VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Sandra Pepera

Key:
SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
SP: Sandra Pepera (Respondent)

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Sandra Pepera at Senate House on Thursday, 7th August 2014. Sandra, thank you very much indeed for coming into Senate House. I wonder if you could begin, please, by commenting on how you came to join the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1995.

SP: It was personal circumstances, really. I was separated from my husband and had lived in Ghana for the previous 10 years, and I needed a job that allowed me to live independently. I saw the advert for the ComSec in 1994, when I was home for my home leave, and I applied. That was July of '94. I was interviewed in October 1994 – Max Gaylard was Head of Political Affairs Division at the time – and by December I'd been offered the post and I started in March 1995. So, that's really how I came to join the Secretariat.

I think that they were particularly interested by the fact that I had spent nine years working in Ghana as a lecturer in Political Science and International Relations. I had done a lot of work in that role on democratisation and military issues or military regimes, and I had some strong evidence of political analysis in my background.

SO: You remarked to Stuart Mole in an interview that you gave him, that you had 'first-hand knowledge of low intensity democracy'. Ghana, of course, had multi-candidate presidential elections in '92, the first since 1979, although the parliamentary elections which followed were boycotted by the opposition and weren't held again until 1996.

SP: Absolutely. And 1992 was a defining moment for me, and I refer to it in my interview. I don't know whether Max will remember, but he asked me what I thought of the Commonwealth observer mission to Ghana in 1992, and I remarked that I was probably the only person in the room to have lived under

the full effects of, shall we say, such an untoward assessment of an electoral process.

I had been deeply involved with what was going on in Ghana at that point in time, to the extent that I was actually the Ghanaian equivalent of Peter Snow on election night in 1992. I was on TV, commentating on the election results as they came in. And, of course, at some point the government chose to remove us from the air because it was quite clear that there was something awry with the results as they were coming in. So, I was very intimately involved with that 1992 election. And, I suppose, even by the time they got to my interview in 1994, the COG's report was still smarting somewhat and, of course, shortly after that we had the Kenya election reports. So, really, to say that I didn't find the Commonwealth at its finest moment – as far as I was concerned, in those sorts of situations – would be an understatement.

SO: Do you know whether it was part of the discourse of criticism of the process of the election, and the Commonwealth's production of a report, but, perhaps, lack of follow up thereafter?

SP: Well, I think we understood intimately – straight off – that it was just too late to come in two weeks before polling and, clearly, certainly, in Ghana's case. And I think it is something that Ghana, probably, is still bearing the costs of now. The veracity and the integrity of the electoral roll was absolutely key – to the extent that the demographics did not match the electoral roll in 1992, and I suspect it does not match the electoral roll even today. Yeah, two weeks before the election… This thing was a done deal long before COG arrived.

SO: Well, indeed. Neville Linton, whom I interviewed about his involvement in the first election monitoring mission that went to Malaysia, made exactly the same point: that elections are stolen months before.

SP: Months before, months before. And this was clear to us. I suppose we, collectively – the Ghanaian leadership, intelligentsia, academia – we all walked eyes wide shut into that election. But we somehow naively expected the Commonwealth to pick it up, and they didn't. And that was disappointing, to say the least.

SO: Was this a source of much discussion when you finally came to Marlborough House with Max and said, 'Look we need to adapt our processes to try to get in there earlier'?

SP: I think it was already something that people had understood: that we needed to develop a much closer lens and look at the working of the Commission itself, the development of the electoral roll, who's on it, who's not, how it's displayed. I remember, when we went to Cameroon in 1997 for the observer mission there, we learnt new ways in which voters could be frustrated. Literally, by electoral rolls which they *had* registered on, which they *had* checked, now being posted 20 miles away from where they should be, and so forth. It goes on. There was, I think, a much clearer focus on the electoral register emerging from those early COGs, and some of the issues related to those early missions.

SO: So, in addition to your work on election monitoring, what were your other responsibilities in PAD?

SP: I got to PAD in March 1995 which, of course, was a CHOGM year. The CHOGM that year was the Auckland CHOGM. And out of that, I mean, I was sitting – I think I was probably one of two people left behind in PAD – sitting at my desk, when the news of Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution came through. And the knock-on effect, obviously, was the immediacy of the discussion leading to the Millbrook Declaration and the establishment of CMAG, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on the Harare Declaration – CMAG, for short. Of eight Commonwealth foreign minsters, the first chair was Stan Mudenge from Zimbabwe, and I believe the first vice-chair was Don McKinnon.

SO: It was indeed. The Foreign Minister of New Zealand…

SP: Absolutely, at the time.

SO: Don McKinnon has commented to me that, as he said, 'we were building CMAG, as the saying goes, as the plane was flying'. Yet how much prior preparation had there been on a body such as CMAG in the run up to Auckland?

SP: I certainly wasn't aware of it. I may not have been aware of it because I was a newbie and a lot of my first six months was taken up with [providing] support to the Tanzanian elections, which were their first elections from a one-party state to a multi-party state. And, obviously, the fallout from that was the whole Zanzibar issue, and so forth and so on. So, I wasn't particularly aware that there was a lot of grand discussion around the CMAG. It may have been that it was something that was held quite tightly to the Secretary General and the Director, and a couple of special advisors. What I do know is [that], when they came back from Auckland, we were into full steam ahead. And I believe the first meeting of CMAG happened before Christmas that year. It was almost an immediate sort of, 'We've got to meet!' The first three countries were Nigeria, the Gambia and Sierra Leone. At that time, Nigeria hadn't yet been suspended, I don't believe. It wasn't immediately suspended...

SO: I understood it was immediately suspended. That was the announcement from Millbrook.

SP: From the Councils of the Commonwealth?

SO: Yes.

SP: Well, then it could be. But there were discussions later on, I know, about how far the suspension went. So, we had these three countries immediately on to CMAG's remit. And, as I said, I believe the first meeting could've taken place before Christmas that year. It was very swift, anyway.

SO: Don has commented that, 'The CMAG was trying to establish ground rules at almost every meeting, because there were different views on different issues. And clearly within the membership of CMAG, of course, we came to talk about Nigeria more than anything.' But he also

remarked that the regional factor was an important conditioning element for various people on CMAG, and so the representative from Ghana, the Foreign Minister from Ghana, very much viewed the issue of Nigeria through a regional lens.

SP: Oh yes, of course. In fact, I think Ghana probably viewed all of CMAG through regional lenses, because the first three countries were basically all West African. So, you know, it was all very close. And what I remember, for example, from the very first meeting of CMAG – as Don McKinnon says – looking at, if you like, the protocols…Even that [i.e. protocol] we were having to just think about on the hoof. So, we knew Stan Mudenge would come, in his own right; we knew Don McKinnon would come, in his own right. Malcolm Rifkind was the British foreign minister, and I believe he turned up for the first meeting with Lynda Chalker as his deputy, but I don't believe he turned up for many meetings after that – if any.

SO: Did he send a representative?

SP: Lynda Chalker. Then Lynda Chalker would take the UK chair. Similarly, in the case of Ghana, I remember the very first meeting. Kojo Tsikata turned up, and he was really the National Security Advisor of Ghana. And, I believe, Victor Gbeho was the Foreign Minister at the time, but he didn't come to the very first meeting, I don't believe. I think Mohamed Ibn Chambas, who was the Deputy Foreign Minister, came. And there was an interesting discussion in PAD as to, 'Well, did Ghana get one chair at the table or two?' And I said, 'Frankly I don't care what you think. Kojo Tsikata isn't in any ranking, but if you're talking about chairs at the table, Ghana gets two chairs at the table, unless and until one of them decides to sit behind the other. But we are not going to make that decision for them.' So there were those little protocol issues that we just had to work out. And then, how much was done over the lunch? How big was the Secretariat team to be? What was the Secretariat's role in briefing? Because, of course, the Secretary General wasn't chairing this meeting; he was, if you like, an advisor to the chair. The chair was Stan Mudenge, and we had to prepare briefs for both the Secretary General in his role as Secretary General, and Stan Mudenge in his role as chair of CMAG. So there was a lot of – Don's right, yes – making it up as we went along.

It required a lot of close working between PAD colleagues and the various points, largely at the High Commissions in London. So, we formed quite a tight bond, I remember, with some key colleagues working in the Canadian High Commission, in the New Zealand High Commission, in the Jamaican High Commission – because Seymour Mullings, I think, was the Jamaican rep from the Caribbean on that one. Tan Sri Mousa from Malaysia…So, of course, the Malaysians were absolutely key. You know, there was a lot of consensus-building work as well as intelligence work being done – at a sort of network of what I would call 'desk officers' – in supporting CMAG in those early days. And we were very swiftly onto huge new territory, particularly with Nigeria. The whole issue about listening and actually inviting non-state actors to engage with the foreign ministers: I don't think the Commonwealth had ever done that on this scale before. I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but we had a two day meeting at one point where the first day was all Commonwealth organisations, non-state actors, Nigerian non-state actors, human rights bodies and so forth. Individuals from Nigeria who had particular

expertise/experience or things to say that CMAG needed to hear were allowed. And then the second day was the inter-governmental day when Tommy Ikimi, Foreign Minister for Nigeria at the time, came and engaged with the CMAG ministers at that level. So, again, it was absolutely striking new territory in that respect.

SO: Don remarked that Stan Mudenge, as chairman, played a funny role because he didn't want Nigeria – the issue under discussion – to be determined by non-Africans. And yet, as you say, it was *the* paramount issue for CMAG, even though there were other West African states that were on CMAG's agenda.

SP: Yes, and it's very difficult for any African to see Nigeria being held in the dock and assessed, tried, if you like – judged – by non-Africans. Nigeria is a massively powerful and important country to Africa. As much as we may all reel against some of the negative aspects of it, I have to say that I find Nigeria an important indicator of my own Africanism. It is a hugely important country. And you could see that Stan Mudenge and others, certainly, were challenged by having Nigeria put in this position. I think it was completely right that the Commonwealth sought to engage with Nigeria in this way, but it wasn't an easy engagement – neither politically, intellectually nor emotionally – for a lot of people around the Commonwealth. I don't think the Malaysians were comfortable with it either, in their own respect. So, this wasn't simply an African issue but, I think, a recognition of Nigeria as an important developing country-state – let's put it that way. An important and influential developing country, and one that deserved respect for that role.

SO: So, was the Secretariat also trying to play a role to achieve the liberation of General Olusegun Obasanjo, because he was in prison during this particular time?

SP: I think it never came down to any one particular person. I think something momentous shifted, clearly, with the execution of Saro-Wiwa, but after that it was about the liberation of Nigeria.

SO: From a military dictatorship?

SP: From a *rogue* military dictatorship. I think we have to accept that the rule of General Sani Abacha and the regime of Sani Abacha, even by the standards of Africa at the time – and there were many military regimes – was out of kilter. It was a rogue regime in so many instances, and I don't need to belabour those points. But that was the issue: we were in completely new areas of peril for Nigeria and for the region with Sani Abacha.

SO: Yes, indeed. So, just to go back to how CMAG started to evolve… How were the meetings structured? Was there an informal get-together? Was there a degree of establishing informal discussion before the more formal assessment of progress and exploration or consideration of the briefs that you had prepared?

SP: In the early days, I recall that CMAG would generally begin after a lunch. And that was the attempt…It was supposed to get people together to have a bit of an informal chat, and then you'd work through the afternoon and probably the

next morning. So, you'd have eight hours, let's say, of engagement, over probably a day or night, moving to the daytime. And before the ministers met, we would have to do things, as I said earlier, like ascertain, actually, who was being sent from some of the key countries. It mattered whether you were dealing with Malcolm Rifkind or Lynda Chalker. And it mattered if you were dealing with Victor Gbeho as opposed to Mohamed Ibn Chambas, in Ghana's case. If I remember correctly, the Canadian ministerial portfolio, I think, had changed maybe a couple of times. Lloyd Axworthy was a member, but I don't think he was the founding Canadian minister, if I remember correctly. But I may have got that wrong. So, there was a business like, 'Who's coming? Let's find out. Who's coming?'

And then there was a lot of intelligence gathering: what are the facts, as you said. What's happened in Nigeria since the last meeting? What did the last statement require action on, either by the Nigerian Government or by the Gambian Government, by the Sierra Leone Government, by the international community? Had it been done? And so forth and so on. For example, in Sierra Leone's case, obviously, there was a lot of exhortation and advocacy around either UN troops or intervention forces and so forth. Those weren't things that the Commonwealth could deliver, but the Commonwealth and CMAG would have asked member states to lobby, to take this into the United Nations or whatever it was. So, there was just a compilation of what had happened from CMAG 3 meeting to CMAG 4 meeting, and we had to present those facts.

And then we would also make an assessment about the direction of travel. Were things getting better? Were things getting worse? Did the intervention of ECOMOG in Sierra Leone indicate the possibility of an ending to some of the atrocities of Foday Sankoh? Were we getting closer to a peace deal? But, conversely, and somewhat paradoxically, what did the ability of Nigeria to mount effective regional intervention forces say about the latitude and the likely change within Nigeria itself, from a military-based regime to a democratic one? And there was a weird thing going on whereby the military were almost as much deployed against their own people as they were against others. So, it was a strange thing there. And we had to, for example, in that context also, engage with the Guineans. Because Guinea provided large numbers of troops to ECOMOG and took serious losses from the depredations of the RUF – Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front – and these sorts of things. So, they were a non-Commonwealth country, but we had to also get alongside what the regional powers who were actually providing troops to ECOMOG were thinking, whether they were Commonwealth or not.

SO: In 1996, Dr Mahathir wrote to Bill Clinton saying that CMAG was not proving to be the powerful tool for correcting a deviant regime that had been hoped for at the Auckland meeting. And he was making a direct appeal to the American President saying, 'Could you please use your leverage?' His argument was that General Sani Abacha wouldn't even let a CMAG mission through the door. And yet, you did manage to get into Nigeria.

SP: We did get in there, in the end, and I think that that was largely on the back of the 'good offices' of the Ghanaians and of Zimbabwe. I seem to recall that

Stan Mudenge went to Abuja on his own – without the rest – first. And then the CMAG mission got in. But it also took a number of engagements. The Nigerian Government sent Tommy Ikimi and a huge Nigerian delegation to London to engage with CMAG over two days. So, we didn't get the instant yes, but – through a number of different channels and good offices – they did eventually get there and I don't think that achievement should be underestimated. Nigeria did not, at any point, choose to leave the Commonwealth. They did not want to go. And they didn't say, 'You know, up with this we will not put. We're off.' That was not ever a part of the dialogue. Ikimi blustered it, but I think it was never a position that Nigeria – as a whole – would have felt comfortable with. So, there were lots of forces trying to hold Nigeria in the Commonwealth and engaged with the Commonwealth, as far as possible.

SO: I know that Moses Anafu, who I understand was your boss in PAD…

SP: Absolutely.

SO: You've said, before we started, that he held the field for the Chief's good offices and – in his role as 'Mr Africa' for the Secretariat – he had particular responsibility for the Chief's quiet mediation in Sierra Leone, in Nigeria, and in Gambia. Now, how much was his work in close collaboration with CMAG, or was there a degree of separate but parallel paths?

SP: I think you can't underestimate the importance of the fact that, within PAD, each region had representatives from the region at senior level. So, if you had an issue in Fiji, you could send somebody from PAD who was from the Pacific. If you had an issue in Africa, you could send somebody from PAD who was from Africa. If you had an issue in Asia, you could send somebody from PAD who knew the region well. And I think we underestimate the benefit of the doubt that an African walking into a situation like that – or an Asian, or whatever it is – will get. The relevance is the fact that you're actually addressing people who understand the background and the context of what's going on.

So, I think Moses' work was as much focused on Zanzibar. That blew up in 1995 and he was in and out of Zanzibar a lot. Lesotho was an ongoing issue that Moses was very deeply involved with. Swaziland, similarly, was an ongoing issue that Moses was deeply involved with on the good offices missions, and Sierra Leone, definitely. The Gambia was in a different category. It was smaller and I think none of us thought it was going to be… It's what, 20 years now since the coup? I don't think anybody…

SO: …thought that President Jammeh was going to last quite that long?

SP: I think that's probably surprised everybody, in that respect, but there are special circumstances there, should we say. [*Laughter*] And Nigeria was always, I think, held much more closely by Chief Anyaoku himself. It had to be. I remember when I was recruited to the Secretariat. In my very first meeting with Chief Anyaoku, he said he expected me to be the eyes – to have my eyes and ears on Africa – and to provide the best advice possible. It was quite a heavy responsibility. I think I wasn't aware of the level of

expectation. And anybody who knows Chief knows that he sets a pretty high bar, and I took it seriously. And I think that, in pulling together good offices missions, he was very careful about who he selected to do what for him. I remember he called me from my sick bed, I had chicken pox…

SO: Oh, Sandra, that's an appalling thing to have as an adult!

SP: At the age of 35, I had chicken pox, which my children brought into the house. And he called me and said he needed to go to Tanzania and Zanzibar, to take forward the good offices work himself, on one mission, and he needed me to accompany him. And I said, 'Chief I'm sick.' He said, 'Have the spots gone?' And I thought, well that's a personal question! [*Laughter*] To my embarrassment, he'd also suffered chicken pox as an adult, having the children walk it in, so he knew exactly the course of the disease. But we then flew to Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar, on a five day trip: you know, shuttling between the various parties and those with close affiliations and associations to the issue. And then Moses would follow up. So there were times when Chief would go himself, but the long-term hard slog was generally led by Moses. And he is one of the most skilful diplomats I've had the privilege to work for, really.

SO: It's certainly a privilege to talk to him about his work in South Africa and elsewhere. How far did you feel, though, that Chief – as a Nigerian Secretary General – was in a particularly delicate position within the Commonwealth?

SP: I think, certainly, it can't have helped to have Nigeria in such a pariah status, frankly, for so much of his Secretary Generalship. But he didn't let that become the defining motive of his Secretary Generalship. He was about reversing the trends of militarisation and military dictatorships and the abuse of human rights in Africa, full stop. And I think he sensed a move that was coming from the populations, and changes were possible. And what he wanted from the Secretariat – and from PAD, in particular – was to ride that wave and to be, if you like, opportunistic and supportive of those changes. So, my first big project when I hit the Secretariat was to prepare not only for the Commonwealth observer mission of the Tanzania elections, but also the technical assistance package that went towards supporting the Tanzanians to have a half decent election, for the first time in x-hundred years, with the CCM now being challenged by a couple of other parties – obviously, by the CUF in Zanzibar, but there were a couple of other parties on the mainland as well. And I remember we wanted to get the electoral commissioner from Malawi, Justice Msosa, who by all accounts had done a very good job in Malawi with the elections. We wanted to get her into the electoral commission in Tanzania. And the Tanzanians basically stalled and stalled and stalled and stalled, and I think she finally got into Dar es Salaam about four weeks before the election. But it was a constant piece of discussion. Max and I made a trip – a pre-election assessment mission, my first to Tanzania – and we looked at all these issues and we reported back to the Secretary General. Because, at the time – I'm not sure whether it is still the case – the pre-election assessment mission advises the Secretary General whether or not to send a Commonwealth observer group, because the Secretary General was clearly, definitely, very conscious of the importance of not sending an observer mission into a situation where it was bound to fail, so to speak: where it was

not going to be able to do a credible job. And, I think, over time, we allowed that a 'credible job' also meant calling an election rubbish when it was.

SO: Yes. As you did in Zimbabwe.

SP: Zimbabwe was later. I think the first time we really did it was the Cameroon elections of 1997, in May 1997. I think it was the presidential election we went to. It was headed by a Canadian, Jean Jacques Blais, and I think we came as close to ever saying, 'This wasn't a credible election,' as we could. And 1997 was early in the process for that.

SO: Yes. That pre-dates the Zimbabwe critical report by some five years.

SP: Absolutely. That was a fairly trenchant report and, actually, I think the observers would have gone further but the idea was, as ever, to continue to engage with Cameroon. And I recall a couple of months later, the Secretary General, Chief, called me down to his office and asked me to accompany him while he spoke to the Prime Minister of Cameroon. I think his name was Musonge. And what Prime Minister Musonge wanted was a Commonwealth observer mission to come and observe the parliamentary elections, which were happening in September or October the same year. And I had to say to Chief, 'My best advice is you have to say no.' And he said, 'Well, if I'm going to say no you'd better be here with me, to explain to me why I'm saying no.' And I took down the Observer Mission Report and I said, 'Look, these five recommendations are stroke of the pen recommendations. They've done nothing about them. The next four are more difficult. They certainly haven't engaged with those.' I said, 'You would be sending in a Commonwealth observer mission when you *know* that the groundwork for a credible election has not been addressed.' So said, so done. Chief had one of those funny phones where he could speak to the other person, but they couldn't hear what we were saying in the room. And so, as he was going through, I was feeding him lines, or prompting him or putting a piece of paper under his nose or whatever it was. And we had to – or, he had to – graciously decline Cameroon's invitation to send a Commonwealth observer mission to that election, the second election, in 1997.

SO: Were you also liaising with other international or national election monitoring groups such as the Carter Foundation or UN Military Monitoring?

SP: This generally happened much more in country. I can't recall a lot of pre-arrival liaison, but we would touch base. You would try and get hold of everybody's pre-election reports and we'd share information between ourselves. But the more likely liaison happened when you had your Commonwealth technical assistance people working alongside the UN people, the Carter Centre people, or the National Democratic Institute people, or IEA. There's a whole range of them. But I have to say that, in the 1990s, this was still a fairly competitive business and people were staking their turf and their claim, particularly in that business of actually developing the science of observation. So, increasingly, I think, the art of observation was backed up by an analysis of the psephological bit about the voting, and then you had the media pieces, then you had the political environment, and so forth and so on.

So, it just got a bit more structured and more rigorous, in terms of the examination of what was going on.

SO: In your work, then – focusing on CMAG, the role supporting election monitoring, supporting good offices – did this allow any time for much else? You've pointed out your principal focus remained on Africa: to be the Chief's political antenna for developments on the ground; to help to identify trouble spots.

SP: Yes. Some of it was about identifying political trends, what was going on – particularly in the context, perhaps, of observer missions. But one of the other highlights of what we did in that time was, for example, the Roundtable of Heads of Government of Commonwealth Africa on Democracy and Good Governance in Africa. So, this was an African CHOGM, if you like.

SO: Yes, in 1997, in Botswana.

SP: In 1997. And, again, I was the lead political officer on that. I did the pre-mission to Botswana, identified where we were going to be and what was going to happen. I worked with a very strong Botswanan team of civil servants to support this all. And then, again, a huge innovation was engaging opposition parties. In fact, it was the Political Parties Forum where, for the first time, you had both governing and opposition parties from around Commonwealth Africa sitting together to discuss some of the key principles of governance, as far as parties were concerned.

SO: To allow the concept of 'a loyal opposition'?

SP: Absolutely. To allow the concept of a loyal opposition to try and break through. and it was very interesting. Which party do you choose in which country? And, in some countries, you had to choose two opposition parties because it wasn't clear, and so forth and so on. So, there was a lot of work done on that. And then that communiqué – I can't even remember if it was a communiqué or a report – from that Political Party Forum was provided to the Heads of Government to discuss as well, and to look at some of the issues raised in that report.

And there was the Retreat to Chobe, a wonderful resort. President Masire was in the chair. I'm just trying to recall how many Heads of Government didn't turn up... I mean, the majority of African Heads of Government *actually* turned up!

SO: So what was the tone of discussions?

SP: The tone of discussions was, 'Yes, we want to engage with this, but it's because of this particular safe space that we *can* engage with it.' And the fact that it was in Botswana helped. The fact that it was in Southern Africa, where you had this predominance of, not only functioning democracies, but also Commonwealth countries, together…The fact that it was a Commonwealth platform that allowed this to happen, and that they understood what Chief, what the Secretary General, would have allowed to be brought to them…And it was carefully managed. The opposition parties might have wanted to go a

lot further, but it was a carefully managed process that allowed the range of views to be well expressed, but not in an incendiary way.

SO: It was the first and only time, though, that such a meeting was held?

SP: To my knowledge, it was the first time. I don't believe anything has been done similar to it since.

SO: No.

SP: But it was absolutely a break through, as I said. And, I think, just watching the political groups – because they didn't talk to each other in their own countries – this opportunity to actually meet and congregate and discuss, it was quite powerful in that respect. It was an interesting initiative in that context.

SO: I've heard it said, though, that there was a commonality of resentment towards the activities of NGOs that was expressed at that meeting.

SP: The NGO thing is always very difficult, and I think I've struggled with this myself. Because it seems to me that there is a dilemma at the heart of where non-governmental organisations want to be. It's absolutely right, and they should assert their independence as non-governmental, but they are constantly trying to be at the same table as the governmental – on equal par. That cannot be the case. I'm a political scientist and it doesn't work for me at all, I'm afraid. It doesn't work for me at all. There are issues about the legitimacy of voice and representation. And there are many NGOs around the world that aren't the best on their own internal democratic governance points and so forth, as well.

So, I think it is a bit of a poisoned chalice, and I know [that] when I went to DFID, for example, one of the first things I was working on was the Poverty Reduction Strategies and the HIPC initiative in 2000. And a part of the process was to have civil society engagements with a discussion of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

I remember Clare Short one day saying, quite trenchantly, 'Well, where are the parliaments?' And it was almost as if – where the parliaments were present, democratically elected and functioning – it was almost as if we had all forgotten that they were the representatives of the people. But any NGO with some logo and some support from an external agency was allowed to come and comment. And we weren't working hard enough to get parliaments to comment on these things. And she was clear that she would not have NGOs privileged over the democratically-elected representatives of the people. So, there is an issue here and it's not one that has been fully settled at all. It requires further work, it does require further work. And yes, it was something that people were upset about. And they continue to be upset about it. The confusion over the role of NGOs continues to this day – the political role of NGOs, I should say.

SO: Indeed. Expanding on your point about Clare Short… Of course, the Blair Government came into office in 1997 and, in that October, it was the Edinburgh CHOGM.

SP: Absolutely.

SO: What were your perceptions, what were your observations, about the commitment of the Blair Government and individual ministers or civil servants within that government, towards the Commonwealth and towards the Secretariat?

SP: First of all, I think I have to say [that] Tony Blair's chairing of the Edinburgh CHOGM was a lesson in… I mean, he was just brilliant. He chaired that CHOGM fabulously, which was not easy. I think '97 was actually my first CHOGM and to actually walk into that hall in Edinburgh and see 52 Heads of Government around the same table at the same time…And even if only 40 of them turned up, that was a *lot* of people. Historical figures, sitting there. And there was Tony Blair: the newest, the youngest, the brightest and shiniest. But he did a fabulous job of managing that meeting, where you had Jerry John Rawlings always off message, always meandering through various issues. But you also had Nelson Mandela at the table. I think this could have been one of the last of Lee Kwan Yew's events. Chretien, Monsieur Chretien. I can't remember which of the female Bangladeshi Prime Ministers would have been there…A woman! One of the ladies would've been there! So it's an extraordinary sight…

So, I think, certainly they were determined to get that right, and I think in '97, if I remember rightly, the Labour Government had a G8 and the Commonwealth to manage. It was a lot, and they knew it. But it was well managed. One little anecdote I will share is that one of the things you do is you prepare the list of the names of the Heads of Government for the chair, so he knows. And the Secretary General called me to his suite and said, 'Sandra, the chair of CHOGM wants the first names of the Heads of Government.' My jaw dropped, and I just thought, you're joking…There is no way Tony Blair can call Robert Mugabe 'Bob'. It ain't gonna happen! Certainly, this Secretary General isn't going to allow it to happen. Which is why he called me into the room. So, I went away and I looked at all the names and I indicated what I would call the Heads of Government: names that were collegial, familiar, but not informal. So, you could call President Rawlings 'JJ'. That would be alright. But, as I said, you couldn't really call Robert Mugabe 'Bob'. I can't remember what I came up with. But we went down this list and I then had to go to the Chairman's suite and find somebody to say, 'This is our best advice. And our advice is that it would not go well with some of the Heads of State if Tony Blair – being a fairly new proposition for them – were to try and call them by their first names.' But he looked down his nose at me from a very great height, and I think he just took a view as to whether or not this was good advice. But he took the piece of paper from me and thanked the Secretary General for his advice and walked away. And then I think they used it to the extent that we had done it. But it was quite funny. The first thing they wanted to do was get on first name terms with some of these living legends of the political history of the Commonwealth.

SO: Informality can be taken too far. [*Laughter*]

SP: Exactly. [*Laughter*]

SO: So, at this particular time, who would you identify as being key Heads within the Commonwealth? You've mentioned Lee Kwan Yew, but this is very much the twilight of his political career.

SP: Mahathir.

SO: Mahathir, yes.

SP: Hugely important. Mugabe had a lot of residual respect, I think. Obviously, Mandela. It was '97, India was… I can't remember who was Prime Minister.

SO: It was I.K. Gujral. So, was there an identified equal commitment by India in the 1990s?

SP: No. No, India was always problematic. And there was this existential kind of, 'Ah, what do we do to make India more interested in the Commonwealth?' And it just didn't happen. We had a very senior Indian diplomat – Kris Srinivasan – [who] came to the Secretariat. But it was never seen as the signal of India's commitment to the Commonwealth, and I think we all pined after a deeper Indian engagement.

SO: Yes, the largest democracy in the Commonwealth. And it seemed to be somewhat disengaged.

SP: It was always disengaged…

SO: Max commented yesterday that Malaysian interest in the Commonwealth seemed to be tailing off by the latter part of the 1990s because Kamil Jaafar had not succeeded in being appointed as the DSG, and instead Kris Srinivasan was appointed to that post.

SP: I can't comment on that hypothesis. What I saw was a very strong engagement by Tan Sri Mousa on CMAG, and the Malaysians always sent good strong people to the observer missions. Their political engagement was strong. They supported Commonwealth organisations well. I think, again, it's this thing about the Secretariat versus the Commonwealth, and they may have been disappointed at not getting the Deputy Secretary Generalship for the Secretariat. But it didn't – to my mind – show itself in a lack of engagement with the wider Commonwealth agenda.

SO: And in 1998, Kuala Lumpur held the – up to that point – most successful Commonwealth Games. I know the commitment had been made from 1987 at the Vancouver meeting, but that was still a phenomenal input of financial support…

SP: Absolutely. And I think, particularly – I may be misremembering this – but I think their engagement on the environmental agendas stayed very strong from Langkawi. I'm not disagreeing with Max, but I just wonder whether there might have been a difference between the Secretariat and the Commonwealth. You asked about the UK's position, and I think that – over the period of time that I have understood Britain-Commonwealth relations – I think what I've seen is a decreasing interest in the Secretariat but a steadier interest in the Commonwealth, particularly obviously at moments when the

interests of the UK and the Commonwealth are most tightly knit. So, that's what I would say, I think, if I look at the early years of my time at the Secretariat, with Rifkind as the foreign secretary and Lynda Chalker, as a very active sort of minister for Commonwealth affairs. I know she was supposed to be Minister for Africa, but actually, I think she was pretty engaged across the board. In 1997, I remember Robin Cook coming, I believe, to only one CMAG meeting, and then thereafter deputising all the Commonwealth issues to Tony Lloyd, who was a very engaged minister with issues, until, of course, he was toppled on the Sierra Leone affair [i.e. due to his failure to disclose information about the supply of illicit weaponry by Sandline International to combatants in the Sierra Leone Civil War] – which was very strange all round. I joined the British Civil Service itself in 2000, having left the Secretariat. I think there were certainly a number of people in DFID, the Department for International Development, that understood that – particularly behind some of the UK's big international structural advocacy pieces [like] HIPC, the debt relief initiative, and then later on around the reform of the International Financial Institutions, to enhance developing country voice – the Commonwealth was a good forum for information exchange, for awareness-raising, for advocacy, for lobbying. And one of the divisions I was attached to, you know, we had the first Commonwealth/La Francophonie meeting on IDA issues.

SO: International Development Agency (IDA), yes.

SP: Yes.

SO: So were you involved in setting this up? In writing briefing papers, with a degree of Secretariat guidance?

SP: Well I was – by this time – in DFID, and we wanted to support the discussion on enhancing developing country voices in the International Financial Institutions. We were getting nowhere, really, and nobody really wanted to pay much attention to it. So, I remember suggesting to my head of department at the time, why did we not see whether we could not get a broader coalition of developing countries? We had access to the Commonwealth. We also had access to the La Francophonie, just because France was very involved in the HIPC initiative, as well, and they had a number of countries they wished to help. So, we had access to both. Why not try and get a joint meeting to discuss some of the issues around HIPC, around Poverty Reduction Strategies, around the voice and representation issue? And that went forward and, I think, quite successfully. I can't remember the year. It was probably around 2001/2002. And, again, I think it was the first – and maybe only – one of its kind. But, certainly, the intention was that it became more of a standing forum where the donor countries could access the views of developing countries over these issues. And, at some point in time, hopefully a developing country forum itself would then be able to – of its own volition, in a sustainable way – engage on these issues. The most important thing was that it had to be breaking out of some of the political silos and actually reaching across a group of countries in their economic groupings, which are low income countries and middle income countries. And you got that if you grouped the Commonwealth and La Francophonie together.

SO: So, this is really expanding the structure and ideas of the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting. Would they have discussed such issues in that particular forum?

SP: The Finance Ministers would have done, yes. But you wouldn't get Commonwealth and Francophonie Finance Ministers in the same place.

SO: Of course not, no.

SP: The only place they might come together would be in the G-8, of course. But, in this context, what we were looking at was… We were ensuring that the ministers of development, planning and finance from the two groupings were also able to meet and discuss some of these issues in a meaningful way.

SO: On the Commonwealth and development generally: in the latter part of the 1990s, what were your observations and reflections of the role and benefit of CFTC? Under Sir Sonny Ramphal, development had been the Commonwealth's other grand strategy, in addition to opposition to apartheid. Yet the place and structure of CFTC was altered once Chief Emeka became Secretary General in 1990. I know from talking to Max Gaylard that there was general discussion in the Secretariat on how to best use CFTC funds: whether they should be targeted in following up, as you say, the election monitoring mission reports – in other words, for capacity building – and knowledge transfers. What is your recollection of these discussions?

SP: Well, again, [this is] another existential discussion as to whether CFTC was about capacity building or gap filling. I suppose it was quickly obvious that not a lot of capacity transfer actually went on. I'm not sure that we ever had a full and formal evaluation of CFTC, but it seemed – at least from my observations – that our CFTC experts were just that: they were experts. And not every expert can transfer capacity as well. So, I would suggest that that was probably patchy in its actual success, but so is IMF capacity building. So, this is not something reserved to the CFTC, and it was a constant tension, particularly with those who were managing CFTC. There were those of us who had other objectives: for example, supporting democratisation. I was the lead officer working on the Commonwealth Police Development Task Force for Sierra Leone. This was a multi-national task force of senior police persons drawn from around the Commonwealth that went into Sierra Leone to start rebuilding the Sierra Leone police. And we had Canadians, a Zimbabwean woman, a Brit, I think somebody from Sri Lanka… So it looked like the Commonwealth. And the point of that was, as I said, to start rebuilding the Sierra Leone police force in that tail end of the conflict. So, it was post-conflict reconstruction. And I have to say that one of the British officers who was seconded to that task force subsequently became Commissioner of Police in Sierra Leone.

Now, we used CFTC funds in part for this. I remember the British also put in separate funds for it. But there was no question that this was part gap filling. Some of the job descriptions for these Commonwealth service personnel were line management jobs. But they also had strong training components. I remember one of the Canadian servicemen was the police bandmaster or something wonderful. So, he was very excited at the thought of recreating the

Sierra Leone police band, which is absolutely part and parcel of that whole ethic of the service. So, for those of us who had a different set of objectives that we were trying to achieve, we found ways to justify the use of CFTC funds for those objectives. But I know it was a constant worry and there were moments when you thought, 'Why do we still have to be sending legal drafters to Kenya, which has a hugely advanced and hugely mature judiciary and legal profession? And how is it that they still need legal drafters?' It can't all be about integrity and the ability to draft in a non-partisan way because, if there are checks and balances in the process, that should be picked up later. But I think some Commonwealth member states have got used to having Commonwealth technical experts doing certain things for them, and then we almost never develop exit strategies for them.

SO: You commented to Stuart on CFTC that, 'the organisation, perhaps, fielded not the strongest technical capacity programmes and not the strongest technical capacity support.' You questioned what was the key area of comparative advantage for Commonwealth technical assistance. And it was not going to be across the board, but there were going to be places where that technical assistance was going to be invaluable for a member state.

SP: Absolutely.

SO: This is really, as you say, gap filling in niche terms of delivery.

SP: Absolutely – in niche areas. And I think we tried to spread ourselves too thin, and to some extent this was also almost an employment agency for Commonwealth technical experts. I think it was a little bit problematic. I think that there were some areas whereby Commonwealth expertise was absolutely going to be the key. I would say legal drafting – not necessarily for Kenya – but legal drafting must have been an area, because of the commonality of the common law around the Commonwealth. That would be an area.

There would have been other areas where the government couldn't have the capacity. I know there was the apocryphal story of the civil aviation expert in that Pacific Island and, basically, if a Commonwealth expert hadn't gone down there, there would have been no flights to that island for six months or whatever it was. So, there are some places where, with the best will in the world, that population, that state, cannot field the full range of specialists, supporting needs. And there are other parts of the Commonwealth where there is a multitude of that expertise, and that's when you want them to fill the gap. But also, I think, importantly, how do you – long term – make it a sustainable position for the member state to take [upon itself].

SO: When you then moved to DFID – I want to come back to other parts of your Commonwealth work – how far did DFID see CFTC as a useful multilateral aid instrument?

SP: The money came from the DFID budget but I cannot, hand on heart, say that the stewardship of CFTC really was a major concern of DFID, up until the point at which – under the coalition government – the whole range of multilateral organisations that the UK gave money to came under review, with

the multilateral assessment process that was kicked off in 2010. But I would say that, apart from a rather formulaic annual glance to see whether or not in general terms, for example, things like the administration of the fund was being kept… If DFID had said to the World Bank, 'zero growth in admin costs', then of course it would try and apply the same to CFTC and so forth. But to the extent that Secretariat costs and the running of the Secretariat was separate from CFTC costs – which were all programme costs – it wasn't always obvious that somebody really had a good look across both. The relations with the Secretariat are generally led by Foreign Office colleagues. And, as I said, I would not want to overstate the amount of scrutiny of the development effectiveness – let me put it that way – of CFTC that went on.

SO: Sandra, when you were still at PAD, you were involved in the review of the criteria of membership that came out of the Edinburgh Heads of Government meeting in 1997. How do you recall that process evolving?

SP: It didn't seem to. It was clearly a very complicated baseline to start from, because you did have, first of all, to accept the anomalies that had already occurred.

SO: By that you mean the inclusion of Mozambique?

SP: Mozambique, Cameroon, but even in the South Pacific: Papua New Guinea, I think, wasn't directly Commonwealth… Was it Papua New Guinea or Vanuatu? I think at least one case in the South Pacific had already been included. So, we had precedents whereby the direct link to the British colonial experience had already been breached. And then you looked at the list of countries that were lining up for membership. And you had Rwanda. There was a persistent lobby on Ireland. I was never quite sure whether the Irish were involved with that, or whether it was just a lobby on Ireland. People pointed to Yemen. And I think that was it, I can't remember. But, you know, you had a list of countries that were looking to come in, and I believe [that] the Chair of the Commonwealth Membership Review… Was it a Canadian or was it Don McKinnon?

SO: I don't know, I'll check that.

SP: Certainly, my recollection was [that] it was somebody from the 'old Commonwealth'. And it was very difficult, then, to reconcile what was going to be the criteria against which you would assess membership. You couldn't just have it, then, as a close affiliation with Britain's overseas experience – or however you wish to put it sensitively these days – because, as I said, you'd had a breach already with countries that didn't have that. Then you couldn't put 'English speaking' because, again, you had countries that didn't have that. Adherence to common law traditions? Again, you have countries that didn't have it. So it was a difficult exercise, and I think, in the end, nobody was probably very satisfied with the criteria. But maybe we got to a place where people were more satisfied with the process by which scrutiny was going to take place.

And, as I recall, that required engagement not only by the Commonwealth Secretariat but, I think, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association would be involved. A range of Commonwealth organisations that would say, 'By our

assessment, this country is exhibiting or on the point of exhibiting, or could do better towards exhibiting, Commonwealth values and Commonwealth engagement,' and so forth and so on. And that process, then, would take time. And at some point, the Secretary General would make a recommendation as to whether or not the country, a country, should be admitted. So, I think, whilst the criteria probably weren't as definitive as people might have wanted – because there were just too many precedents to tie up, and a view that, actually, the modern Commonwealth might want to be much more expansive – the process probably made people a little bit more sure than had been the case. Because there had been, I think, three missions to Cameroon before they came in.

Mozambique was a very special situation in that Mozambique had been called 'a cousin of the Commonwealth' for so many years, because they were the only non-Commonwealth country ever to receive CFTC funding – because of its Frontline status and then, of course, because the request from Nelson Mandela was impossible to resist.

So, it didn't feel like Secretariat members were supporting the discussions; it didn't feel like a very complete process in some ways.

SO: Speaking of a complete process, South Africa, of course, had returned to the Commonwealth after the multi-party elections in April of '94. It had been the fifth on Alfred Nzo's list of priorities when he became South African Foreign Minister that April. You've mentioned Mandela. How far, though, did you have the sense that the ANC Government, in addition to Mandela, was committed to the Commonwealth? The reason I'm asking you this is [that] it is now part of the discussion about the contribution of the Commonwealth to the end of apartheid. In the ANC mythology of liberation, the Commonwealth is nowhere to be seen – which is an enormous slight to those who were particularly active.

SP: I don't think I would say that we got a terrific sense that we were number five on South Africa's list. I would say that that wasn't obvious in very many ways. There must have been an increase in, perhaps, experts doing the roster. There would have been more Commonwealth organisations with full memberships in South Africa. But as far as the politics of the Commonwealth were concerned – which is probably where I had the greatest lens over – I can't say that South Africa played a major role. I mean, we did have, of course, in 1999, the Durban CHOGM.

SO: South Africa had to be persuaded that it was their turn…

SP: Yeah, I understand that also. And, of course, I was a part of the Commonwealth Observer Group to the elections in 1999 in South Africa, which was an interesting experience for me. But, no, I certainly didn't get a sense that South Africa was in a hurry to reciprocate the Commonwealth engagement with it at the time.

SO: First, if I could ask you about your interesting experience of that second Commonwealth Observer Mission in South Africa. Why did you say 'it was interesting for you'?

SP: Well, again, it was led by David Steele, who was a long-term South Africa hand, so to speak. And I remember it as being a very strong Observer Group of people. Danville Walker from Jamaica, to name but one – and it's probably invidious to name any – but it was a strong Observer Group. We did the normal pace of an Observer Mission, and I was sent to Durban, KwaZulu Natal, with a very distinguished Indian whose name, shamefully, I forget at this moment… That is shameful… We were in the southern part of KwaZulu Natal, and there were two other observers in the northern part.

It was an interesting experience because this was now my second trip to South Africa, ever, and I suppose I'd expected more of a transformation than I saw. And, I recall, one evening, a bunch of observers and Secretariat staff booked a table to go out for a meal to a pizza restaurant in Pretoria, and got there, and we were turned away.

SO: What?!

SP: Absolutely. We were turned away and politely but firmly told that we did not have a reservation at that particular restaurant. And I think we were all just stunned. And I looked down this queue of, as I said, eminent Commonwealth experts from around the Commonwealth – a multi-national group of people – and I looked at this young man and I said, 'Are you sure you want to turn us away?' And he looked at me blankly and said, 'No reservation for you here'. So we left. And we mentioned this the next morning to the Chair of the Electoral Commission. And, you know, for some reason, I think Health and Safety decided to visit the restaurant for three days.

SO: Did they, now!

SP: But it was just like, they had the *nerve* to turn us away.

SO: I find that deeply shocking!

SP: We found it deeply shocking! I couldn't believe it. You can imagine the conversation thereafter was extraordinary. Of course, we knew we had the right restaurant and a reservation and everything else. But clearly when they saw us, we were not welcome. [*Laughter*]

SO: To go back to the official Commonwealth: The Durban meeting was in November of 1999, and Thabo Mbeki became the first Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office. Do you recall how that emerged?

SP: I don't, actually. I think it emerged from the CMAG issue, and the question was [that] CMAG had become almost a punitive mechanism. And there was certainly a view that, short of being 'CMAG-ed', as we used to say, there was work to be done with a number of Commonwealth countries, and there were engagements to be had and issues to be supported. But there were those who insisted that CMAG's mandate remained drawn as tightly as it ever had been, in 1995, which meant that CMAG could only deal with countries where there had been the unconstitutional overthrow of a democratic regime. So, Pakistan joined, and I went on the Pakistan mission, and that was interesting too. So, Pakistan joined the list. You then had Nigeria, Gambia, and Sierra Leone – all in '95. Nothing reverted to CMAG until Pakistan, in 1999. And

there were those who said, well, this is wasting, in a way, the Commonwealth's broader 'good offices' ability, and the opportunity to raise issues within a forum that would allow the government in question to engage. Nigeria had engaged. But the point was, short of the actual unconstitutional overthrow of a democratic regime, what would you do? So, there was that second tension.

But then the third tension was the Secretary General saying, 'Well, that's when my good offices come in'. And now, somehow or other, these three tensions seemed to be resolved with the idea that, if you had a Chairman-in-Office, you had an extra resource that the Secretary General could also use to, in a way, consult with and draw into any issues that might occur ahead of a crisis, a political crisis.

Now, in this context, there had been a long discussion, for example, about Fiji, before its actual coup. There were issues brewing there. I'm not sure if Zimbabwe itself didn't come up at some point. But, these weren't the unconstitutional overthrow of democratic governments. The strict interpretation of CMAG didn't allow them to be discussed, but how would you engage with them? So, somehow or other, we ended up with the Chairman-in-Office. It was quite unsatisfactory, I think.

SO: One of the recommendations of the latest EPG report presented to heads in Perth was the abolition of the Chair-in-Office role.

SP: I think there is an issue about it because you may – as we should always have foreseen – not wish the Chair of your CHOGM to be the Chair of the Commonwealth for the next two years.

SO: Indeed, with Sri Lanka currently Chair-in-Office.

SP: That's the one that really hit. So, I think India and South Africa have always been, as I said, the countries that the Secretariat have felt have not been appropriately engaged with the Commonwealth: given their importance, in India's case; and given the Commonwealth's engagement with its most important historical transition, in the case of South Africa.

SO: So, 1999. The storm clouds were starting to gather for Pakistan. You've made reference to the mission to Pakistan…

SP: Yes. We went on a mission to Pakistan. It was led by Lloyd Axworthy; all eight CMAG ministers went. It was quite a tough mission, not least because Mr Axworthy was a particularly difficult foreign minister. But all eight foreign ministers went. I suppose the thing I remember most about that mission was the moment when the ministers were supposed to be able to send a small group to meet with Nawaz Sharif, who was then obviously in detention, and a message came back that we couldn't. And, I think, certainly some members – some ministers – felt that this was Musharraf running interference. And Musharraf's people said, 'No it's got nothing to do with us. Nawaz Sharif has said he is not going to meet with you.' And I think the foreign ministers just couldn't believe this, but it was one of those nice moments. The Commonwealth had called for the release of Nawaz Sharif, they'd called for a road map back to democratic practice, [but] they had not called for his

reinstatement as Prime Minister. He wasn't seeing them if they weren't calling for his reinstatement as Prime Minister. And, as I recall it, the two most senior Secretariat team members – it could have been Amitav [Banerji], and one other – they actually went to see Nawaz Sharif, and he explained this in no uncertain terms. And they had to come back and let the delegation know.

Now, of course, the issue was Sharif's own behaviour. Again, it was the business of the erosion of democracy: he was step by step dismantling the democratic and constitutional structure of the state, but he was a civilian and therefore, in a way, one had had to watch this happening without been able to intervene. I am sure the Secretary General was attempting good offices behind the scene – as were others across the world, probably – but until Musharraf actually overthrew him, there was not a formal process for the Commonwealth's engagement. So, it was a classic example where we could see this train wreck happening before our eyes, and had no way of actually mobilising a bigger force than the Secretary General's good offices. Perhaps a Commonwealth force – not in terms of a military force – but a Commonwealth energy to engage with the ensuing political crisis that led to, in the end, Musharraf overthrowing [Sharif].

SO: Was there also any parallel Commonwealth energy being increasingly invested in the situation in Zimbabwe? The political crisis there was beginning to gather momentum by the end of the 90s.

SP: No. The Commonwealth is nothing if it's not built on a shared emotional commitment to struggle and liberation, and, in that context, there are icons of that struggle and liberation. Sometimes it takes a long time for the membership to see the negative elements. And, as we all know, the Zimbabwe situation is a complex and complicated one, and it continues to pit the colonialist against the liberator in some people's mind. It's a classic ongoing discussion. So, nobody was going to be in a hurry to try and, if you like, 'CMAG' Zimbabwe, or even to engage with a Good Offices mission. And, in any case, the crisis *really* turned in 2000.

SO: Yes – after the referendum on the constitution and the presidential elections.

SP: Absolutely. Having said that – I don't know whether Moses alluded to this, but…– I think Moses and I wrote the best piece of political analysis and advice we'd ever written in the five years that I'd been there in April of 2000. This suggested what we foresaw happening, and ways in which the Commonwealth might engage, and I think the manner of the engagement – more than anything else – meant that the Commonwealth very quickly became irrelevant to the resolution of Zimbabwe's crisis, I think. It wasn't our finest hour, in that respect.

SO: Matthew Neuhaus argues that, in fact, the Commonwealth played an important proactive role on Zimbabwe – particularly the Commonwealth Election Monitoring Mission report of 2002, which, he said, kicked off the whole question of the crisis of democracy in Zimbabwe.

SP: Yes, but between 2000 and 2002, you're dealing with a senior, mature, sophisticated political operator like Robert Mugabe, and you have to have

advice that equips you to deal with that. And for a number of reasons – perhaps just when the Commonwealth, the Secretariat, needed the best advice – it lost some of its best advisors.

SO: Yes it did. What of Sri Lanka?

SP: No. Sri Lanka wasn't even… The Commonwealth has a self-censoring ordinance that says it doesn't deal with civil wars and/or wars between neighbours – except it had engaged in Sierra Leone. But the Sri Lankan Civil War had gone on for so long with very little – as far as I could see – in terms of a Commonwealth political engagement; it wasn't on the radar at all. I only became involved in the Pakistan situation because I became, in a way, the functional lead officer for CMAG. So, actually, when the Pakistan coup came along, I fully expected that I would not be engaged with it, but that my peer who dealt with Asia in PAD would take the lead. And I was very surprised when the Secretary General said, 'No, you are CMAG and if it's a CMAG issue, you have to get involved.' Frankly, Pakistan wasn't a country that I'd had a great deal of engagement with right up until that moment.

SO: During your time at the Secretariat, how important was the Office of the Secretary General compared to the Political Affairs Division? Did they run very much in tandem or was there a careful allocation of responsibility? It seems that there is a fair degree of cross-over…

SP: Well, yes. Political Affairs Division did three things. It gathered intelligence. Just knowing what was going on was a feat in itself. I remember there was Moses, myself and one other junior officer, Victor Pungong. He tragically died of a heart attack, I think. He was Cameroonian. He was one of the first Cameroonians recruited to the Secretariat after Cameroon joined. And we looked across to our colleagues, for example, in the Foreign Office, and I had a Rolodex of fourteen names in the Africa division in the FCO, which were teams and names of people that were responsible for bits and pieces of Commonwealth Africa. So, just keeping on top of what was going on was a feat in itself: it was an intelligence-gathering piece.

Then there is a consensus-building piece. For example, when we were working on Nigeria, I think, probably for the first time ever there was a very close connection with the EU and the Commission. Tim Clarke, brother of Charles Clarke, headed up the Nigeria desk at the Commission. Now, this is two Commissions back, so it was a different animal, but basically the EU had slapped a whole lot of sanctions on Nigeria and we were trying to align ourselves with those, make sure that they remained relevant and appropriate. Not that the Commonwealth was adding sanctions, but just understanding where the EU's thinking was going. Is Europe going to add more sanctions? Are they about to increase visa bans? So, all that… Consensus-building piece…Talking to the Commission…Once a year, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth had a set of bilateral engagements with the Secretary General of the United Nations. You know, [we were] making sure that, in that moment, [we] put the right things in front of them for that discussion to take place, and so forth. There was a whole consensus-building piece on the politics of things.

And then the third thing that PAD did was [coordinate] partnerships with governments or groups of governments around Commonwealth objectives. So, democratisation or human rights or whatever it was. So, that might mean working one-on-one with a government, bilaterally, or it might mean working with a number of governments on an issue.

So, I think if you saw that as what PAD did, then the signals as to where PAD was supposed to do that would be a point of us raising a flag for the Secretary General and saying, 'This is what's happening here, what do you think?' Swaziland – you know, they've had another round of TUC and student strikes. But Mswati obviously ain't about to become a constitutional monarch any time soon, what do we do? And, you put up the note and the Secretary General will say, 'Oh, well, when was Moses last down there?' or, 'What is the rest of Southern Africa, what is SADC saying about what's going on in Swaziland?' You would hope that, when you put up your note, you'd also been in touch with a few people to find out, 'Okay, what's SADC thinking now about this?' So, then, you would hope that the Secretary General had advice as to what to do next. And sometimes he would say, 'Okay, it's not enough for Moses to go down there.' Either, he might appoint an envoy of his own, or he would send… I think on one occasion, at least, he sent Kris Srinivasan down to Swaziland – with Moses in tow, of course – to engage with the political actors down there and try and see whether there was a way forward.

So, that's the sort of thing that would happen. You'd be looking across the piece and saying, 'Okay is there a tension coming here? Is it an issue that the Secretary General or the Commonwealth can engage with?' And then you'd raise it as a flag, and then see. And then sometimes the Secretary General would say, 'Well, look, I want to do this,' and then you'd have to think, 'Well, how would we do that?' I think the Round Table was very much an initiative like this. The Secretary General had thought it would be something he would like to do. And then our job was then to find out how to do it, how best to do it? What would be the best project design for it? So, that's how it would come about.

But I think a political initiative would pretty much never be something that the Secretary General wouldn't sign off on. He would have to sign off on a political initiative. And, on occasion, we were providing political advice as to what would happen: for example, in the context of the World Bank annual meetings. If you understood that these were never purely technical issues – you know, what is the G-8 really meaning? – then you might provide advice to the Secretary General. He might decide to write a letter to the G-8 Heads of Government on an issue that was of importance to the Commonwealth, and make sure that they took those into account in their conversations. The fact that the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting always happened in the margins of or just before the annual meetings meant that, in those years, there were moments when we did get messages in through the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting on issues to do with Commonwealth states and reconstruction support to Sierra Leone, or whatever it was. And then you thought, 'Okay, some of this will travel into the corridors of the other institutions as they also have their debates and thoughts about some of the issues.'

SO: Sandra, please, could I ask you, having worked in ComSec for five years and also – with the benefit of hindsight – looking back through the DFID lens, what do you feel were the particular characteristics of Chief's leadership of the Commonwealth as SG?

SP: He is a very, very thoughtful and considered man. So, nothing happens in a hurry or without having been completely thought through, and I think that's something that both the Commonwealth and the non-Commonwealth responded well to. He's not excitable. Yes…I think that's an issue. He's also very shrewd about what the traffic will bear and seems to know at what points he could push the envelope on something, and how far he could push the envelope. So, not only was it the opportunity but understanding how far that opportunity would let him go. I think he'd been in the Commonwealth long enough to understand the Commonwealth itself, and the nature of the beast. And he, of course, knew a lot of the people and had at least been able to engage with them and observe them over many years, so, that helped. But I think, importantly, he also had a vision and an objective: what would his term be remembered for? And, I think, it was clearly something around establishing a trend towards democratisation and governance throughout the Commonwealth, and there were reverses as well as successes in that, but it helps to have a vision. It helped to have a sense of, okay, these 10 years, one wants to really put one's energies and muscles to it, and I think that that was it. So, I think something about being considered, something about having a vision, and something about the depth of his knowledge of the Commonwealth. He is also quite wily and opportunistic. He didn't have the showmanship of Sir Sonny Ramphal, but it was a different kind of – and equally effective – understanding of the political barometer of the Commonwealth.

SO: How much do you think it was also particularly beneficial to the Commonwealth that, at a time of huge change and – not exclusively, but predominantly – African problems that were confronting the Commonwealth, that there was an Africa SG?

SP: I think you can't underestimate that fact. I think PAD itself was set up to reflect that. And, as I said, the benefit of the doubt of being able to walk into a situation as an African certainly shouldn't be underestimated.

SO: What was his relationship like, particularly, with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan?

SP: Kofi Annan, yes. They seemed to have a good relationship. Again, I think these are two people who must have known each other for quite some time. Funnily enough, their careers had almost mirrored each other in that both of them – at some point – went back to their native countries for ministerial posts of relatively short duration.

SO: Yes. Chief was Nigerian Foreign Minister for a year, in 1983-1984.

SP: Yes. And Kofi Annan went back, I think, for a lesser post but didn't survive, either. So, they had some interesting parallels in that respect. And, actually, they are quite similar people. They are actually quite similar. I know Kofi Annan quite well. They're not sentimental. They don't do the 'kitchen cabinet'

thing. And some have said this was why Kofi Annan got it so wrong over Rwanda – because he didn't have those people around him who were able to say, 'You know, you've got this one wrong'. They didn't have that sort of favourite coterie of people around them.

SO: Which Sonny Ramphal did. He always had a particular group around him.

SP: Absolutely. They didn't do that, either of them.

SO: Interesting how different political operators can act, in fact, in very similar ways.

SP: And they probably avoided it because they thought that they would get slated for doing so. But, as you said, it's a hugely important political resource, to have that kitchen cabinet.

SO: As long as that kitchen cabinet doesn't then become gatekeeper for knowledge or access.

SP: Or even just playing to you what you want to hear.

SO: Well, indeed. You don't want the sycophants.

SP: No. But there is still some value – I would say a great deal of value – in having friends in high and low places that you can come to.

SO: Yes. Sandra, you left ComSec in 2000 and joined DFID – as you said, still during the Blair years. And then you went as UK Director to the Caribbean Development Bank. Was that relatively soon afterwards?

SP: I was working in DFID headquarters in London from May 2000, when I joined, until October 2004, when I got my first posting overseas as a head of office, which was to be head of the DIFD programme in the Caribbean. It's a regional programme, and so whilst I was based in Barbados we had offices also in Guyana and Jamaica at that time. And I was, simultaneously, the UK's Director to the Caribbean Development Bank.

SO: Did you come to see the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Secretariat differently because you were operating in a different political culture, from a different perspective?

SP: Well, it's interesting, because DFID's Caribbean post covers exclusively the sovereign, Commonwealth Caribbean, and so the Dominions are covered by our Overseas Territories Department. So, in DFID, you have a Caribbean Department and you have an Overseas Territories Department. So, as I said, the Caribbean Overseas Territories – plus St Helena, and the remaining Pacific Overseas Territories – are dealt with separately. So, in a way, it was familiar as a political grouping, because I knew these states from my time in the Commonwealth Secretariat. But the engagement was obviously different because the engagement was much more about the partnership between the UK as a development assistance partner to the Caribbean states. I arrived two months after hurricane Ivan devastated Grenada, and one of the first

things I was responsible for was to organise £10 million of budget support to Grenada: to basically pay the civil service for the three months to December, whilst a broader package of post-hurricane assistance was put together [by] the World Bank and others. And we had to restructure Grenada's debt and so forth and so on. Now, I'm not sure that I would have had as good an understanding of some of those dynamics of small islands if I hadn't been in the Secretariat. But, at the same time, it is a different relationship that you have. The UK's relationship with the Caribbean was aimed at trying to reduce vulnerabilities, and these vulnerabilities were around not only the natural disaster issues but the micro-economies. Another area where this came up was the ending of EU trade preferences on sugar. The banana issue and the rice issue had been running for years before I got to the Caribbean, but the ending of the preferential trade relationship on sugar was a massive issue for at least six of the Caribbean states: Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Kitts, Belize, and Jamaica, of course. So, the question was what support could the UK give – not only directly into the countries themselves, to mitigate this end of preferential treatment, but also through the EU, because all trade issues, as you know, for the UK, are now dealt with as an EU competency issue. Through the EU, what could the UK say in those corridors to get the Commission to provide mitigating assistance to the Caribbean countries?

And this all came to a head just ahead of the 2005 CHOGM when the Heads of the Commonwealth Caribbean were invited to breakfast with Mr Blair, and some bright spark in Number 10 had decided to remove the reference from the briefing that he was going to be having breakfast with them the day before or the day after the EU announced the ending of the Preferential Trade Agreement. So, the Prime Minister was well and truly ambushed by the Commonwealth Caribbean Heads, led by Jagdeo, as we heard it. And whilst it was unfortunate that the Prime Minister got ambushed, the silver lining was that the issue of stronger representations in the EU on the mitigating package for the sugar producers was upped. The UK advocacy and lobbying around this gave a much more creative take on what could be done with a package of mitigation measures. Something we had been suggesting, advising, from our lonely outpost in the Caribbean for a while suddenly shot up the agenda. So, that was a good thing, and so a better package of mitigation was…

SO: Yes, a classic case of CHOGM working best for small states to have access to a large power head of government.

SP: Absolutely. And before I left the Caribbean, the other issue I could point to was the UK support for the Caribbean Risk Insurance Facility, which is a facility that provides insurance pay-outs to governments to support their public sector in the event of a typhoon, hurricane, earthquake, whatever… It was a project initiated by the World Bank but very much supported by the Caribbean Development Bank, DFID and others to get this thing off the ground; we had, as I said, paid £10m to Grenada alone in 2004, as post-hurricane support. But through this mechanism – obviously, it's an insurance mechanism – we understood that with almost a one-off payment of about £4.5 million/$7.5 million, something like that, we could establish an insurance pool that would obviate the need for single payments from the UK Exchequer down the line. I signed off on that in March or April 2007, and it's been running as a mechanism ever since. But, again, we did a lot of work lobbying,

not only externally. Making sure that others came on board. Canada, for example, came on board, and – importantly, at the time – they paid for Haiti's insurance premiums for some years going forward, because they knew that Haiti would never be able to get itself together to make those payments. In its initial funding, Canada included Haiti's subscription: that allowed for coverage to extend to Haiti. And the last hurdle, then, was to convince DFID that the Caribbean budget – its budget for the Caribbean – should be inflated by this amount of money as a one-off payment.

SO: Was Don McKinnon working on this particular approach, or was it dealt with effectively as a British multilateral agenda programme for the Caribbean, so that it didn't have a specifically Commonwealth dimension?

SP: No, it didn't. I know that a briefing was given to a Commonwealth meeting of small states on the mechanism, but I can't say I saw a Commonwealth interest or push. And maybe it didn't need [it]. Again, if we accept that the Commonwealth should focus where it actually can really add value, [then] if this seemed to be going along alright without it…

SO: A case of saving energies?

SP: Save energies and use them elsewhere. So, I wouldn't say that I noticed a Commonwealth engagement with that particularly, but certainly I do know that a briefing was given by the World Bank design team to a Commonwealth meeting of small states.

SO: Sandra, just to start to wrap up, how and why do you think the Commonwealth has survived, and what does this say for it going forward?

SP: Well, I'm really worried about the future because I think the Commonwealth has survived on, as I said, a sort of post-colonial emotional bond. If you look at it, the generation of leaders of the Commonwealth that really helped that first transition from the British Commonwealth to the Commonwealth – the modern Commonwealth – they had the same worldview. They might have been coloniser and colonised, but to a certain extent, they did have the same worldview. They'd read the same books. Some of them had been to the same colleges, like Oxford. There was this commonality of understanding and it carried the Commonwealth a long way.

We haven't really put things in place other than that, to keep the Commonwealth going on a different footing. So, I am concerned that the institution-building of the Commonwealth has not kept pace with, frankly, the generational change in the leadership of the Commonwealth, and that generational change is responsible for things like the growing importance of the regional blocks as opposed to a global block. It is responsible for what technology does to a meeting or the need for meetings. It's responsible for the fact that, you know, no two leaders now – probably – have that ability to self-reference across a common past of some kind. So, if all those things have broken down, what are the institutional blocks of the Commonwealth that we've put in place, that can take the Commonwealth forward?

I think the Charter is important because, you know, finally there is some kind of constitution for the Commonwealth. But just having it isn't enough. It's got to live in some way, in people's lives around the Commonwealth, and there's some work to be done there. I think that the Secretariat has certainly failed over the last decade – probably longer – to ensure its relevance to member state governments, and that's its first constituency. It's actually not the peoples of the Commonwealth: the Secretariat is an inter-governmental organ and it has to understand that, and if it's not engaged with the governments of the Commonwealth, then actually it has no constituency. I think that is something that has to be addressed. In engaging with the governments of the Commonwealth, you have to show what's in it for them, and I think – both politically and in terms of the development agenda – this has not been clear to the governments of the Commonwealth.

And then the third piece, of course, is that the Commonwealth is more than the Secretariat. Looking across the piece, at what the whole jigsaw of Commonwealth organisations means to the peoples of the Commonwealth, some of the same issues apply. Is the Commonwealth Journalists Association as well formed today as it might be, given the changes in generation, technology, media, and so forth and so on? And you could do that across a whole range of Commonwealth organisations. So, I think these are the sorts of issues that make me a little fearful for the future of the Commonwealth. Because, once you've cut away the personality-driven piece of the Commonwealth – which has actually been the last 50-60 years, which is embodied in the Queen, frankly – once you've cut away that personality-driven piece, then you're not left with anything very much that is well-grounded and forward-looking.

SO: The Commonwealth isn't enough of an entity.

SP: Not to outlast that change of personnel. I think that that's the key thing. The leaders are different now; it's a different breed of leaders. They're a different generation. They haven't all come through that same formative experience of de-linkage from the colonial experience. Whether you were British or part of the broader Commonwealth family, everybody went through the same experience of that de-linkage at that point in time, and that's what held the Commonwealth together: this great emotional bond that everybody had has held us together for this period of time. But, in that time, we should've been putting in place the institutions that spoke to the future and – not only the institutions – the ways of working that spoke to the future, for a continued Commonwealth engagement. If you think it's relevant still.

SO: Richard Bourne, who is obviously a great Commonwealth devotee, has argued that the efficacy of the Commonwealth has been that it has operated below the radar. Its relative invisibility has been one of its hidden strengths. Derek Ingram argues that the explanation for the survival of the Commonwealth is its inertia: the lead weight of its continued existence as an international organisation. It can bimble along and people might or might not use it, but there won't be any necessary impetus to unravel or disband it.

SP: Well, I'm not sure death by a thousand cuts is a good way to go. I mean, really! And that's what's going to happen. One of the things we haven't put in

place is a proper financing structure for the Commonwealth. And, again, when I say 'the Commonwealth' in this context, obviously, the key symbol of the Commonwealth is the Secretariat or the key organ of the Commonwealth is the Secretariat. We haven't put anything in place for a good finance plan for that, and slowly the Secretariat will atrophy. So, that's problematic. I'm not sure that operating below the radar is enough any longer, and I would question that. I don't think the Commonwealth was operating below the radar on anti-apartheid. It certainly wasn't operating below the radar through the democratisation phase that Anyaoku led. So, these were all quite high profile things, and I think nobody was in any doubt what the Commonwealth was doing those things.

SO: What about the future headship? You've identified Queen Elizabeth as a critical element in being the core – at the centre of the web of personal and shared formative experiences.

SP: I think she symbolises it, hugely. I don't think she is critical to the Commonwealth continuing, going forward, but I think she really does, as I say, crystallise this business about being the one generation, and we really are just one generation of Commonwealth leaders in that respect. We are now coming to a critical change in that regard. I think again, you know, certainly when I was in the Secretariat, one of the other bleats – so, apart from India and South Africa – the third bleat was, 'How come the Prince of Wales doesn't give a toss about the Commonwealth?'

[*Laughter*]

SO: He did go to the Colombo CHOGM and acquit himself quite well.

SP: He did go to Colombo and acquit himself quite well, but his mother is now 87 and she wasn't about to travel.

SO: Exactly. No more long haul flights.

SP: I think he has been very active recently – with the Prince's Trust work and so forth and so on. In any of those he might have indicated an interest in the Commonwealth. It just didn't happen and I don't know whether this was part of that protocol between the head and the heir, but it was a bleat. It was certainly a bleat in the Secretariat when I was there.

SO: My last question, on the back of the Glasgow Games, which have just concluded. In your role at the heart of Political Affairs Division, did you see the Games having any political utility within the Commonwealth?

SP: No. I think the only time it came close to it – and it wasn't actually the Commonwealth Games…Wasn't there a Cricket World Cup in England at some point between '95 and 2000? And there was a great deal of excitement because, I think, it was the case that all the countries that were participating were Commonwealth countries, and there was great excitement because you could actually legitimately roll out the Commonwealth flag, as well. But that was as much a PR point: it was about showing that the Commonwealth was here and it was nice.

But I think, no, not generally. And it shouldn't be the case, I suspect. The Commonwealth Games should remain in that part of the firmament that says, you know, sport is sport and politics is politics. We have ways by which countries are not able to participate in the Games. So, if you are a suspended country…

SO: But Fiji has just attended the Glasgow Games and Fiji is not part of the Commonwealth.

SP: Has it been suspended? You see, there are different sorts of suspension. You can get suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth, which just means that you can't go to the inter-governmental meetings. If you get suspended from the Commonwealth, then, for a start, that's when you change to becoming Ambassadors from High Commissioners. And then you can't go to things like the Commonwealth Games. So, there are two different levels, and that's why I was saying that I think the first suspension of Nigeria was only a suspension from the Councils of the Commonwealth, which included some discussion about, for example, did that mean that Nigerians could no longer work at the Secretariat? Could Nigerians join Commonwealth organisations? And so forth and so on. So, that is different from the Zimbabwe-type suspension when, basically, they are suspended from the Commonwealth. [Robert Mugabe withdrew Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth after the Abuja CHOGM in 2003] So, Zimbabwe cannot turn up for any Games; it cannot benefit from the Commonwealth Foundation. Now, the Secretariat cannot require the Commonwealth Veterinary Association to ban all Zimbabweans, but there is an expectation that if a country is suspended from the Commonwealth it is suspended from the membership organisations that are affiliated to or borne out of the Commonwealth. So, if Fiji went to the Commonwealth Games then they are only under the first…

SO: The Councils of the Commonwealth?

SP: Because Fiji still has a High Commissioner, right? So, as long as Fiji has a High Commissioner, then they're not suspended from the Commonwealth.

SO: Sandra, thank you very much indeed. It's been a great discussion.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]