touch with me, certainly. He may have stayed in touch with other people but I think he generally shut himself away. That was very interesting and understandable because he came into the Secretariat in December 1965. He'd been 'man and boy' in the Secretariat, beginning in the International Affairs Division as an Assistant Director, working his way up the organisation and had been there almost continuously all that time. So there wasn't much you could have told him about the organisation; he needed no induction in that respect. He knew the personalities, he knew governments. Again I don't think there was too much politically that he needed to be in touch with the Secretariat about. He took himself away and developed this 'mantra' – his mission statement, if you like. I wouldn't describe Emeka as a 'visionary' in that sense but he manufactured a very clear mission for himself and for the Commonwealth. He felt quite keenly the criticisms from outside of some of those Commonwealth governments who had been pursuing the anti-apartheid cause but whose regimes were very far from being democratic.

There were, at the time of Emeka's first Heads of Government meeting, around 9 or 10 (depending on how you define them), military or one-party states in the membership. In the Commonwealth in 1991, there were 49 countries in the Commonwealth at that point. But it did mean that 20% of Commonwealth countries at that stage were by no stretch of the imagination democratic. Obviously as the anti-apartheid struggle had got nastier, and in particular coming from the British tabloids, there had been a lot of stuff directed at African leaders, some of it thinly disguised racism. There had been plenty of justification of some of the criticism, one ought to add. It had certainly hit home with Emeka. Emeka was a great anglophile anyway, and was more conscious of this criticism than others. Anyway, it strengthened his belief that the Secretariat needed to put its own house in order.

SO: How much was that Emeka's own decision or was it building upon the High-Level Appraisal Group coming out of Kuala Lumpur which had initiated a phase of examination of the Commonwealth and its direction?

SM: He had decided early on that this was a real problem that needed to be addressed. So obviously there was a sense in which the high level appraisal contributed to his leadership on that issue. I would give Emeka a huge amount of credit for having gone away, on his 'retreat', and decided that the Commonwealth had to develop its democratic and human rights agenda. Now I'm not saying that Emeka, either then, or as it's turned out later, is a populist democrat or human rights advocate, because he's a rather patrician figure. I don't think his instincts are always naturally in that area but he decided as a matter of principle that this is what should be done. And that's where the Commonwealth went. As I say, he had this mantra in his head about what the Commonwealth needed to do and he kept repeating it over the next 10 years; and he did decide in 1988-89 that the Commonwealth needed the High-Level Appraisal Group. Again, here's a good contrast between Don McKinnon

because one thing Emeka did do was that he got immediately stuck in to all the meetings of the Working Group of Experienced Officials. This was a group of 'sherpas' doing all the legwork for the High Level Appraisal Group, under the chairmanship of a prominent Malaysian official. Emeka was there and took a leading part in all these discussions so that there would be no surprises later on. The working group of experienced officials included Lord Armstrong, the Cabinet Secretary. He's worthwhile talking to as well.

SO: He's interviewing me before he'll agree.

SM: Is he? Oh, okay! [Laughter]. The Working Group produced the report that went before Commonwealth leaders in Harare in 1991. In Harare, the High-Level Appraisal Group under Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mohamad Mahathir actually only met for part of the day. So actually the High-Level Appraisal Group composed of Heads of Government didn't do much work apart from a slightly skewed examination of future directions. They considered the membership issue; they talked about election observer missions, and so on. But it was really at the Retreat in Elephant Hills where this debate was brought into some kind of coherence as the "Commonwealth Harare Declaration". Again, I know that Lord Armstrong, for the British Government, had another draft of the Harare Declaration ready.

There is an interesting contrast with Don McKinnon's arrival as Secretary-General. He was in touch with the office in the build up to his arrival. He saw Emeka several times – they had a series of meetings in London. I remember one in New York as well.

Don seemed to be pretty clear in his own mind about what he intended to do. I am not sure what Emeka said made much difference, but then that's probably always the way with successors and their predecessors.

Don McKinnon had a thoroughly hands-off approach to his own high level review because he too had a review process coming off the same Durban summit (in 1999) that elected him SG. Instead of getting stuck in immediately, making sure as Emeka did, that it was precisely as he wanted, governments were allowed to move in, which I thought was a mistake. So, from the very beginning, I felt he lost some ground on that. He was able, of course, to join these discussions simply at Heads of Government level, but by then he was probably a bit behind the game. So there was a big difference between the two in style.

In terms of Emeka, he's very conscious of his status; he is a Chief and there are certain ways that chiefs should behave. To his critics, this could sometimes be vaguely ridiculously, and perhaps a bit pompous.

SO: Was it just being conscious of his dignity?

SM: He would say – and I give him credit for this argument – that he was protecting not his personal dignity, but of the dignity of his office. I remember occasions when he managed to rescue certain events from total farce by investing them with his own personal dignity. On one occasion we had a dawn wreath laying ceremony in New Zealand on ANZAC Day, and something terrible had happened just before he was due to lay his wreath: somebody had fallen over and the wreaths had been knocked over. It was

just a moment of farce when the whole thing could have dissolved into laughter and ridicule. Chief pulled it all back into a proper solemn occasion by walking with this huge dignity, holding his own wreath, by taking all the time in the world with his bow and with his personal respects, before turning and marching in a very measured way back to his place. He just brought the whole ceremony back into some sort of order and proper respect.

There were other occasions when he would insist on doing something that I thought was a bit petty and pompous, but he would say "I'm not doing this for me; I'm doing it for the dignity of the office." He was very conscious that if he got fobbed off with a permanent secretary as opposed to meeting a senior minister or head of government, that was the beginning of a dangerously slippery slope.

That's what officials wanted: to be in control of their Secretary-General, to be able to take over. It was a way of taking upon themselves, of diverting that channel of power and of reinterpreting the message for their heads of government. Emeka knew (as did other SGs) that the personal relationship with heads of government was an absolutely essential part of the chemistry.

SO: It's validation also of the role of the Secretary-General.

SM: Yes it is, it's the be-all and end-all. Consultation is "the lifeblood of the Commonwealth", as the Memorandum of Understanding says, and the Secretary-General has to be the embodiment of that. He has to be the nerve centre of that consultation and consultation in the broadest sense. He has to be able to pick up on silences as well as sounds and to be aware, as far as he can, of all opinions. There are ultimately limitations on that approach and one of them is electing people to offices. The Commonwealth has a rather strange way of dealing with elections. Other than that, it would be for the Secretary-General to appreciate that there was a difficulty in the Pacific, even though Pacific leaders, probably for reasons of politeness, wouldn't be articulating the fact that they had a problem but it would be apparent in other ways. Emeka was very good at picking up on those signals.

SO: How about the workings of the Secretariat during his tenure as Secretary-General?

SM: One of the things that Emeka had very clear in his mind - and this was part of what was Emeka's mission – was that there would need to be not only this high-level reappraisal of the future directions of the Commonwealth, now the battles of apartheid were increasingly in the past, but also the Secretariat would need to be re-vamped. So he always knew that he wanted to bring in management consultants and that he wanted there to be a whole chain of internal changes within the Secretariat. I think that was a necessary process which moved us further down the road, in what were changed circumstances. Sonny had experienced the Secretariat at its very peak and he had been used to adding people and adding divisions, more or less at will.

SO: How did he have the budget for that?

SM: Well, the budget came with it. So funds were established on the way, and he was able to find funding for new activities. Also countries of course were joining, and there was not at that stage a zero growth budget. Emeka, facing

tightening budgets, realised that he had to reduce staff, streamline divisions; and staff numbers started coming down from their peak. There were two Assistant Secretaries-General – one was the Head of the Secretary-General's office. The other Assistant Secretary-General was also the Managing Director of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation and that tended to be a Canadian because the Canadians were amongst the biggest contributors to the Fund. Emeka, with the management review, reverted to having three Deputy Secretaries-General.

So three Deputy Secretaries-Generals, no Assistant SGs, a reduction in the number of divisions, rationalising programmes. So Emeka did embark on rigorous change there. He looked at the terms and conditions of all the staff. One of the great issues in the Secretariat has been the whole question of contract tenure and rotation of staff. There has been a differential between locally recruited staff and overseas recruited staff and this has also had an impact on rotation policy. The argument has been that better terms should be given to the overseas staff because they will be serving a term or two and then they'll be going home and so on. There was a lot of debate, which goes on still, about how many terms should someone expect with their appointment? Is it one contract of three years, two contracts of six or three contracts of nine? This argument has gone on and on. In Emeka's time the rule was "one term if you're no good; two terms of you're any good; and three terms if you're really good".

SO: Stuart, did you count as locally engaged?

SM: I was included at in the diplomatic level, but I was locally recruited so I did not have any of the diplomatic privileges which other overseas recruited diplomatic staff had. Interestingly enough, I discovered by looking through the 1965 record of the Prime Minister's meeting, that the reason why the Secretariat was given some privileges but not immunity from parking regulations was because Harold Wilson (who was in the chair) said "Well, actually we've had a terrible problem with it."

SO: 'We' still do!

SM: We still do. "Do you mind if we leave that one out?" said Harold. So that's why the Secretariat staff can't park on double yellow lines! But overseas diplomatic staff do get duty-free alcohol, immunity from prosecution and taxation, and other privileges. So there was a differential there. The three contract rule applied for a particular appointment, so if you were an Assistant Director, the rule applied to that grade. If you were then promoted, the clock was re-set. So it meant that by the time I became a Director (after a year with Emeka as head of his office) in 1991 my clock for nine years as a Director would have started ticking at that point. Even so, even after that the Secretary-General has discretion to give people a year or two extension, if need be. This issue has raged on and on ever since and it's been the cause of serious litigation. One of the things that happened while I was there was that because the Secretariat didn't want to be subject to English employment law, it had to agree to alternative arbitration machinery to justify its being; so as an international organisation, it had to have an arbitral tribunal for the external and independent redress of staff grievances. There was scarcely a case referred to the Arbitral Tribunal under Anyaoku – it had not long been established – but McKinnon had to deal with a rising number of cases. One or

two have proved expensive for the Secretariat in terms of compensation. However, that was the kind of price that had to be paid for being an independent international organisation.

SO: So this fundamental restructuring of the Commonwealth Secretariat was a painful process of managing change. Did that diminish the efficacy of the Secretariat in the 90s? After all, the Commonwealth itself was going through a process of change. So there would be new challenges placed upon the administrative staff.

SM: I happen to be of the view that leadership is the crucial ingredient here. It is how the Secretariat is led and what the kind of culture that leadership instils and what it means in terms of setting standards for others. I think that Sonny was probably, above all the Secretaries-General, the one who managed to inspire much of the organisation, whatever they were doing; even those remote from him, in some of those outer circles. He inspired them to give what they could in their respective fields, even if he may not have taken a very close interest in what they were doing. He also had a personal touch. For instance, every Christmas there was a staff Christmas party and Sonny would himself cook the most wonderful Caribbean food for staff. That kind of touch has an impact. I could never have imagined Emeka doing that. He was naturally more remote - utterly polite and utterly charming, but not with that kind of common touch. Don McKinnon was probably the most relaxed and matey with staff, but this could sometimes be a disadvantage, particularly in his handling of personnel decisions.

What I would say in defence of the Secretaries-General is it was a huge challenge for Arnold Smith in setting up this body; none of his successors had that task to actually create something out of nothing. To create something where the expectations of some of the most powerful governments were so minimal and where actually it was something that Arnold Smith had to create out of flesh and bone, as much as anything else. So others didn't have that challenge, but others had to cope with changes in the international climate. They couldn't make do with the pioneer spirit, the kind of make-and-do approach; they had to be conscious of international norms, increasingly conscious. I think even now we're only truly connecting with some of the international standards in terms of behaviour and management, accounting procedures, and all the rest of it.

I would suspect that the pioneering spirit of the early days extended as far as the finances; that's as far as I would say. Certainly Patsy Robertson was told when she was appointed by Arnold Smith, "I'll find something out of petty cash to pay you." Which I think she found rather insulting! So, times have changed a lot and the SG has a lot more to put up with in terms of managing this still cumbersome, multicultural organisation. But my view hasn't changed that the root of a successful Secretariat is leadership and a Secretary-General ought to be able to capture that organisation and lead it successfully; no amount of international norms and kite marks, or whatever, will be enough. The organisation may be in conformity with every possible international standard but unless you've got somebody driving the organisation, it's not going to go anywhere.

SO: Stuart, I wonder if you could elaborate please on how each of the Secretaries-General handled the British Government?

SM: My experience is of Sonny Ramphal, of Emeka Anyaoku and a bit of Don McKinnon and I know that Don's memoirs are just out.

Beginning with Sonny: his relations with Mrs Thatcher were on the whole difficult, I would say. Although there was a sort of undercurrent - other people have mentioned this aspect of Mrs Thatcher's femininity – of mild chemistry there. She probably thought he was a bit of a rascal but I think nonetheless she found him an engaging rascal at that. After all, at the very end, she invited him to dinner at Downing Street and described him as 'a superb Secretary-General'. So, in a sense, although they were coming from completely different planets - or completely different parts of the planet, there was some mutual respect. Certainly, towards the end of Sonny's time, the relations with the British Government got very bad indeed and part of Sir Peter Marshall's job as Deputy Secretary-General was to keep in touch with the Permanent Under-Secretary in the FCO and to just try and keep things as much on the road as he possible could.

SO: So that was an increasingly tough job?

SM: That was an increasingly tough job and one that Peter Marshall did for much of his tenure. Peter came in, in 1983 and served until 1989; so for all that time I think for Peter life was pretty difficult.

SO: Mrs Thatcher was not the entirety of the British Government, but she dominated policy to an increasing degree.

SM: She dominated policy and she infected the civil service as well. I thought there was a big difference between how the officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and indeed in other parts of the system behaved in relation to the Commonwealth during that time, compared with, say, the present. I remember as a Brit sitting and listening to UK ministers and to senior officials talking and thinking "Why can't you be positive? It would be so easy to say things that would win you friends and which would create understanding but instead you're speaking in this barren and arrogant language and it's getting you absolutely nowhere." Some of the officials, the only thing they could think of, and talk about, was money. They had no broader perspective, no broader feel for the Commonwealth or where they could be helpful. I could think of one or two names of that period who were exemplars of that kind of approach and it was so damaging, but I think it was, at root, Her Master's Voice that was coming through.

SO: How about the political appointments? You talk about the civil servants within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Treasury?

SM: There were actually some very interesting figures there, weren't there? Lord Carrington I think had a fairly healthy dislike of Sonny Ramphal from their exchanges over Zimbabwe, but Carrington had a fairly interesting and enlightened FCO team didn't he?

SO: Yes, very much so.

SM: He had Iain Gilmour, Douglas Hurd.

SO: As well as Richard Luce.

SM: Richard Luce. There were some really excellent people there. For instance, on the Middle East I think there was movement there, wasn't there? Maybe this is all another story.

SO: How about Geoffrey Howe?

SM: Geoffrey Howe was a case in point of someone who actually at times rescued Mrs Thatcher from her worst excesses. He certainly did that at the time of the Special Summit on the Eminent Persons Group Report in August 1986. The odd thing about Mrs Thatcher was that when stripped of her briefings and her official persona and whatever, she reverted back into pure Grantham: all these original homespun attitudes would come bubbling out and at times it was quite horrifying. It wasn't the official position of the British Government but it was being articulated by the Prime Minister and I think that was quite shocking for people. I do remember something of that kind happening on the morning of the discussion of the seven heads in 1986. It was only Geoffrey Howe coming in, in the afternoon, who managed to pull things back from what might have been a disastrous result. Then of course there was the occasion when John Major was famously rebuffed by Mrs Thatcher on South Africa when he had painstakingly, with other Commonwealth Foreign Ministers, negotiated an agreement in Kuala Lumpur in 1989.

SO: When John Major became Prime Minister, though, was there an easing of tensions between Marlborough House and Downing Street? Or is there an inevitable tension between the two?

SM: It was an easier relationship, no question of that. Sonny, I think, is very fond of the UK but I wouldn't describe him as an Anglophile in the way that Emeka is. Emeka, I think, has taken it one step on, almost to the point, on occasions, of being rather more trusting of the British than I think they deserved. So his relations with John Major were very good. On a particular issue they fell out, certainly I remember that. Indeed one very embarrassing occasion occurred at the 1993 Limassol CHOGM meeting in Cyprus. This was again a fall-out of from the High Level Appraisal. Heads looked at the term of the Secretary-General and at Emeka's second term. He was elected in 1989 and took office in 1990. So he had an expectation of at least two five year terms (though I think he wouldn't have wanted more than that). The proposal was that they should move the SG to two four year terms as a maximum. In the course of the debate, there was a disagreement about timing and dates and it came out badly. First of all, it looked as though the British had no confidence in Emeka having a second term.

Secondly, it looked as though they were trying to shave off his time by effectively cutting away at his term. Emeka absolutely stood his ground. The great thing about Emeka, as indeed with Sonny, was that when he got to a certain line he would stand behind it, and that was that. He knew precisely when to do that and to hell with the consequences. Emeka effectively won that particular contest, though there were some formal words that got them round the corner.

I remember John Major because Commonwealth membership was discussed in Harare, in the context of the Harare Declaration. So it was rather

interesting; there was established the principle that for a country to join they had to sign up to this "charter" of democracy and human rights, and they also had to show that they were living by these principles, and not just paying lip-service.

So that was an interesting development in terms of membership. It was a precursor of what later happened in terms of "Well, now you're a member, what standard do we expect you to live up to?" I think the other disagreement with John Major, was at the '95 summit where he was hoping that Heads could get a rather more restrictive framework on membership in place, to avoid a "Mozambique factor" coming through and that you wouldn't get the kind of Mozambique factor coming through.

SO: What do you mean 'the Mozambique factor'?

SM: Well, by then Cameroon had flagged up that it wanted to join the Commonwealth and I think Mozambique by then had made clear it also wanted to join. John Major wasn't in favour of this and hoped that the working group on membership criteria could be established. This happened and the group was led by the then New Zealand High Commissioner in London, John Collinge. John Major's ploy was for Heads to agree to the working group looking at membership criteria which would postpone a decision on Mozambique and then recommend a restrictive approach, leading to quite tight entry requirements which would bat away Cameroon and Mozambique. But of course Nelson Mandela drove a coach and horses through this by proposing Mozambique's membership at the Retreat of the 1995 Auckland CHOGM. Of course this was received with acclamation and completely blew away John Major's attempts to hold the line. When we got to Edinburgh, two years later, there were then three applications on the table from Palestine, Rwanda and Yemen. By then Tony Blair, with some difficulty, was able to kick all of these into touch. Even so, a substantial proportion of Heads still wanted Palestine, a non-state though it was, to be a member.

SO: Had that been emerging through the '90s from the Oslo Accords?

SM: It had. One of the interesting things about the Commonwealth is the way that some major international issues, such as the Middle East, seeped into Commonwealth discussions even though there was no, at present, Middle East countries within the Commonwealth. Emeka, being Emeka, did have some discussions about trying to engineer a situation where Palestine would be accepted into membership, alongside Israel and Jordan.

SO: That would have been interesting.

SM: [Laughter]. Yes, as a kind of tripartite solution. He certainly had some discussions with the Israeli Ambassador in London in that regard.

As regards the Palestinian application, Yasser Arafat delivered this personally to the SG at Marlborough House. I remember the day Yasser Arafat came and he was wearing his traditional outfit and Chief was dressed up in his Nigerian robes. At the end of the discussion upstairs in the Secretary-General's office, Chief offered to show him Marlborough House and the state rooms and said "Stuart will you guide?" So I took them round the fine rooms and they stopped under this portrait of the Queen and they both looked and I

thought “If only I had a camera.” Because the sight of Yasser Arafat and Emeka, standing either side of the portrait in their robes, admiring this picture of the Queen, would have been a fantastic picture, I thought. Anyway, though nothing happened in 1997, Rwanda persisted and eventually came into membership 10 years later.

SO: Was Arafat serious about this, do you think?

SM: I think he was a lot more serious, for instance, than Fidel Castro was when he enquired on Cuba’s behalf.

SO: Yes.

SM: I think at that point Arafat was looking for any degree of support and validation he could find. Also I think they probably had overblown expectations of what the Commonwealth could provide in material terms.

SO: How about with Blair?

SM: It was very interesting to see the British organising the 1997 CHOGM because all along there was a kind of presumption of British superiority. You know, the expectation in the Commonwealth that whatever the British did would be the ultimate in organisation and everything. This pervaded the British sense of their own self-importance in that respect and in some respects Edinburgh was a cock-up on several levels. The conference centre was too small; the Edinburgh International Conference Centre was actually not quite big enough for a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. For The Retreat, the idea of just a train ride up to St Andrews and back wasn’t a good idea, I think. The Opening Ceremony was a complete disaster. It was affected by this kind of “Cool Britannia” approach that characterised the early Tony Blair administration. What the Commonwealth does want, in any country they go to, is authentic home-grown culture, or not necessarily so much authentic. You know, they want the business: when they come to Britain, they want Beefeaters and Life Guards and, if they’re going to Scotland, bagpipes and kilts; and the National Anthem and the Queen and everything else. What they got was Tony Blair banning bagpipes and kilts: no obvious Scottishness, no Life Guards, and we had a version of the National Anthem which sounded as if it was being played on the central heating system.

SO: ‘God Save the Queen’ in hip-hop style?

SM: Yes, and it was such a wrong call. Tony Blair’s approach to the Commonwealth also was quite misguided. He saw them as a genial backdrop to his photo opportunity. So one of the struggles we had was at the Retreat. Retreat discussions, as each Heads of Government meetings went on, were getting more formalised. Less and less of the formal business was done in the Executive Session, more and more of it was being pushed into the Retreat. In the very early days at Sonny’s first Retreat (in Gleneagles in 1977) he got a few heads together. The rest generally played golf and exercised and walked. As David Lange, the New Zealand Prime Minister said of the outsiders, “We had our noses pressed to the window.” The rest of them were excluded, apart from those that had to do the deals. By this time, it had become formalised to the extent that you had a room where all the Heads could come and they

would all sit round in a position of equality, and it got more difficult, the bigger the Commonwealth got.

To keep it informal, you'd try and avoid having tables and blotters and all the paraphernalia; and, amongst those informal chairs, would be the host Prime Minister or President and the Secretary-General. Increasingly you'd have one or two staff people at the back and then three or four people at the back and then there were five or six people at the back. When we arrived in St Andrews I went and saw the meeting room with Alistair Campbell and all the normal team there, with Anji Hunter, I think. They had got a kind of little raised podium for Tony Blair to sit on, with the Secretary-General next to him and a nice flower arrangement. Then the Heads were all theatre style, just sort of sitting row upon row, looking adoringly, and we said "You can't do it this way." They said "No, no this is all agreed. Tony's agreed it, we can't change it now." We said "Well, you'll have to." They said "No, they're on their way. It's too late." So we said "Well, I'm sorry, this doesn't work."

So we had stalemate. As soon as Emeka arrived, I took him to see the room and he immediately went to Tony and it was all changed back to the normal arrangement. But that was the sort of thinking there was. Blair didn't have the patience for the Commonwealth. He wanted to cut to the chase and, with the Commonwealth obviously, you've got to go at the pace of the slowest vessel. It takes time before everything is corralled into consensus; you've got to give it time.

SO: Did Robin Cook 'get' the Commonwealth?

SM: Not really. I remember Robin Cook as being a rather indifferent attender because what had happened by then, by 1995, was that the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) had been founded and so Cook had a position on CMAG representing the UK. CMAG was actually in those days doing some quite important stuff, particularly about Nigeria. But invariably the British would send deputies to Cook. There was Derek Fatchett who was Junior Foreign Office Minister. He actually died suddenly and it was rather tragic because he was a very fit guy. I remember him getting a very high score in the Commonwealth versus the Foreign Office cricket match. Then, later, there was the Junior Foreign Office Minister and Manchester MP Tony Lloyd. I'm afraid that we didn't see much of Robin Cook.

SO: In terms of British preoccupations and demands on the Foreign Secretary at the time, this was the build up to the Kosovo Campaign in '98-'99. I'm just thinking of explanations why he might not have been a good Commonwealth man.

SM: I think that's absolutely true, but if you compare the time that people gave, what I will say, in defence of Tony Blair, was that he almost without exception attended the Commonwealth Day Observance in Westminster Abbey. Others, who were ostensibly much more committed to the Commonwealth, had not done so. Tony Blair was extremely good about that, I don't know why but he was.

SO: A good photo opportunity?

SM: Possibly, but he invariably didn't get it, particularly.

SO: Just to conclude, please could you comment, in your experience, on each Secretary-General's relationship with the Palace.

SM: It is a very interesting relationship because it is a distinct one from government. I think the Queen sees her relationship as Head of the Commonwealth as being quite separate to her relationship with the British Prime Minister or the Prime Ministers of her other realms. So Sonny and Emeka had regular audiences with the Queen, and I know this was also the case with the other three holders of the office. They also saw her on many other occasions too. She would come to the big events and there was quite a lot of contact. Emeka would keep in close touch with the Private Secretary and had quite a number of meetings or lunches or whatever. There were some moments, like over Fiji in 1987, when the Palace actually performed in relation to the Governor General, a remarkably separate function to the British government machinery. I suppose that was also true of Sir Humphrey Gibbs in Rhodesia after UDI; you know that they were operating on a rather different track. Again, those links with the Palace and constitutionality were quite unique.

SO: As you say, Ratu Penaia's relationship as Governor was with the Queen.

SM: In Fiji, absolutely, until it became utterly untenable. That was a recognition that there was something distinctive there and something that had its own particular hold - it may not have been a major element in the crisis but it had its own particular hold. Interestingly, when Rabuka came back to power legitimately as Prime Minister, the first thing he did was to present the Queen with this sign of atonement.

SO: Did he give her a 'sevu sevu', the whale's tooth?

SM: The whale's tooth, indeed. There were Palace drafts that would go through a Commonwealth system but not through the British one, necessarily. Of course the Palace would have a British government official; an FCO person probably, as an Assistant Private Secretary so there was that connection but I can remember drafts of Queen's speeches and of course the Queen's Commonwealth Day Message would be passed through Commonwealth channels for the input of the Secretary-General. So I think the Queen had a very clear view - this was a proper job. She wasn't simply a symbol and the relationship was important. The Palace, on the whole, was as helpful as it could be.

It's also interesting to reflect how the succession to the Headship would be dealt with in terms of the Commonwealth, and that's been a tricky issue. Obviously one clear possibility is that Prince Charles will be appointed the next Head, so there have been continuing attempts, over the years, to develop the Prince of Wales' interest in the Commonwealth. When the Commonwealth of Learning was established in Vancouver, the thought was that Prince Charles might become the Chairman of the Board of Governors, though that in the end came to nothing. It was a pity because Prince Edward had been President of the Commonwealth Games Federation and this is a valuable role. One thing Emeka did was to open up a role for the Queen at the opening ceremony of CHOGM. Up to that point, the Queen had never come to the CHOGM though everyone thought she did. She would be staying

elsewhere and would have her audiences there, so Heads would be discreetly leaving the meeting to go and have 20 minutes, or whatever, with the Queen and come back again.

So she had very good contact with Heads of Government but the only contact she had with the meeting itself was a day or so before when the Secretary-General would take her around the CHOGM venue and show her the meeting rooms and introduce the staff, and so on. Then she would go back and she'd give a party or two but not actually attend any part of the meeting. Emeka broke new ground. Emeka is a huge traditionalist and a great believer in the monarchy and he not only brought her into the Opening Ceremony (for the 1997 CHOGM in Edinburgh) but made sure she gave a speech as well. Invariably, she now makes the best speech of all, and has been doing it ever since. What was interesting in Uganda in 2007 was that Prince Charles came to the CHOGM and actually joined one of the roundtable discussions that the Civil Society organisations were having with Foreign Ministers. That was a very interesting and rather doubtful interposition of the son of the Head of the Commonwealth in official Commonwealth consultations. There was no kind of constitutional justification for that, in my view, but in the way the Commonwealth does, it's slowly edging its way through to somewhere else.

SO: Yes, as Derek Ingram said, it's the Commonwealth's ability to constantly reinvent itself.

SM: That's true [laughter].

SO: Stuart, thank you very, very much indeed.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]