VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Vijay Krishnarayan

Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
VK: Mr Vijay Krishnarayan (Respondent)

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Mr Vijay Krishnarayan, Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, at Marlborough House on 14th May 2013. Vijay, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by telling me, please, how you came to be involved in Commonwealth activities.

VK: Thanks very much, Sue. I was active in Caribbean civil society, working on sustainable development and natural resource management issues. I became the Director of the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute in the late 1990s, early 2000s. I'd already become aware of the work of the Commonwealth Foundation because, before I joined the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, I was a VSO volunteer in Belize, working on the environmental side for a non-governmental organisation called the Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology (BEST). While I was there, I got a note from the Commonwealth Foundation asking for people to participate in a study tour to look at women's participation in rural development. It was going to take place in Pakistan, organised by the Commonwealth Foundation in partnership with the Aga Khan Foundation. Now, as a VSO at the organisation, I didn't think it was appropriate for myself to go on [the study tour]. So, my Belizean counterpart went, and it was a life-changing experience for her – exposing her to a different way of working, different cultures, linking her up with different practitioners in the field and [it] made a real difference to her. It was from that moment that I became aware of the Commonwealth Foundation and thought this is an organisation that I thought I might like to get to know a little better.

When I joined the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute after my time as a VSO in St Lucia, CANARI – as it was called – was a regular recipient of grant funding from the Commonwealth Foundation. Indeed, the Commonwealth Foundation had eventually paid for me to go on a study tour that was being organised by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute just prior to my joining them. Arguably, it was thanks to the Commonwealth Foundation that I was recruited to that post, because it was during the course of that workshop that colleagues at the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute got to know of me and my work. As the eventual Director of the Caribbean Natural

Resources Institute, I was reviewing the sources of our funding and the Commonwealth Foundation came up time and time again as…not a substantial contributor, but a regular contributor of small amounts of money that enabled us to do some important academic work. It wasn't purely academic – it was applied research – but it was really money that was used to bring practitioners together from the Caribbean region to regularly discuss issues of natural resource management and citizen participation in natural resource management.

The Commonwealth Foundation liked the work that the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute was doing and paid for me to go to the 1999 CHOGM in Durban. That was a fantastic opportunity for me. It also saw me join, as a consequence, what was then called the Commonwealth Foundation's 'NGO Advisory Body'. Aware that it was a small London-based outfit, the Commonwealth Foundation recognised the need to have a body of civil society advisors from around the Commonwealth to advise it on grants and programme-making.

SO: How peripheral were civil society organisations at that 1999 CHOGM in Durban?

VK: I don't think they were peripheral, I think they were just making space. Civil society was gathering in the wings of heads of government meetings since 1991 at the Harare meeting. At that time, the nature of interaction between civil society and CHOGM was quite different. In fact, I believe [that] in Harare, civil society organisations met about six months before the meeting. But it was only after, I think, the intervention of the Royal Commonwealth Society at the Edinburgh CHOGM in 1997 that the concept called a 'Commonwealth People's Festival' was discussed and implemented. It was that model, if you like, [which] the Commonwealth Foundation took up and took to Durban, having tried something smaller in Auckland in 1995. But the idea of combining a gathering of civil society together with exhibits and showcasing examples of people's work and so on, I think that really came to the fore in 1997. So, in 1999, we were experimenting. It was a huge gathering. My back-to-office report from that described that it was as if we were all on a fabulous cruise liner going on a journey that nobody knew what the destination was, but we were all funded to be on it. We were all having a fabulous time, had great experiences of learning and exchanging, interacting with each other, but we weren't entirely sure what the end product was. But as an exercise in awareness-raising about the Commonwealth – about the diversity of the Commonwealth, about the work that other civil society organisations in the Commonwealth were doing – it was absolutely fabulous. It made me determined to get involved and engaged with this institution in some way. So, I was invited as a consequence of that to come onto the NGO Advisory Body. From there, I developed close links with the directors and staff of the Foundation. I was asked to organise activities for the Foundation in the Caribbean on the subject of natural resource management.

I left the Caribbean in 2005 and came to London: didn't have a job, started consulting – which, in real terms, means writing reports for people that don't like writing reports. One of my clients came to be the Commonwealth Secretariat. I think they asked me to write the annual review of 2005 on the way in which civil society had engaged with Commonwealth Secretariat programmes. As a consequence of doing that work, colleagues at the Commonwealth Foundation came to know that I could write a few reports and

they asked me to do some work for them. So, I worked very closely with the then-Deputy Director Rudo Chitiga and started helping her with some of the programme directions that the Commonwealth Foundation was taking. At that time, Rudo was very keen on exploring and expanding the Foundation's work on governance and citizens' engagement and involvement in governance systems and structures. That's always been an interest of mine, obviously, from my previous experience coming at it from a natural resource management perspective. The management of natural resources requires governance and institutional arrangements. I've always been interested in the way in which you can reconcile developmental and conservation imperatives. So, that requires a set of institutions, a set of policies, as well as capacities that enable that, but you could argue that that is the case for governance in any other sector as well. What I saw at the Foundation in the early 2000s was an interest in that way of thinking: accepting that the engagement and involvement of citizens in governance would require much more than training or capacity-building. It required some other thinking around the ways in which institutions work.

SO: Vijay, was this picking up on academic ideas in development economics [which were] emphasising good governance [and which] came very much out of the structural adjustment era? By this I mean, is the role of civil society moving in parallel with economic liberalisation and political liberalisation?

VK: I think there is a danger of it being portrayed as such. I say 'danger' because, in all of that, I've always avoided using the phrase 'good governance', because the more that I understand about the Commonwealth, the more I appreciate that there are diverse takes on governance, and where the Commonwealth has struggled is [in] imposing a template or blueprint. In fact, the great strength of the Commonwealth is that it's able to establish norms that are universally agreed without ever codifying what those norms are. So, one person's 'good' is another person's 'not so good'. That said – and I'm not saying that there aren't absolutes regarding the basics of any government system, and they stem from commitment to the electoral process, but arguably also extend to a commitment to, loosely speaking, pluralism, tolerance, and inclusion. But actually drawing a line in the sand as to when one crosses over from 'good' to 'bad' in each of those instances is something that I'm not sure the Commonwealth is good at, nor would ever want to do.

SO: After writing your report for the Commonwealth Secretariat in 2005 and before you served as the Foundation's Deputy Director in 2006, what was your take on the connections and discrepancies between the Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation's work?

VK: I think, traditionally – and this became quite clear to me when I was doing that piece of work – the Commonwealth Secretariat has had a rather ambivalent view of the Commonwealth Foundation. Ambivalent and ambiguous, if that's possible at the same time. In some corners of the Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation is seen as subsidiary in some way: another division, if you like, negating the fact that it's a separate organisation, with a separate board of governors. In other parts of the Secretariat, you will hear us talked about as mildly irritating, because it's our responsibility to bring civil society discussions to the fore in Commonwealth and ministerial processes. That's not always seen as an integral part of the intergovernmental process: it's seen as peripheral or even tangential, whereas we don't see it like that at

all. It's very much part and parcel of the way that Commonwealth business is transacted. So, subsidiary, peripheral: both completely dichotomous perspectives, but nevertheless they exist. There's also, I suppose, a sense of ownership over the Foundation in some quarters which stems from the governance arrangements. So, for example, the Commonwealth Secretariat has a seat on the Commonwealth Foundation's Board. A seat is reserved for the Secretary General or his or her representative on the Board of the Foundation. So, he would obviously sit alongside our high commissioners and our civil society representatives. That's not a mutual relationship – for example, the Foundation does not have a seat on the Secretariat's Board – which reinforces the subsidiarity perception.

SO: But does that date back to 1965, with the creation of the Secretariat and the concept of civil society being subordinate actors? As you've said, from the 1990s, with the reconfiguration of the international system, international politics [and] international society, there was a rise of civil society actors which is embedded within the Harare declaration of 1991.

VK: Yes.

SO: Does that cause points of tension and friction?

VK: I think it does, particularly if we fast forward to where we are now. We'll go back to the intervening years in a bit, I'm sure, but where we are now at the Commonwealth Foundation is looking at the totality of requirements that encourage and enable citizens to participate in governance processes. As I've said, that is more than about training and grant-making to civil society organisations. You can build all the capacity you like, but if the institutions are not receptive then you're wasting your time. So, now, at the Foundation, we are much more intent on working directly with governance and institutions: using our intergovernmental status to argue that civil society organisations need to be heard. This could bring us into direct conflict with the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat, with their exclusive mandate to work with governments on governance. Broadly speaking, it's a line in the sand. "You guys work with civil society, we'll work with governments and that's the way we'll carve it up." But it's not as simple as that. If we're engaging in issues of participatory governance, we have to work with governments to make sure that they're open and willing to discuss and engage with civil society organisations. I'm not suggesting that that the Commonwealth Foundation is going to start opening up all sorts of doors with members states, but I think we do have a responsibility to work with the focal points that have a specific interest in engaging with civil society organisations: to bring them into contact with those organisations, but also to help them understand this thing called civil society. It's new for many people.

SO: So, the Commonwealth Foundation is more than the soft edges of 'soft power', then.

VK: It's getting less soft. With our new strategic plans and our commitment to promoting participatory governance, that does bring us into a less soft area, shall we say.

SO: So, now the Commonwealth Foundation is really nudging the Commonwealth Secretariat forward to discuss political issues, and has done this increasingly – specifically since 2007, then, when you joined.

VK: I couldn't take that kind of credit for it. It's civil society organisations themselves that are pushing at the door, and the Foundation has responded.

SO: As Director, are you an institutional manifestation of that?

VK: I think that is right. And it's not just since 2007. I think if you go back to the early 2000s – with Rudo Chitiga as Deputy Director, with Colin Ball as the Director at the time – these guys weren't from the usual stock of Directors of the Commonwealth Foundation. Previously, Directors of the Foundation had been long-serving diplomats from the service who were, in a sense, rewarded after years of service with the position of Director of the Commonwealth Foundation. And they did excellent work in getting the Foundation to where it was. But I think in the 2000s we began to see a different profile of Director and Deputy Director: a different style of leadership at the Foundation, drawn much more from the civil society side of the equation than the intergovernmental side, and that was beginning to have a profound effect on the direction that the Foundation was taking. But then, arguably, that's an institutional manifestation of the growing voice of civil society.

SO: But this also ties back into the Secretariat and the extent to which that organisation takes its remit and its approach from the formative political experiences of the current leader. Don McKinnon, at that particular time, was a New Zealand politician and former Foreign Minister, accustomed to dealing with more formal lines of political and diplomatic communication. He was not necessarily as in tune with civil society actors, since he thought of the Commonwealth more in trade, finance and diplomatic terms.

VK: Actually, I take a slightly different view. In my analysis, it is politicians that have a firmer grasp of the need to engage with the totality of the stakeholders.

SO: What of the Secretaries General who were administrators or bureaucrats?

VK: I think they do find it harder. I went to speak to the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management early on this year in Delhi – hundreds of senior officials, public officials gathering there – and I went to speak to them about the importance of the public sector engaging with civil society. I was booed. Not roundly – it's a Commonwealth gathering, so people are too polite to do that kind of thing. No vegetables were thrown. However, it was a rough reception. Those colleagues, senior officials, civil servants – they're the custodians of governance processes.

SO: Who are guarding their patch jealously?

VK: Absolutely.

SO: And don't want to accommodate civil society?

VK: Yes. So, this is where there is some nexus with your argument about new public management and the rise of civil society. So, there is some connection there, but it's not an ideological connection that's very comfortable for many that are working in civil society.

SO: It seems that there's a constructive tension between bureaucratic resistance and civil society pressure, with that aspect of administration thinking, "I don't want to slide into a populist response", versus civil society actors who are trying to change the name of the game and make governments more responsive to trends of opinion.

So, how have you seen the institutional role of the Commonwealth Foundation change between 2006 and going up to the Perth CHOGM in 2011? Has its institutional architecture altered to reflect that change in democratic trends within the Commonwealth, manifested through civil society organisations?

VK: I think it has. The Foundation went through tremendous growth between 2005 and 2010. Those five years were a period of dramatic growth. I think the Foundation doubled in size in terms of staff – it's not saying much, but we went from 12 to 25 or something like that. But we were able to take advantage of the willingness of bilateral donors, in particular, to use the Commonwealth name, to use the capacity of civil society to make progress on certain specific things. Human rights in the British Overseas Territories – there was a huge grant from DFID and the FCO to advance that. There was a huge grant from DFID to advance sustainable fisheries with stakeholder involvement programmes across the Commonwealth. These were interesting pieces of work, but they were indicative of the willingness of major Commonwealth donors to use the facility afforded by the Foundation – its connections with civil society and the technical expertise that resided there – to advance particular agendas.

SO: How much has the Commonwealth Foundation also provided an institutional structure of continued contact with countries that have been suspended from the Commonwealth, or that have withdrawn from the Commonwealth, to try and maintain that necessary filigree of links to provide a path back to good governance and membership?

VK: Well, the only example that I can give you is the example of Zimbabwe. Taking a cue from some statements made by the Secretary General in early 2008, the staff at the Commonwealth Foundation began thinking about ways in which the Foundation and civil society could make a contribution to the rehabilitation of Zimbabwe.

SO: How much was this building on what the Royal Commonwealth Society had done? At the Kampala CHOGM in 2007, I know that Stuart Mole, as Director of the RCS, enabled Morgan Tsvangirai to be on the periphery of the CHOGM meeting.

VK: That was an absolutely crucial moment, and actually itself indicative of how civil society can shape Commonwealth processes. The Royal Commonwealth Society made the bold decision to invite Morgan Tsvangirai to the Kampala heads of government meeting. Obviously, there was no entry to CHOGM for him, but what the RCS did was set up a parallel event – a fringe meeting, if you will – which Tsvangirai was invited to attend. Now, this meeting was so out there that it wasn't even included as part of the official programme of the Commonwealth People's Forum, which was the official gathering of Commonwealth civil society. There were a lot of nerves about the nature of the event, questioning what it was that the Royal Commonwealth Society was

trying to achieve, but credit to Stuart for pursuing it. That actually opened the door for a much freer discussion about what it was that the Commonwealth could do.

Later, in 2008, the Commonwealth Secretary General made a statement about the need to mobilise global opinion and resources to provide humanitarian aid. I think there was a call for Commonwealth member states, in particular, to heed the call being made by the UN. I think it was for material aid in the face of crop failures and cholera. It was in response to that that the Commonwealth Foundation started this thinking about what it was that we could contribute. I started thinking about the potential to convene a gathering of civil society organisations from the Commonwealth family along with civil society organisations in Zimbabwe and in the SADC region to discuss political transition. There was a global political agreement – a power-sharing arrangement had kicked in – and so we thought maybe if we funded something [to] bring together these diverse elements, we could at least set out an agenda for civil society organisations, if we can't chart a course for our governmental counterpart. So, we used the intergovernmental stage of the Commonwealth Foundation to go to our member states and say, "Look, we want to do this. There's a grant that we can give to enable this kind of discussion. Can we do it?" It was a useful device, because through that, our grants committee reviewed the proposal. The grant committee comprises representatives from our board, so High Commissioners sit around the table and determine whether a grant can or cannot be made. It was the decisive intervention of member states from Africa in commenting on that grant that emboldened us further and told us we were on the right track.

SO: Was that when you had the meeting in Johannesburg, in June?

VK: Yes, that led to the meeting: to the round table. That grant enabled the meeting that took place in June of 2009. This was a round table which brought together civil society organisations from Zimbabwe, from the broader SADC region and from Commonwealth-accredited organisations, many of which were based in London. That, in turn, led to a Commonwealth Organisations Committee on Zimbabwe, which still meets to this day and delivers *ad hoc*, I would say, individual interventions, if you like: projects which we fund from time to time, but we're not the only funder. There's also an arena for intelligence and information-sharing about the situation in Zimbabwe.

SO: In terms of political endorsement, were there any key African countries? I'm just wondering about Nigeria. HE Olusegun Obasanjo had been on the Troika which had tried to contribute to the resolution of the Zimbabwe issue, but which led to Robert Mugabe leaving in 2003. What of South Africa? Or were there other key Commonwealth actors?

VK: My memory of that meeting is that it was Ghana who was most outspoken. I don't recall…

SO: Zambia?

VK: Zambia. Ghana and Zambia: those two representatives. And, obviously, Zambia, the regional voice, was very important. But it was those two interventions, I think, which sped us on our way. I'm of the opinion that when the discussion happens again about Zimbabwe's relationship with the

Commonwealth, that intervention and the consequences of it and the efforts of the broader Commonwealth family will make it easier for talks to resume. And, actually, [it] makes it more likely that Zimbabwe will choose to re-join the Commonwealth than if those things did not happen.

SO: It's problematic, of course, because certain civil society actors have been markedly at odds with the ZANU-PF leadership. Yes, it's part of a coalition government now – the Government of National Unity – but the extent to which you could be levelled as supporting treasonable activity… ZANU-PF doesn't have a conceptualisation of a loyal opposition, which is part of its revolutionary fervour: it regards MDC, in fact, as a counter-revolutionary force. So, it could be fundamentally counterproductive.

VK: I think that's a risk that we take, but we're not advocating anything more than a discussion among civil society organisations about transition. What was interesting about the 2009 round table was that, although there were no official representatives from ZANU-PF, governors from Zimbabwe's provinces either attended themselves or sent representation and, of course, all the governors are ZANU governors – [or], at the time, were ZANU governors. So, there was an arena for dialogue and discussion.

SO: So, apart from the megaphone diplomacy and rhetoric of "imperialist external malign influence", in fact, the discussion took place on a much more practical and discreet level?

VK: Exactly. I think it served a useful purpose. My personal perspective is that any future in Zimbabwe will include a ZANU component**.**

SO: Yes, I agree. This is what I see as the jockeying for power between the factions of ZANU-PF as they try to reconfigure the political landscape for the inevitable time when Mugabe has gone. The power plays are certainly taking place.

Has the same process of attempted engagement using civil society actors taken place with Fiji or with Sri Lanka?

VK: No. I think it's a missed opportunity. I think there is the potential there, particularly in the case of Fiji. By virtue of its geographical and communications linkages, Fiji is at the centre of much of the civil society community in the region. Many regional civil society organisations are based in Suva, and indeed in Nadi. I think there is the potential there for civil society to connect with colleagues and counterparts elsewhere in the Commonwealth. I think it's maybe a little difficult in Fiji because it's clear that civil society itself has been split since 2006. Elements of civil society have actually been asked to participate in governing and take up government positions, while others have taken a firm view that, actually, it's not appropriate, and so on. So, it's difficult for civil society. Nevertheless, I do feel that the Commonwealth, as an entity, in its efforts to continue dialogue with counterparts in Fiji, could make better use of civil society linkages and contacts. We couldn't do that at the Foundation; we wouldn't do that un-encouraged.

SO: To what extent have you been responsible for civil society actors' attempts to nudge governments and processes, as well as the

Foundation's function as an autonomous entity to encourage multi-ethnic participation in civil society organisation? I was wondering, particularly, with regard to the schism that exists in the political sphere in Fiji between the Indian community and the Fijian community.

VK: We would need some encouragement, either on the part of the Fijian government itself, our Fijian civil society counterparts, or indeed from the Commonwealth Secretariat. If we got any hint of encouragement from any one of those three constituencies, we would start thinking about what we would contribute.

SO: How about in terms of encouraging democratisation from a grassroots level in Pakistan and in Sri Lanka?

VK: In Pakistan – and indeed in Sri Lanka – we continue to support civil society organisations through our grant-making, but those two instances, I think, are quite different.

SO: I put them together because they're still within the Commonwealth, whereas Fiji is outside and so is Zimbabwe.

VK: Yes. It's an important point to make that, as much as one would like to, I don't think it's possible to generalise about the ways in which civil society contributes or can contribute to either healing or the institutionalisation of democratic traditions or of tolerance or what have you. It's clear that every context is completely separate, but there are some things that we can contribute in Pakistan and have been contributing in Pakistan. Clearly, civil society organisations have gone through many stages in their relationship with official processes, but civil society organisations have consistently been outspoken and independent, no matter what the shade of the political regime in Pakistan. We've continued to support them here at the Commonwealth Foundation, largely through grant-funding and the development of key contacts with civil society organisations inside Pakistan. Especially those working in the frontier regions, which have shared some pretty harrowing experiences, I have to say: their brushes with the Taliban, who are not the most tolerant when it comes to enabling or allowing civil society activity, particularly when it comes to the schooling of women, provision of health. These are some of the services that civil society organisations are providing in that territory. But the Foundation has done what it can through grant-funding to continue to support that kind of work. So, I think in Pakistan there's been support not to international, non-governmental organisations – because that's never been our thing at the Commonwealth Foundation – but [to] Pakistani national and local civil society organisations delivering on the front line, on the one hand. On the other hand, [we are also] making space at international gatherings for high-profile Pakistani civil society advocates, largely on the governance side: making room for them and providing platforms for them to have their say when it comes to Commonwealth gatherings, such as the Commonwealth People's Forum. That's not a view just taken by the Commonwealth Foundation. I think our colleagues at the Human Rights Unit at the Secretariat would share that outlook.

In Sri Lanka, of course, it's a different situation because of the heads of government meeting and the global attention focused on Sri Lanka and the position of civil society in Sri Lanka. I mentioned in my last breath the distinction that we make in the Commonwealth Foundation between domestic

civil society, if you like, and the international, non-governmental organisations. Traditionally, the core constituency of the Foundation has been those national organisations – national development, non-governmental organisations – rather than the international organisations. This is for the simple reason that if you take an organisation like ActionAid's budget for the Asia region alone, it's something in the order of £35 million. Our annual budget at the Commonwealth Foundation is £3.2 million, for fifty-four member states. So, they have very little interest in what we can contribute to their work from a material side. Where we have engaged with them has been on the political side, where they recognise the ability of the Foundation to open up Commonwealth political spaces.

For example, in relation to Zimbabwe, the International Crisis Group and various others [have been] making interventions and making submissions to the Commonwealth Foundation, referencing the Commonwealth Foundation in their reports on the future of Zimbabwe and so on. But, in relation to Sri Lanka, our interest is in supporting Sri Lankan civil society organisations. So, that is what we have done. We're aware of others, but we don't make a bee line for Human Rights Watch or Article 19 or Amnesty International, or any of those organisations that have rather well-defined and established positions. We've focused much more on the need to support the organisations that are based in Sri Lanka and are asking for support.

SO: That's interesting, because Amnesty International and the Anti-Apartheid Movement concentrated their energies very much towards the Secretariat, seeing that as the political lever to achieve racial justice in South Africa. You are saying the Commonwealth Foundation's remit and focus of attention is very much on the domestic sphere, rather than international connectivity and leverage.

VK: Yes, this goes back to our funding, if you like, and the way that we're structured. We receive money from member states, and member states expect to see some kind of impact in their own countries.

SO: Since you joined the Foundation, have you experienced approaches to the Commonwealth from states such as South Sudan or Burma?

VK: Yes, we have. This is another point that goes back to our relationship with the Secretariat. We've been made very aware of the fact that we can't cross lines and we should not pursue discussions until broader discussions take place regarding the membership of those countries with the Commonwealth. You have to be in one of the fifty-four to be one of the forty-seven. There are only forty-seven members of the Commonwealth Foundation. You have to opt in to membership of the Commonwealth Foundation, so it's not automatic. So, Fiji is not a member; several other Pacific island states such as Tuvalu, Nauru, and Vanuatu are not members. In the Caribbean, I'm afraid [that] St Kitts and Nevis have remained outside since they became independent in 1980. Singapore withdrew from membership last year.

SO: Why?

VK: Now, Singapore… Their argument was that they wanted to see some more specificity and more focus in the work of the Commonwealth Foundation. They weren't satisfied that the work of the Foundation was delivering that, and they chose to withdraw. My personal opinion is that, now [that] we have a

new Strategic Plan which is much more focused, with a greater emphasis on results-based management, [it] will make it more likely that Singapore will see itself in the work of the Foundation. But going back to your original point, Commonwealth Foundation membership is a subset of broader Commonwealth membership. In fact, when we redrafted the Memorandum of Understanding – the governing document of the Commonwealth Foundation, if you like – as part of the re-launch process, our member states were very clear in their desire to see us not engage with non-Commonwealth member states, unless they had given some explicit say so.

SO: Given the activities of civil society and their desire that the Commonwealth Foundation should continue to represent the will of its members, how much do you see yourself, now, under your new Strategic Plan, as being entirely responsive to, say, the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association and their desire to get together? Or do you have a convening role?

VK: Okay. Our relationship with the Commonwealth family, as a consequence of our Strategic Plan, has changed.

SO: Yes.

VK: Under our previous model, we would make sure that we dispersed about £250,000 to Commonwealth organisations every year – out of our £3 million income, more or less. We would make sure that we dispersed £1 million in grants every year, leaving a little bit for running costs and a little bit for projects that we would run from London in conjunction with partners. Of that £1 million that we would disperse every year, we would ring-fence about 25 percent for Commonwealth-accredited organisations. So, under our new Strategic Plan, the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association, the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, and the Commonwealth Association of Planners are treated the same as other civil society organisations. We have done away with that distinction. We're interested in promoting and supporting civil society organisation at large, which includes Commonwealth organisations that see themselves in our participatory governance project.

Now, this has obviously not been received entirely favourably by the Commonwealth associations, who enjoyed a degree of privilege under our previous regime: guaranteed access to a certain pot of grant funding. It was unique because it also made provision for core funding to Commonwealth associations, unlike any other aspect of our grant-making. So, I think it's fair to say that some organisations in the Commonwealth family have rather interpreted our new direction as an abandonment of the Commonwealth family and are questioning, "If you're not going to give us this privileged access, what is it that is Commonwealth about your work?" Which is a quite fundamental question. In response, I would say that there can be nothing more Commonwealth about our work than a commitment to participatory governance. It's what the whole thing is about; that's the point. It's the common shape of the institutions across the Commonwealth – the common patterns of governance, common systems of governance. That's the common currency that we enjoy. That provides a common unit of analysis, if you like – a common focus across the Commonwealth where we can encourage any civil society organisation to see themselves getting involved.

SO: I do know that when you first presented your new Strategic Plan, it had something of a bumpy reception.

VK: Yes, 'mixed', it's fair to say. I admit I was booed there as well. I am using the term 'boo' lightly, but it didn't go down entirely well.

SO: The criticism was that it is necessary to generate the meetings to then garner opinion, rather than garner opinion and then hold the meetings.

VK: Karen Brewer and colleagues from the CMJA were quite critical of the fact that we had said in our new grant-making regime that we're not going to fund workshops any more. We're not going to fund one-off conferences any more. That may be the bread and butter of Commonwealth organisations, but what we're looking at here is a more results-based orientation. We're being asked to demonstrate impact, and that's what our member states were asking for. "What are the results?" "What's the consequence of the action?" If we accept that – and we do – we cannot be providing resources in the way that we've provided them in the past, where we essentially made grants to organisations and asked very few questions about the ultimate impact of those activities. We're now obliged to say, "Well, what's it connected to? Where did it come from? What's the rationale for it? Is there a sound rationale for it? What are you going to do about it, and how is it going to impact? Can you demonstrate what kind of change it is going to result in?" That's not easy for organisations that have been holding these meetings ever since…many of them predate the Commonwealth Foundation itself!

SO: They have their own diplomatic modes of behaviour and engagement.

VK: They do.

SO: And firm views on how opinion coalesces and then is funnelled. So, the new Strategic Plan is obliging them to reconfigure this process.

VK: Yes, it is. In this strategic planning process, the Foundation has gone from an organisation that was obliged to support the agendas of other organisations to an organisation with an agenda of its own. That's not an easy transition to make.

SO: Just to summarise, then, at this point, Vijay… What has enabled the Commonwealth Foundation to do its good work in the time that you've been involved in its activities?

VK: An amazing staff, [and] consistent support from our member states. Even in the dark days for the Commonwealth Foundation, member states have continued to support the work of the Foundation. I am often reminded that we have a small budget, but actually the size of the budget isn't that important. I think we can achieve lots with the money that we have. What's important about that funding is that it's consistent. There are not many organisations that can predict that within two or three years' time they will have an income of X million pounds. That is like gold dust for us. So, I think it's those two things: the resources that we enjoy, and the political support that we continue to enjoy. I think, by and large, [these] are the things that have enabled us to continue doing what we're doing. Of course, the support from our constituents on the beneficiary side [is important], as well. Civil society organisations consistently speak up for the work of the Foundation. That is important, as

well. So, political will, resources – both material and human – have helped us to do what we have.

SO: Just looking at the wider Commonwealth – both formal Commonwealth and informal Commonwealth – how much do you think it is down to individual personal diplomacy, to that filigree of personal networks, to key individuals being highly adept at using the policy space the Commonwealth provides?

VK: It's absolutely essential; absolutely essential. You can achieve almost anything in this institution. That's the great joy of it.

SO: To use an example, Richard Bourne with his Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

VK: Completely. So, Richard Bourne, Stuart Mole…These colleagues have long since understood that the institution is a malleable one: that the lack of codification means that there are spaces that enable one to pursue a particular cause or issue, to develop organisations within the institution that are capable of effecting change. So, Richard Bourne: he set up the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, he established the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, and he established the Ramphal Institute. With each of those organisations, [he] has helped the Commonwealth as a whole to tackle some quite profound issues.

SO: The Ramphal Institute's work on migration is really cutting-edge stuff.

VK: Exactly. And respected outside the Commonwealth.

SO: Yes. So, as you say, these committed individuals were drawing upon institutional structures and Commonwealth goodwill rather as a bank?

VK: When you look at the work that Stuart did in taking Morgan Tsvangirai to Kampala… That was an incredibly brave thing to do.

SO: He was building very much, though, on the Commonwealth's historic engagement with and willingness to listen to the outsider: to people who weren't necessarily within the formal diplomatic framework. The Commonwealth had done that with liberation fighters; it had done it with the ANC; it had done it with the Patriotic Front. It had done it to Robert Mugabe, ironically, dating back to 1975, when the Patriotic Front first went to Kingston and spoke to Commonwealth heads of government. So, there's a certain irony there.

VK: Yes.

SO: Just to conclude, Vijay… Why has the Commonwealth survived and how has it survived?

VK: It has survived, I think, because it's got an amazing capacity to reinvent itself. It's at one turn a vehicle for decolonisation, at the next turn an agent against heinous apartheid, at the next stage an advocate for sustainable development, at the next stage a convener of global opinion on key single issues behind the scenes.

SO: On the point about the key single issues behind the scenes, though, how much of the problem is not the vitality of the Commonwealth but the very fact that it cannot advertise the extent to which it is providing discreet quiet diplomacy? By its very nature, its networks and modes of behaviour, it can't take the glory or the credit.

VK: No. But in a sense, it's never been an organisation that has been into taking the glory or the credit. It's always been a…

SO: A global subsystem?

VK: Exactly, and very understated in its nature. That's the organisation. It's not a treaty-based organisation; it's a voluntary association. I think it understands very well that it has no divine right to exist. I think it does understand that. But, nevertheless, it has continued to be supported.

SO: In your experience, how much has the old Commonwealth – the pre-1965, small, tight network including India, the 'old Commonwealth Plus' – come to terms with the change in the Commonwealth? Are they adept at using its networks, or do they not need to?

VK: I think they do need to, not least of all because they're not only global players, they're regional players as well and they can see the value of the Commonwealth in pursuing their own regional agendas. The first rule of diplomacy is "pursue your national interests", and you do so through any means available. The Commonwealth provides an opportunity to have those informal discussions before going into other, more formal, inter-governmental spaces.

SO: But with the multiplicity of international organisations, is this so? In the G-20, there are Commonwealth members, after all. There are core members at the World Bank and the IMF meetings, at WHO meetings, at Food and Agricultural Organisation meetings. You're suggesting that even great powers should be more adept and attentive to where, in fact, there is potential for linkages in alternative organisations.

VK: I think that's right. There is increasing cause for the Commonwealth to mobilise as a block within global spaces. I think there is a real opportunity there. It came up in the outcomes of the Eminent Persons Group, I think, but has been consistently referred to: the need for the Commonwealth, for example, to get together in nominating the next President of the World Bank, or the next President of the Fund.

SO: How adept do you think – again, from your experience – small states have been in using the Commonwealth space?

VK: Absolutely essential. Now, whether they've been adept is another question.

SO: I can see why it's a vital organisation and platform for them, because it's much smaller than the UN, but how effective have they been at exploiting the Commonwealth?

VK: I think it varies. It's varied over time. There have been times when small states have been very adept and have seen it as absolutely…I won't say absolutely essential, but [they] have been more adept at mobilising, at using

the Commonwealth as a vehicle to get what they want on a global stage. You can see that in relation to the follow-up to the 1992 Rio conference, for example, and the institution of the United Nations Small Island Developing States programme.

SO: But how organised were they in trying to get together before, say, debt forgiveness discussions?

VK: Arguably the Commonwealth played an important role in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 in providing that kind of catalyst. But I think – going back to the specific issues – the Commonwealth doesn't necessarily have to overtly wave a small state flag. By taking up issues like, for example, advocating action on non-communicable diseases on the UN stage, it is taking up an issue there that is of great concern to many Commonwealth small states.

SO: So, it's not just about climate change or LGBT rights; there are other aspects to it.

VK: Indeed. But LGBT is a case by itself at the moment. Same sex acts are criminalised in forty-two of the fifty-four member states. It's clearly a difficult issue for member states to talk about. But this is another instance. It doesn't have to be Fiji, it doesn't have to be Zimbabwe – it's another instance where I believe civil society can help the Commonwealth talk about a difficult issue.

SO: As a political issue, LGBT rights also have constitutional aspects and ramifications for a considerable number of Commonwealth states. That has really come to the fore in the past five years.

VK: Definitely; absolutely. Part of that is coming largely from civil society. There's no single member state that's pushing this issue. Global civil society and LGBT organisations are recognising the potential of the Commonwealth as a permeable space.

SO: Surely there is also pressure from key individuals, such as Michael Kirby, a leading judge in Australia who happens to be gay himself, and who was determined to use that civil society energy and commitment in the recent Eminent Persons Group review.

VK: Completely, and what is heartening is to see the way that the Secretary General himself has responded to that agenda. I would say [that], over the past year, we've seen a number of public statements via the Secretary General on the issue. It's taking a progressive line. I think it started actually two years ago: he made a statement in Kenya to the *Nairobi Star*, I think it was, in May – I'm afraid my memory is going, it's either 2012 or 2011 – on the importance of observing universal human rights, stopping short of condemning countries that have criminalised same sex relationships [and] advocating that human rights need to be observed and that people that are victimised on the basis of their sexuality should not be.

SO: Vijay, I have one particular question about your view and your involvement with Commonwealth activities on the contribution and the role of the Queen. People have said what a remarkable leader of the Commonwealth she has been since she became Queen in 1952. Have you observed any particular aspects of how effective she has been?

VK: First of all, I have to say I came into this job slightly sceptical about the Monarchy and its role in the Commonwealth. But I have been completely turned round, just by virtue of observing the commitment of Her Majesty to the institution and her incredible sense of duty. I know that she is aware of the fact that the Commonwealth is much more than an association of governments. She is committed to a number of civil society organisations in a personal capacity, too. She has not intervened directly in the work of the Commonwealth Foundation. I know that she does pay keen attention and interest, but she has not intervened directly in the affairs of the Commonwealth Foundation. We have had participation by Prince Charles at a Commonwealth People's Forum – I think we were in Uganda – when, I think, for the first time, both Her Majesty and his Royal Highness were deployed, if you like, at a heads of government meeting together. Prince Charles attended a round table that we had, bringing together civil society colleagues and Commonwealth Foreign Ministers, and he was very keen to listen to the exchanges between civil society and Foreign Ministers and took a keen interest. I think that's probably as much as I can say.

SO: Thank you very much. What particular challenges do you feel have emerged for the Commonwealth since you became involved, working for the Deputy Director of the Foundation?

VK: I think it's that constant striving for unity and commonality across the association. There are tensions in the institution, but the Commonwealth is not the only place where those tensions are being played out. Tensions between those that are advocating or asserting the primacy of civil and political rights, for example, on the one hand, versus – it's an unfortunate word to use, but I think it's an appropriate word to use – versus those that advocate the primacy of human development. I think reconciling those two discourses – broadly speaking, governance versus development – is one of the key challenges facing the Commonwealth.

SO: Is there tension from regionalism also within the Commonwealth?

VK: There is, certainly: both within regions and region to region. But I think the fundamental challenge for the Commonwealth is addressing that tension between democracy and development, because that plays out in the unfortunate way of pitting what you referred to as the 'old Commonwealth', earlier on, versus the new Commonwealth. That's not pretty.

SO: No.

VK: Because there's the imperialism baggage on the one hand, versus the "We've got to feed our people" imperative on the other. It can be very corrosive.

SO: How much of it is a question of perspective and assumption, rather than the activity and genuine insensitivity on the part of larger states with greater economic and political power and representation in the international community?

VK: Yes. I think that, in true Commonwealth style, it is give and take. You can't apportion blame entirely to one constituency without asking another constituency to look at itself. But that's the value of the Commonwealth – it provides the space for that kind of interaction and exchange. Unfortunately, it's a very colloquial exchange and it can get quite bruising! The danger

comes when it prevents the institution from moving forward. That's the difficulty.

SO: Yes. Do you see the issue of Sri Lanka getting tangled up in this 'old Commonwealth' versus 'new Commonwealth' false dichotomy?

VK: Undoubtedly. The discussion on Sri Lanka has been caught up in all of that.

SO: Yes. Vijay, thank you very much indeed.

VK: You're welcome.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]