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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Sir Ron Sanders 2)

SO: Sue Onslow – Interviewer

RS: Sir Ronald Sanders – Respondent

SO: Sue Onslow talking to Sir Ronald Sanders on Friday 16th October, 2013. Sir Ron, thank you very much indeed for coming to Senate House to talk to me. I wondered if you could begin, please, by adding your reflections on the Delhi CHOGM of November 1983. The Thatcher Foundation has just produced some new documents from Mrs Thatcher’s personal papers and they seem to show a very different view of her attitude towards the Commonwealth. These documents also throw light on the question of the management of the Grenada invasion issue from the October of that year.

RS: Well, that 1983 conference was, I think, dominated by Grenada more than anything else. The apartheid issue and what was happening in Southern Africa was so very much in the air, of course, but the issue of great moment was Grenada. We came into that Grenada meeting with the United Nations having already voted on a resolution that condemned the invasion by the United States and, by implication, condemned those Caribbean countries that had participated in it. Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe was particularly strong on the matter and he was very vexed that Caribbean countries had associated themselves with the United States in an invasion of a Caribbean country. The

President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, practically accused the Heads of Government of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, the small countries of the Caribbean community that had virtually invited the United States to participate in that invasion. He accused those leaders of lying. So you can understand the atmosphere in which this discussion was taking place. Then we had Kenneth Kaunda who said, handkerchief and all, which was, as you know, his trademark, that what the OECS countries had done in inviting the United States to intervene in Grenada, exposed his own country to that kind of possibility, and so he condemned it.

So we had a strong view from the Front Line States. The matter could have gone quite badly because the Chairman of the meeting, Indira Gandhi of India, was equally exercised about this invasion by the United States. Of course, she had an eye on issues to do with her own domestic situation in which the last thing she wanted was any kind of external intervention in terms of what was going on between India and Pakistan, on the one hand, and within India itself. Were it not for leaders such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, there would have been severe condemnation of the Caribbean countries that encouraged the US invasion. In turn, the Commonwealth itself might have been fractured. Lee Kuan Yew made the statement that he could very well understand why these small countries felt threatened by a military junta in a neighbouring state that had seized power and killed the Prime Minister and members of the Government; [he said] that he could understand that they themselves would have intervened militarily had they had the capacity to do so. [He] could equally understand that not having the capacity to do so, they chose to invite the United States to help them. So his was a moderating influence on that discussion.

What was remarkable about Mrs Thatcher in all of this is that although in public statements when the intervention had actually taken place, she had made much of her anger at the United States government, that anger was not demonstrated in any way by what she said at the meeting. In fact, if anything, she gave some support to the beleaguered OECS countries – Barbados and Jamaica – for the fact that they had resorted to inviting the United States to intervene. At one point I remember her saying, describing the Deputy Prime Minister of Antigua, Lester Bird, who had led the Antiguan delegation at that meeting, as the 'silver tongued' son of the Prime Minister of Antigua, after the

presentation that he'd made in which he laid out the case for why small countries, particularly ones that are as close together as those in the OECS, including Grenada, felt that they were kith and kin. Lester Bird had argued that what was happening in one country touched the others because there were bonds of blood, of family relationships and so on. He described the helplessness that OECS members had felt in not being able to do something about the military coup, and, therefore, they turned to outside intervention. But beyond that Bird called for healing. What he said was that the time for rancour had now passed and that it was necessary to focus on what could be done to get the Americans out of Grenada, and what role the Commonwealth could play in trying to put democracy back into Grenada with the system of governance based on free and fair elections.

Mrs Thatcher jumped on that point and, in fact, that was the line she took in the meeting. Then there were the concerns of Sonny Ramphal, the Secretary General, over two matters. One was that he didn't want the Commonwealth divided over the Grenada issue; he wanted the Commonwealth to try to play a constructive role in the reconstruction of the country and in getting democracy back in place; and he wanted help from as many countries as he could – both to get a Commonwealth police force into Grenada to replace the American troops, and to get some economic assistance to rehabilitate the place.

The second concern that he had - and this, I suppose, was because he is a Caribbean person - was to heal the division that had developed amongst the Caribbean states over this matter. The OECS countries, Jamaica and Barbados, were of one mind in support of the intervention, but Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize and the Bahamas were not. Guyana had, in fact, voted on the resolution at the United Nations - I think Guyana was one of the co-sponsors of it - that condemned the Americans and the other Caribbean countries. I'm not so sure how many of those Caribbean leaders were actually speaking to each other when they got to Delhi. So I think Ramphal was keen to try to calm all that passion and vexation. He contrived with the help of a number of countries, including Britain, to have the Grenada section of the communiqué sent to a small drafting committee and a small committee to look at it, which incidentally Britain was not on.

So: Was this at the Goa Retreat?

RS: This was at the retreat, yes. Now Sonny had drafted the paragraphs that were to be looked at and there was not a great deal of dissension over it. Mugabe was on that group, for instance, but he didn't raise any big concerns about words that were drafted; nor did the representatives of the Caribbean countries who were anxious to get the thing behind them at that point. While I don't recall that British representatives were part of that drafting group I knew they took a keen interest in it, so obviously they would have seen the draft.

SO: Documents in The Margaret Thatcher Foundation archive note that those involved in the drafting were 'the Heads of Delegation from Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, St Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Zimbabwe and myself.'

RS: Yes, so she was part of it.

SO: No, this is Sonny Ramphal writing a confidential note to all Heads of Delegation.

RS: So she wasn't there?

SO: No.

RS: I didn't think she was, but you see the key players were there: Eugenie Charles from Dominica was the person who ended up in the White House with Ronald Reagan on the morning of the invasion, justifying it. So her participation there was critical; Mugabe [was there] because he was the most vocal of the African leaders in his antagonism toward what was happening. But, as I said, that was the group and I think Sonny might have been able to get them to agree to it fairly easily and I would be surprised if the British government didn't have sight of it before it became a final text.

SO: You went with Lester Bird, head of the delegation from Antigua and Barbuda, to the Goa Retreat. Were you in any way involved in, or observing those discussions?

RS: Well, you know, the truth is there was very little discussion, if the truth be known. Sonny had contrived to have that draft put before these people and it was only those who were anxious about any wording that got involved in any minutiae in terms of the discussion. I think Antigua may have suggested one or two changes – a couple of words, just to convey the right impression. I don't recall the Zimbabweans wanting to change anything seriously but I am sure there will have been other delegations that would have played around with words. In every government, as you know, we've always got people who are specialist wordsmiths: they like words to say things which they think it means and, of course, words mean different things to different people; but nonetheless, at the end of the day, they had a text that was generally acceptable and that was the important thing. It got us over the Grenada hump and it demonstrated that the Commonwealth could rise to an occasion in which there was a necessity for help for a Commonwealth country because it led eventually to work on small states, particularly on their vulnerability including their security concerns. But at the back of all of this I have to say it was a suspicion by many of us that Mrs Thatcher herself was not as upset about the intervention in Grenada as she had been letting on publically. That was always the feeling.

SO: Sir Ron, can I put it to you, though, Mrs Thatcher would have been in serious difficulty with her Commonwealth colleagues had she known of the invasion beforehand and had not publically protested. I have read a letter from the Council of Foreign Relations which remarked upon the fact that it was certainly in her favour, if she was not consulted nor informed by Ronald Reagan beforehand. If she had she known, this would have put her in an invidious position.

RS: Well, you know she was consulted by him, from what I recall, and I wrote a chapter on this in a book a couple of years ago.

SO: To commemorate Sonny Ramphal's 80th birthday?

RS: Yes, and the documentation I used for that research was the Ronald Reagan Library in which there were telephone conversations between Mrs Thatcher and him and subsequently letters between them on it. He actually told her that the invasion was being contemplated. Now she had urged him not to do it,

but I think the reason why she was urging him not to do it was because on the following day she had a debate in the House of Commons with a very virulent Labour Party which was not happy about the fact that American cruise missiles were going to be put on British soil.

SO: The background of this was indeed the installation of Pershing and Cruise missiles, which was enormously contentious in British politics and wider public opinion.

RS: Right. So I think that more than anything else was what was occupying her mind. There had been a precedent before in 1979 when Eric Gairy (then Prime Minister) was overthrown in Grenada by the New Jewel Movement led by Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard. Several attempts had been made to get the British Government involved in intervening in Grenada then, but the British Government decided they weren't going to do it and had made the argument then that they recognised states not governments. Since Sir Paul Scoon had remained as a Governor-General in the 1979 coup, the representation of the state did not change; the Queen was still the head of the state and therefore there was no question of not recognising the Maurice Bishop regime. I don't know this for a fact but knowing how the Foreign and Commonwealth office works, I think that precedent of 1979 advised the position in 1983. I've no evidence of that; that's just my feeling. In any event the point is that Mrs Thatcher, at the end of the day, did indicate that Britain would be helpful on the economic front, though she was not willing to be party to a police force going into Grenada; other countries had to make a commitment to that.

In the end no police force went into Grenada. The Americans remained in occupation right up until an election was held, and that always raised a question mark as to whether those elections were held in a fair and proper manner but, in any event, that was the passage of the Grenada episode through the 1983 Delhi conference.

SO: Just to set the issue of Grenada in its context at the Delhi conference: I have a note here from the Thatcher Foundation website from Prime Minister Muldoon of New Zealand, who sent a long and detailed letter on economic themes for discussion at New Delhi Commonwealth heads of

government. Also, of course, coming out of the Delhi meeting was the Goa Declaration on International Security. So was Grenada subsumed within discussion of these issues, or did it come to dominate these other bigger themes?

RS: No, on the day that Grenada was discussed it was discussed fully and I don't think there was any great discussion of the bigger themes, frankly. There was not a lot of time at the meeting and Grenada certainly played a full role. It took up a big part of it and I think whatever came out of the meeting on security had been agreed beforehand by the Committee of the Whole - that is the senior officials of the Commonwealth together with the Secretariat. If anything, I think that was merely a rubber stamping job.

SO: Yes. You noted in your e-mail that you were surprised at Thatcher's detailed, written notes, particularly while Lester Bird was speaking. There are extensive manuscript notes in her files, so the cogency of his argument obviously made a particular impression on her. Sir Robert Armstrong sent the Prime Minister a note saying, 'Always purr when you're pleased. A lot of people are acting on that advice this morning.' So Sonny Ramphal's diplomacy in managing the Grenada issue was obviously a success.

RS: Yes, I think it was. What was important for him, I suspect - and for the Caribbean - is that at the end of that meeting, the Heads of Government of the Caribbean countries - who were quite vexed with each other at the start of the meeting - came out of it with much of their antagonism healed. So that was a big achievement too.

SO: My last question on the New Delhi meeting makes reference to the extended telex that Thatcher wrote to Ronald Reagan which remarked that the tone of these Commonwealth meetings was very different from other international meetings. Thatcher was trying to explain to Ronald Reagan the particular atmosphere of a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, but she also added that the undertow was very much one of non-alignment because of India being the host government. Trudeau was also intending to visit China from the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Would you agree with

Mrs Thatcher's observations about the different tone from other international meetings?

RS: No, I don't know. You know people look at things from a different perspective. We could be sitting in the same room discussing the same thing and be thinking of it in different ways. She clearly was preoccupied in her own thinking with this issue in terms of its wider implications. People like me in that room were very concerned about its very narrow implications: how the Caribbean would come out of this and what would the Caribbean relationship be with countries in Africa particularly because, don't forget, that we were - and still are - part of the African Caribbean and Pacific Group which at that time was in very tight negotiations with the European Union over the second Lome Convention. We needed each other to be on side, to advance our causes jointly and the last thing we wanted was anger at Head level of Heads of Government of the African and Caribbean countries. So I think, if anything, I was less concerned with how Mrs Thatcher saw the conference and more with how Africa and the Caribbean would emerge out of it.

SO: Yes. For the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Nassau in October of 1985, were you involved in any of the previous diplomacy, because it was a Caribbean location for this meeting? I notice Sonny put particular attention into advanced diplomacy, in sending officials to the region, in talking specifically to regional heads, also to regional diplomatic representatives to ensure, as much as possible, that particular controversies or issues were managed in the best possible way, going into the Heads of Government meeting.

RS: I had a peculiar problem at that 1985 meeting. Even though I attended it, I only went for two days and the reason was that I was running for a seat on the executive board of UNESCO in Paris at the same time, so I had to fly to the Bahamas and then fly back to Paris in order to be present for the voting, and my preoccupation, I have to admit, before that 1985 meeting was less on Commonwealth issues and more on securing the seat on the executive board of UNESCO. But I was still part of the Commonwealth committee in Southern Africa and at that time I was also a member of a three man committee that was looking at apartheid propaganda, and the three man committee was liaising with United Nations committee on South Africa. The focus of my work

was in that area. I don't think that the British government could have been surprised that there would have been a bigger effort made in the Bahamas to get the British government to move on sanctions because that was being signalled clearly beforehand.

SO: Absolutely. Sonny came out and made a public statement on the need for sanctions in the summer which was particularly striking in the British press that he made such a public declaration.

RS: Well I think he did that because it was clear from meetings of the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa that that's what Commonwealth countries wanted. He knew when he made that statement that the Commonwealth committee on Southern Africa was very much for that and remember that the Commonwealth committee on Southern Africa had been given full authority by member governors. Here in London it was made up of High Commissioners and a representative of the British government to deal with the Southern African question with plenipotentiary powers, and they were very keen that the sanctions now be applied and I don't think there was any country from the Commonwealth that demurred on this. What was more important was that Australia and Canada were very much part of the group and the position. If there was any time in which Mrs Thatcher was isolated, that 1985 meeting was it.

SO: It's interesting from reading Sir Geoffrey Howe's, sorry Lord Howe's memoirs and comments on it that Mrs Thatcher seemed to feel herself isolated, whereas other viewpoints that you've made reference to from within the Commonwealth was that she chose to isolate herself, so...

RS: Yes, but I think that's true. At any point, I think it's within a leader's power, if they can recognise that they've boxed themselves into a corner, to do something to get out of it. We're seeing incidentally the same thing happening with Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka right now. He has painted himself into a corner. Now it was always within his power to relieve himself of this pain by simply saying I recognise that there is Commonwealth concern about the fact that I am hosting this meeting and therefore I am prepared to withdraw Sri Lanka; Sri Lanka will host it some point down the road but let us give the Commonwealth a chance to continue to function; in the meantime I

would be grateful for any Commonwealth help that could help to ameliorate the situation in my country. If he would say that then I think there could be an effort from the Commonwealth to engage with him. But, getting back to Mrs Thatcher... she always had the opportunity to say that she would look at the sanctions issue more closely instead of just rejecting it.

There was sufficient discussion going on and there was sufficient evidence that sanctions would hurt, for her to do something that would have made Commonwealth governments feel that she was at least willing. I think what angered people was the fact that she was so recalcitrant, so obdurate, she was just not going to agree to sanctions. And, while it may not be true, many people saw this as a kind of racist position. She got branded with that. Whether it was racist or whether she genuinely felt that sanctions were not going to solve the problem, I don't know, but it didn't help matters.

SO: I know that a small group had got to together and then deputed Rajiv Gandhi to go and talk to Mrs Thatcher because it was thought that she would be more susceptible to persuasion or arguments from him, because she had thought fondly of his mother, that she would be perhaps more susceptible to arguments from – I've had one account of a good looking younger head going to talk to her but the overall tone, certainly that of those writing on the British position, is her sense of isolation and the Commonwealth ganging up on her at that particular meeting and, of course, she made at that press conference the remark about that she'd only given...

RS: Teeny weeny little bit, yes..

SO: Yes, which would have been fundamentally counterproductive.

RS: I think that all she managed to do there was to make people even more angry and make herself look even more reprehensible than she had up to that point, which was a shame because in many other ways she was such a remarkably good leader.

SO: And the remarkable thing is indeed that having come back from the Nassau CHOGM she then embarked upon a private correspondence with

P.W. Botha, urging him to accept the Eminent Persons Group and the initial response in South Africa was unremittingly hostile, and she returned to the charge and sent yet another prime ministerial letter begging him...encouraging him to reconsider and speaking to the South African foreign minister he is emphatic in saying that it was because of that lady the Eminent Persons Group got through the door so there's an irony there but, of course, this was not known in the wider Commonwealth. Did you sit in on the London meeting in August of 1986?

RS: That meeting was held at Marlborough House. A number of High Commissioners were invited to Marlborough House after the meeting was held simply to meet leaders and to find out how the meeting went and all of that, but no I wasn't actually a participator. It was Heads meeting only.

SO: Yes. I just wondered if you'd been involved in any way on the diplomatic periphery.

RS: No, that work was done essentially by Sonny and the Heads.

SO: Yes, yes. As only seven heads came to that meeting it must have been a small and very intense discussion.

RS: It was only the ones who were meant to be there. Rajiv Gandhi as I recall, Brian Mulroney from Canada, Bob Hawke from Australia, I don't remember who the African leader was.

SO: Kenneth Kaunda came.

RS: Kaunda and Sonny, I don't think it was a group that was any larger than that.

SO: No it wasn't, it was a very small group, very small group.

RS: Pindling from the Bahamas may have been a part of that group too...

SO: Yes he must have been.

RS: He was the Chairman of the 85 meeting so he would have been there yes.

SO: Yes. Sir Ron if I could move on to when you returned to London in 1996 in a diplomatic capacity, having stepped out of the diplomatic world, was that when you were at your representation at the WTO or was that in 2000.

RS: No when I came back in 1996, I came back here to London and to the World Trade Organisation. When I was out of diplomatic service I was in business, so I had nothing to do with government.

SO: But on your return in 1996 that was, if you like, the tail end of the Major government and it was post Auckland CHOGM. Did you feel in any way a different sense of the cohesion and direction of the Commonwealth by the mid-1990s? After all, the South African issue had been resolved, there was a black majority coalition government down in Pretoria, the Commonwealth was moving to an overtly values based organisation based on the Harare declaration of 1991 so was there very much a different tone and agenda within the Commonwealth and it's discourse at that particular time?

RS: Yes I think there was and Major did a lot to help that because he was such an affable, amiable and approachable man. He was a direct contrast to Mrs Thatcher in that sense and I remember when I first went to see him to present my letter of introduction, which High Commissioners have to do when they go to other Commonwealth countries, the first thing we started talking about was cricket *[laughter]* because he was such a great cricket fan and to my embarrassment he knew more about West Indian cricketers than I did. I always remember as well when he was defeated at the general election by Tony Blair, Owen Arthur, the prime minister of Barbados, did not receive the new British High Commissioner for some time, and when he did receive him the first thing he told him was I miss John Major which is a kind of pointed comment to...

SO: *[Laughter]* I was going to say that was a...that was not diplomatic but it was certainly to the point.

RS: ...but Owen Arthur was like that...the point I'm making is that John Major was a very popular character with people and I think most people felt that they could do business with him. It was a time when the Commonwealth was far less fractious in behaviour. For instance, it was a time when we, in the developing countries, got the Commonwealth to take more account of the economic and development needs of small states than they had done for many years. In fact, if anything, after the Grenada events of 1983, and the work that had been done in the immediate aftermath of that including the Vulnerability Report, small states had virtually fallen off the agenda. They had set up a ministerial committee on small states but that eventually petered out but we started the work to get it rejuvenated in 1996 or 1997 and by 1998 by which time Major had gone and Tony Blair had come in, we began to see the fruits of some of that labour.

SO: Well of course John Major was enormously helpful in forwarding consensus on debt forgiveness in the early 1990s as a former chancellor and then as prime minister and it seems to me that this was a point on which there could be Commonwealth consensus but also as a former banker and, as I say, former British chancellor he identified an appreciable difference that really could be made with a modified restructuring of the international financial system.

RS: The thing then was highly indebted poor countries. Those countries that were so poor and circumstances so difficult that they couldn't cope with the debt that was lodged on them. It was unfair debt because it was debt with high interest rates that those countries had probably paid over and over again. Nobody was going to lose anything by forgiving the debt because they'd already got the money back. They were just punishing countries by continuing to do this. Major could see that very quickly as a banker himself. He would know that the banks had made provision for those bad debts over the years, and he knew that governments which had made loans to developing countries, also made some provision for the fact that they may not be able to repay. Recognising that reality, what did he have to lose by becoming a champion of this cause? Nothing. But he had a lot to gain. He did become a champion of it, which was a good thing and highly indebted poor countries, did receive debt relief and many tens of hundreds of thousands of people throughout those states, my own country of birth, for instance, Guyana was a

beneficiary of that debt forgiveness. People were lifted out of abject poverty into perhaps less poverty but certainly better off than they were.

SO: Also, as part of the Commonwealth sense of identity, coming out of the 1995 Auckland CHOGM, was very much a moral declaration of resisting authoritarian governments, military coups, the creation of CMAG to call, dictatorial regimes to account within the Commonwealth so there would have been impulse towards, again, a values based organisation and declared cohesion but with the advent of the Blair government, how much did you identify a change of gear as far as the British government was concerned towards the Commonwealth?

RS: I don't think Tony Blair had the slightest interest in the Commonwealth frankly *[laughter]*. No I say that... and I mean it. I remember him at the first meeting he attended as Prime Minister at Edinburgh which is the first meeting I attended too when I came back as High Commissioner. It was '97 in Edinburgh and he had just been elected. He would walk into a room and he'd speak to no-one. I mean there would be heads of government there, he'd approach nobody; he would stand almost by himself and unless his own officials came and spoke to him he wasn't approaching anybody and nobody was approaching him. It was really quite...

SO: That's bizarre.

RS: Well I know, but true. It's a living memory in my mind. I can see it now as we gathered in Edinburgh... he doesn't suffer fools gladly.

SO: Possibly not but he was the host.

RS: He didn't like the lengthy speeches that were made by some of the leaders and he particularly did not like the speeches that were read. Now some fellows read speeches because English wasn't their first language and so they had a text prepared by some official and they unfortunately stuck to it but I could see him thinking, you know, I've got other things I could be doing and some crisis happening somewhere else. I don't think that the Commonwealth during the Blair years could say it had a great sense of leadership and commitment from the British government.

SO: Can you identify a contrast with say Robin Cook as foreign secretary and his particular attachment or focus on the Commonwealth?

RS: I don't think Robin had any great focus on it either but I tell you what happened with him. I actually wrote an article on (the 1997 Edinburgh CHOGM) that was published in the Round Table in January of 1998 that reflects some of this. Small states had become very concerned that they had dropped off the agenda of the Commonwealth in the years running up to Edinburgh. An economic declaration was scheduled to be made by that meeting. Tony Blair was particularly keen to have that economic declaration because, in a sense, it was spelling out his own view of what should be the third way - the way in which the world economic order should be looked at. People like me, representing small countries, were very worried that we would be overlooked in this declaration. We had good reason for fear because when the draft economic declaration came out, the concerns of small states were not in the least bit reflected in it and I organised a meeting between Caribbean and African countries. We were together in the African Caribbean and Pacific Group structuring relations with the European Union.

SO: So this was regular meetings at Marlborough House?

RS: These were not regular meetings at Marlborough House at all. These were not meetings that were taking place under Commonwealth auspices. I had figured that Commonwealth countries could be - and should be - talking to each other in capitals outside the ones in which they would necessarily focus on particular issues. I was contemporaneously ambassador to the European Union where I was meeting African colleagues with the Caribbean and the Pacific in dealing with the European Union. Britain is a key player in the European Union on our behalf as an interlocutor. My aim was to try to get the African and Caribbean countries in Britain to focus on the matters that we should be putting to Britain to advance for us in Brussels. That was the point of those meetings.

It took on a particularly importance when Commonwealth Caribbean countries recognised that we – and other developing countries – would be marginalised in the concerns intended to be expressed in the Economic

Declaration. Therefore, a small committee of African and Caribbean High Commissioners put up an alternative draft to the Commonwealth Secretariat. Once Africa and the Caribbean had actually put up a joint draft, it couldn't be ignored. In the end we got an economic declaration that satisfied everybody. It did what the British government wanted but it also ensured that the position of small countries in particular was represented.

To get back to Robin Cook. One of the things that Commonwealth Caribbean High Commissioners had argued for was the resuscitation of the ministerial committee on small states that had gone into abeyance. We pushed for such a meeting to be held at Edinburgh on the eve of the Meeting of Commonwealth Heads. As the host Foreign Minister, Robin Cook automatically became the Chairman of that group. He attended the meeting as Chairman and he found the small states were very vehement in terms of what they wanted. But, more than that had he judged that we had an arguable case and I have to say that he took the arguable case on board...

SO: Did he?

RS ...and actually went into the Heads of Government meeting as the representative of the ministerial committee on small states and made the small states argument.

SO: Which is what you wanted.

RS: Precisely what we wanted and so in that sense he delivered. I called the 1997 Edinburgh summit, in a publication I did immediately after, *A Beneficial Encounter for Small States*. We got ourselves specific mention in the economic declaration; we got the Commonwealth ministerial small states group back in action; and we got the Commonwealth secretariat's work agenda to include small states across the board. That was a great achievement. It might have bypassed Tony Blair altogether *[laughter]* because he was probably much more concerned with other matters, but for small states that was Edinburgh's great success. I will now give you this article which has the detail of all that I have just said to you, much better expressed than I just have.

SO: Excellent. Commonwealth Edinburgh Summit: A Beneficial Encounter for Small States, Issue 345, January 1998, I'll make sure that that is read into the record, Sir Ron thank you very much indeed for that.

Robin Cook, of course, resigned from the government in 2003 in protest against the Iraq war. Could I ask you please, from your observation, what impact did Britain's involvement in the coalition of the willing have within the Commonwealth? Were there repercussions? Was the Iraq war a contentious issue behind the scenes, within the Commonwealth or is it more remarkable the fact that it wasn't addressed at all?

RS: I don't recall that a discussion ever happened at a meeting of Commonwealth representatives in London. It may have happened between people at a personal level but the truth is nobody believed that Britain should have been in this war. There were some countries of course that would have taken strong objection to the fact that Britain did go into this war. The clash of civilisations and the clash of religions troubled people. We were running into the core of what the Commonwealth said it stood for - religious tolerance and diversity and the ability to accommodate differences in ethnicity. Many diplomats in London also suspected that going into Iraq had absolutely nothing to do with weapons of mass destruction and when that became pretty clear after the report of the weapons inspectors, the community began to see the Iraq invasion as a Bush/Blair stitch up. But it wasn't a Commonwealth matter and nobody looked to pick a Commonwealth fight over it.

SO: To what extent did it become a Commonwealth matter because, of course, in 2003 for the Commonwealth dealing with the Zimbabwean issue and Robert Mugabe's government violation of human and political rights that had come out of the previous election and there had been, of course, a Commonwealth election monitor's report in 2002 which had been very critical of this but in 2003 at the Abuja meeting Mugabe, of course, withdrew from the Commonwealth in sharp contrast to the international treatment of General Musharaff's Pakistan which arguably was as culpable in terms of violation of human rights, as Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe and yet, because of the geopolitics of the Iraq war, because of the position of the coalition in Afghanistan, Musharaff was treated in a different way.

RS: I agree with that and there were those of us who did express that view at the time although it never came to the point where it was discussed in any Commonwealth Forum. I think African countries would have been particularly vexed that Pakistan was treated this way and Mugabe was treated differently. But there was no point picking a fight on this matter in the Commonwealth. It could only have been done, in any event, at the Heads of Government meeting and probably in a retreat. If the Iraq invasion had happened in circumstances that were not preceded by 9-11, then I think the reaction may have been very different.

SO: Just to backtrack onto the enormous impact of 9-11, to what extent did the atrocities of the attack on the Twin Towers, and the United States' consequent declaration of war on terror, help to knock off course, as you say, the agenda for small states? Because did the dominant theme, an international diplomacy, become how to deal with international terrorism, how to deal with challenges to international security, rather than focusing on developmental issues?

RS: It did. It did knock it off and it knocked it off everywhere. The Americans turned their back on the Caribbean, for instance, at that point. All economic assistance virtually dried up. The focus of all the money was Iraq and Afghanistan. George Bush's entire tenure as President was one of utter neglect for his own backyard.

SO: Yes.

RS: Not only the Caribbean but Latin America. But the way in which it would have been felt in the Caribbean is via the Caribbean countries that were neglected by it. I think there was almost a kind of arrangement with Canada that the United States would concentrate its efforts on Afghanistan and Iraq. Canada was doing something in Afghanistan but not anything in Iraq and Canada, therefore, would take on the bigger responsibility for the Caribbean. But that is in a bilateral context, not in a Commonwealth context. We had begun, once again, to slip off the agenda of the Commonwealth. Further, in the wake of 9-11 the Americans passed what you will remember was called the Patriot Act.

SO: Yes.

RS: The Patriot Act was a wicked piece of legislation which is still in existence today but it informed the thinking of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, on two things. One was harmful tax competition-

SO: Yes.

RS: - which they had already started but it gathered a new momentum after 9-11. The other was financing of terrorism and money laundering. They started looking at what they then called tax havens, and in the process they identified many countries in the Caribbean, and the Pacific. So all of a sudden we became the targets as a result of a fall out of 9-11 and then we saw our financial services sector destroyed.

SO: Sir Don McKinnon though, Secretary General, did adopt this as his personal approach. He had been Foreign Minister, he writes about it in *In the Ring*, and has talked to me about his anger at the OECD as non-elective representatives of international financial institutions or governments telling sovereign states how to run their tax affairs.

RS: I remember the first meeting that we had with McKinnon on this. He invited a handful of High Commissioners in London who were involved in this matter. I was one of them because I was involved in it in two ways. I went to Australia at the invitation of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to be virtually put into a box and told that Antigua and Barbuda was going to be blacklisted, along with several other countries, because of what they described as our lax tax laws and our lax financial controls. I had reacted against this by writing a number of articles about it but actually confronting the OECD on the matter.

SO: Uh-huh.

RS: I was one of those people who saw McKinnon very early in these proceedings. Our argument to him was that the Commonwealth had a role to

play here because Commonwealth countries were very much involved. We had Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, members of the OECD.

SO: Uh-huh.

RS: Who are being judgemental-

SO: Yes.

RS: - about other Commonwealth countries, mostly in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

SO: Yes.

RS: We had at the time a Canadian as the Secretary General of the OECD, we had an Australian who was the Chairman of the Committee on Harmful Tax Competition, and these were the people who we were facing. So we put it to McKinnon that the Commonwealth had a role to play because these were its own member states that were becoming increasingly cross with each other.

SO: Uh-huh.

RS: The situation needed some balance, it needed some sense. The man who was then the Chief Advisor to the Harmful Tax Competition and Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism Committee was a British Treasury official. . This was very much a Commonwealth mix and while the Americans were there, they didn't hold any official position and whilst the Japanese were there, they also didn't hold any official position. It was very much Commonwealth people at the OECD who were in the frontline of all of this. Don McKinnon did take it on. He went to see the Secretary General of the OECD and then he actually organised a Committee of Ministers headed by Owen Arthur, the Prime Minister of Barbados, to negotiate with the OECD. I was made the Deputy of that Committee. McKinnon gave us back up staff from the Secretariat. We had technical people to help us advance the arguments. So in that regard the Commonwealth Secretariat played a real role for small states in this particular matter.

SO: Yes.

RS: At the end of the day we got the OECD to back off the harmful tax competition matter but the way in which these things always happen with small countries, we won a battle but we didn't win the war because all that they then did is use their clout to make the International Monetary Fund the body that would supervise this matter.

SO: You've made reference in the past to Gordon Brown's particular role, leading the Commonwealth Heads Committee looking at IMF reform, did you try then in trying to ensure the interests of small states were maintained to adopt a different tack, focusing on those who could pressure the IMF?

RS: Yeah, I had gone by then. I was no longer in London as High Commission but it's an issue I follow very carefully.

SO: Yes.

RS: The person I think who took up that cudgel for small states on the IMF reform, particularly in terms of the criteria for graduation,-

SO: Yes.

RS: - was the President of Guyana, Bharat Jagdeo, who was himself an economist. That issue was hammered away by him. It was taken up by Gordon Brown immediately after he became Prime Minister-

SO: Uh-huh.

RS: - and Brown actually chaired a Committee made up of a number of Heads of Government to begin the process of IMF reform and I think they had some success largely because Britain sits on the Board of Governors of the IMF, as does Canada. You know, the remarkable position is no Caribbean country, in fact, no small state has a Governorship of the IMF even though we are subject to their rules. The Caribbean is represented on the Board of the IMF by Canada and the Caribbean cannot speak at a Board of Governors meeting except through Canada. On one occasion - this is a remarkable part of the

injustice of the system - when the Prime Minister of Barbados wanted to make a presentation about his own country to the IMF he had to ask the Canadian official - not even a minister - for permission to do so.

SO: That's remarkably demeaning.

RS: But that's the reality of the international circumstances for small states. It's why we have kept on fighting this issue in every conceivable international organisation and it is why small states look to the Commonwealth as a forum in which they could try to advance their issues. We believe that because of like mindedness there would be some sympathy for the position of small states. I must say that sometimes there is.

SO: Yes.

RS: But mostly there isn't because the officials who deal with these matters in the statistical departments of the Department for International Development in Britain, or in the Treasury, only see figures. They don't see people and *[laughter]* it's always a problem.

SO: Sir Ron, if I could ask you as one of my last questions about this question of expanded membership of the Commonwealth to include those countries who were not former British Colonies. For Mozambique, I understand the logic given the historic involvement of Sir Sonny towards co-operation and support for Mozambique in the 1970s. Rwanda is a more puzzling inclusion. The other puzzling exclusion or refusal to participate is Ireland in the Commonwealth, having left in 1949. Could you comment on the inclusion of Rwanda, and the deliberate non-involvement of Ireland?

RS: Well, let me answer that by dealing with Ireland first. When the Eminent Persons Group met and, as you recall I was a member of the Eminent Persons Group, I actually wrote a paper for consideration by the Group in which I suggested that we should recommend as part of our report that approaches be made to Ireland to re-join the Commonwealth.

We would understand the sensitivity Ireland might have on this matter because like many other places Ireland might still believe that the Commonwealth is British and, therefore, would not want to be seen to be joining a British organisation. Ireland has continued to have relations with Commonwealth countries over all these years, in many, many ways, and there is a natural place for Ireland in the Commonwealth. We decided in the end not to include that recommendation in our report. One or two of our members felt that if we had suggested it, it might have appeared as if this was some ruse to get Ireland into a British organisation. I didn't follow the logic of that but I was not in the majority on this particular issue so we didn't go forward with the recommendation.

SO: Were you in a minority of one?

RS: No, I wasn't in a minority of one. I think I was probably in a minority of three, with a number of fence sitters and maybe two people who felt, we ought not to go forward with it. In any event it didn't go forward but it is still my belief that Ireland ought to be a member of the Commonwealth. I think it would help enormously if Ireland were there because of its long association with almost every Commonwealth country in many, many ways and also because Ireland would bring another dimension to Commonwealth thinking. It would be a European country but it would be a small European country.

SO: And a neutral European country.

RS: Well, neutral-ish *[laughter]* but in any event small.

SO: Yes.

RS: It would be most sensitive, I think, to the issues that we have had to face particularly the Caribbean on matters of banking for instance and financial services.

SO: Well, you do have Malta and Cyprus as small European states with very much a presence in the Commonwealth.

RS: Yes, we do but Malta and Cyprus have not been as pervasive in the Commonwealth as Ireland has been. Don't forget that the Irish were the first slaves in the Caribbean. The Irish ran all the Catholic schools in the Caribbean. I, for instance, am a product of a Roman Catholic school in Guyana where I was taught by priests and nuns from Ireland. The Irish have been involved in our countries in many ways. Even today the Irish are still in the Caribbean. The most expensive hotel you can go to in Barbados, Sandy Lane Hotel, is owned by Irish people. Then the second most important telecommunications system in the Caribbean, Digicel, is owned by an Irish company. You can go to many Commonwealth countries and there is still a very strong Irish connection. So the pervasiveness of Ireland in the Commonwealth is not matched by Cyprus or Malta. We have things in common with them, sure, but they are not as present in our countries as Ireland is.

SO: Please if I could just ask you one more question about the question of Ireland, bringing to the fore an idea of Ireland re-joining the Commonwealth. Was that your own autonomous decision or had you been in discussion with others before you wrote the paper?

RS: With others in the EPG you mean or in a wider way?

SO: In a wider way, as well as those within the EPG.

RS: Well both. Take, for instance, an event like the Trooping of the Colour, where Her Majesty, the Queen, invites Ambassadors and High Commissioners to come to the Trooping of the Colour. High Commissioners, of course, take precedence over Ambassadors with the Queen as you know so we always had preferential seating, something which Ambassadors resented deeply. But *[laughter]* we-

SO: *[Laughter]* especially the American Ambassador.

RS: Yes, I'm sure. They all resented it deeply. But the point is: that is the one occasion on which we did see something of the Irish Ambassador. Repeatedly many of us would say to whoever the Ambassador was "your place is really over here with us" *[laughter]* and that was the kind of-

SO: *[Laughter]* yes.

RS: - conversation. So these conversations have taken place at that kind of level. They have taken place on a more serious level. I remember that in a Round Table conference that we had in Trinidad and Tobago prior to the 2009 Heads of Government meeting, when I was not in government but I did attend that Round Table meeting because I had written a chapter in a book on the Modern Commonwealth which was being launched then, the discussion formally did take place about Ireland re-joining the Commonwealth. But it took place amongst academics. Not amongst politicians. But there was very strong support for that idea. Unfortunately it's not something that has been worked on hard enough in my view. I can understand Irish reluctance to do it but I think that the right amount of education and information spread amongst the Irish population not to regard the Commonwealth as a British Imperial organisation, they would see the sense in joining it. Why be isolated from an organisation and with whose members you have such strong economic links?

SO: **Do you think that the Queen's visit to Ireland was a very important symbolic step forward?**

RS: Absolutely. I think that visit, and the way in which she was received, the fact that she went and was generous in the way she behaved and spoke, and they were equally generous in the way they received her, set the tone I think for sensitive discussion on this. I've always been amazed that the people who could do something about it didn't take it up. If I were the Secretary General of the Commonwealth I would be making those efforts, behind the scenes so they may be, but I would be making those efforts. To see how best one could get Ireland in.

SO: **To go back to the others who have been included. I mentioned Rwanda, of course, which joined in 2005.**

RS: The Eminent Persons Group actually looked at this question. We didn't in the end include it in our report but the overwhelming feeling of the Eminent Persons Group was that we ought not to expand the Commonwealth in this way. It's perfectly possible for the Commonwealth to have relations with

countries that neighbour Commonwealth countries but not to make them members because we introduce into it a different kind of culture and a different kind of thinking. You know, this may seem silly but I suspect if you are educated in a particular culture and in a particular language, it leads to a particular kind of intellectualism. These experiences when they are shared are the things that you have in common. To some extent they may overcome the things that you have that are different but when you don't have them, it is the differences that prevail

SO: How far do you think the Commonwealth's qualified success stories in terms of encouraging democracy human rights in returning to observation of democratic values, in fact, are overshadowed by the enormously contentious issue of Sri Lanka and hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting there in November of this year? I'm thinking particularly of the Maldives, which has had a bumpy ride. The Solomon's could be described as a relative success story. There has been acquired below the radar input from good officers to help to encourage political discussion and accommodation. How much is the Commonwealth in a way criticised for its public inadequacies which then fail to look at its quiet contribution?

RS: I have to say that I will never understand what people mean by quiet contribution, nothing is quiet, particularly in international business. Therefore, in my view it is far more important to be transparent and upfront, full disclosure rather than the quiet diplomacy that is being touted.

SO: So they twist it into cosy compromise rather than, in fact, commitment to modification of their behaviour?

RS: Exactly. Let's look at the Gambia for instance. I know for a fact that a Commonwealth official of the Secretariat saw the Gambian President a few months' ago and raised questions of human rights with him and his response was "when you have sorted out Sri Lanka come back and talk to me".

SO: So using it very much as a stick with which to beat the Secretariat?

RS: Precisely. So the point I'm making here is that if people are violating the rules and they see other people getting away with it, why should they stop? We talk about countries but it's not countries really; its governments, and usually it's down to one person of the government, usually the top man. That's why, for instance, when the Gambian President announced the withdrawal of Gambia from the Commonwealth, not even its Foreign Minister knew he was doing it.

SO: Well indeed, it came as a surprise to so many.

RS: So when you have governments where one man can on a whim make a decision of this kind, you wonder what other kinds of decisions could be made. There's got to be checks and balances.

SO: Sir Ron, if I could just then summarise, you are very sceptical about the role of good offices. Do you have a particular insight?

RS: I'm not sceptical about it. I think good offices should happen, but not in secret. That's the difference. Look, I am all for mediation. And I'm all for persons of quality who are able to bring a settlement to a situation, an end to a conflict. But I believe there are time limits on all of this because advantage can be taken of it.

So when a good offices person is employed, let it be well-known. Where the meeting is held, make it public knowledge. The result of the meeting need not be made public at that time but at least the Commonwealth public should be informed that the meeting has taken place. If it becomes clear that nothing productive is resulting from the meetings, then this too should be disclosed. If nothing is said publicly there is no pressure on the government to do anything at all.

SO: In your view is there coherence in the structure of the way that good officers are run from the Secretariat, in historic terms? Because I am very aware of the emergence of the role of good offices but I am wondering the extent to which that there is a clear formula, a clear strategy, delegations of responsibilities, are there different countries, different themes that are designated to different sections of the

Secretariat, individual officers, divisions, to ensure that there is as close co-ordination as possible in the exercise of promoting Commonwealth values through this particular strategy.

RS: I know of no such thing and I think that's very sad frankly because I think we have reached a point, and I made this point myself in a lecture recently, that the Commonwealth is diverse. The diversity is a collection of differences, and unless work is done to narrow those differences and to try to co-ordinate agreement, the differences become more pronounced. We should not believe that 53 countries in the Commonwealth come to a position from the same perspective; they don't. Somebody has to manage that process and that somebody has to be the Secretariat and particularly the Secretary General. That's the Secretary General's job. To manage that process so that as much co-ordination and harmony can be achieved as possible; to recognise when a problem is developing and how to build a bridge; how to help people to solve a problem and eventually when to say enough is enough.

SO: Two last questions. Richard Bourne has commented when I interviewed him that the Commonwealth needs crises because in that way it raises the public profile.

RS: If you have no crisis but you can show a real achievement in other ways that, for me, is far more important than to have a crisis. I would work towards obviating a crisis to begin with. But if the crisis occurs, I would work to solve it. If it can't be solved then it's out in the open but that mustn't be the basis on which I have recognition. It's like saying somebody has to be dying before a doctor will come along to look at them.

SO: You're speaking as a diplomat and a businessman. Richard is, of course, coming from a particular journalistic culture of raising the profile of the Commonwealth into wider awareness.

RS: I don't believe that is the way in which the Commonwealth's profile needs to be raised. In fact, the Commonwealth has a very good story, Sue. Over the years that it's been in existence it has done remarkably good work. That could be the Commonwealth's story. What the Commonwealth achieved it didn't achieve it by itself, but, for instance, it did make a significant contribution to

the end of racism in Southern Africa. That's a good narrative for the Commonwealth. It should be a narrative that the Commonwealth should repeat in other aspects of Commonwealth life such as ending discrimination against girls and women; promoting financial investment in youth who make up the largest number of unemployed in Commonwealth countries; and exploring ways of advancing religious tolerance and understanding as part of tackling terrorism that had developed, in part, from intolerance. There ought also to be more Commonwealth solidarity on issues where the international law is on the side of Commonwealth member states, as in the case, for instance, of . . . , Britain over the Falklands. The Commonwealth stood with Britain over the Falklands.

SO: I was particularly struck with the energy with which Sir Sonny Ramphal came out quickly, a declaration of support for the British Government in saying that force was fundamentally anathema in the international system, in sending officers to New York to lobby behind the scenes in support, again, of the British Government. That was very active diplomacy.

RS: It was sensible diplomacy because the Commonwealth is made up of a number of very small countries not unlike the Falklands who themselves could be subject to invasions of this kind, as happened in Grenada with the Americans.

SO: Absolutely.

RS: When countries of the Caribbean and Asia and Pacific became independent it's because they exercised a right to self-determination. That right of self-determination is international law. It is respected by the United Nations as part of its charter. There is no doubt in my mind that had it not been for Commonwealth continuous support for Guyana and Belize in their border disputes with Venezuela and Guatemala respectively that both the Venezuelans and the Guatemalans would have done much more than they have done in the past to actually advance their claims militarily. The Venezuelans and the Guatemalans recognise there are so many states in Africa and Asia that are part of the Commonwealth, alongside Britain and

Canada that would frown on military action. To some degree, repercussions from the wider Commonwealth helped to temper their behaviour.

SO: They've certainly done it through repeated declarations at Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in the final-

RS: Every single Head of Government meeting has pronounced on this matter. Before that the Commonwealth actually set up small committees of Foreign Ministers of countries to look at these two issues. And to keep a watching brief on them. And everybody is aware of that.

SO: Have they done the same for Cyprus?

RS: I am not aware that it's been done for Cyprus but I don't think Cyprus ever made the request. So that would be the difference but I suspect that if Cyprus... and Cyprus may not have made the request because Cyprus sees its problem in a different way, from the way in which Guyana and Venezuela and Belize and Guatemala have their difficulties. Also India, in Asia and Pakistan: then there's Britain and Canada that have said, 'We would frown on this in our Commonwealth context', so they've held their hand. But I don't recall any request from Cyprus for that kind of attention but Cyprus has also not been neglected, that's the point.

SO: No, and Chief Emeka was emphatic in saying that the selection of Cyprus for a location for a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was precisely because of the issue of the Northern part of the island being occupied by a Turkish regime.

If I can just wrap up by asking you about Prince Charles going to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka. The Queen has made the statement earlier this year, and the Palace has advised that the 87 year old Monarch is reviewing her long haul travel arrangements, the Queen has brought an ineffable but vital atmosphere to Commonwealth Heads of Governments meetings since 1973 and, in fact, her absence from Sri Lanka is particularly marked in view of the longevity of her appearance on the periphery but then for increasing

role in making from '97 the speech to Commonwealth Heads of Government. In what way do you anticipate that an alteration in a Monarchical presence might change the way that the Sri Lanka Heads of Government meeting develops? I appreciate that this is speculative and hypothetical 'cause we're still a month away. Do you think that it is an important substitution or, in fact, that's over representing the role of the importance of the Monarchy?

RS: There was nothing the Monarchy could do about this particular situation. It's gone too far. I don't know the reason Her Majesty is not going to Sri Lanka. I know what the official reason is and I accept that. . The fact is, however, that The Queen has demonstrated enough concern about the Commonwealth to say that she is going to send Prince Charles who is her heir, to at least the British throne, and the realms of the Commonwealth of which she is still head of state. But I think the troubling circumstances surrounding Sri Lanka will have affected that decision in some way and I don't think her presence there would be helpful. If Heads of Government of countries of which she is Head of State are not attending the Meeting, I think she would be in an invidious position to be seen to be having a close relationship with the Head of State of the country of which she is not Head of State. She's a Head of State of Canada. Canada has decided it's not sending high level representation.

SO: Indeed, it's sending a Parliamentary Secretary.

RS: Yes. So for the Head of State of Canada, Her Majesty the Queen, to be at the meeting nonetheless and in close quarters with the President of Sri Lanka, the country to which Canada is objecting, and the person to whom Canada is objecting, I think would pose a problem for Canada. I would not be surprised if in taking soundings from her Realms, in terms of going to Sri Lanka, that she did not get advice from her Ministers in Canada that she ought not to attend. But I don't know that any of that is true. All of what I've just said is pure speculation. But I don't think the Commonwealth on this occasion will suffer from her absence and it may in any event be a good thing for Prince Charles to do this, particularly if there is an aspiration that he should succeed her as Head of the Commonwealth. It will give him a chance to meet Heads of Government in that kind of capacity and it will give him a chance to test his own metal.

SO: In your view, how much is the controversy around the Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka, in fact, a serious challenge to India's regional position and Delhi's regional diplomacy in bilateral and multilateral terms within the Commonwealth?

RS: Hmm, I don't know. You know, I've always felt that the Indians treat the Commonwealth in a defensive manner. In other words, India doesn't advance anything in the Commonwealth. India remains a part of the Commonwealth to protect India's interests. That's my firm view. I wish it weren't so. In fact, when Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister of India it was the first time that I had seen in my lifetime an Indian Government, after Jawaharlal Nehru that was taking an active role in Commonwealth matters.

SO: Absolutely. His mother had focused much more on the Non-Aligned Movement, rather than the Commonwealth.

RS: Right. Here was Rajiv Gandhi saying "Yes, let us let Pakistan back in". Even though they were mortal enemies but having enough good sense and vision to recognise that that was a good thing. Here was Rajiv Gandhi actually siding with the countries of Africa and the Caribbean against Mrs Thatcher, with whom Britain's relationships were far better served, but on a question of principle. He didn't have to do that and he didn't have to go as far as he went, but he actually did. He did all of these things and there were clear indications at that time that India was taking a more activist role in Commonwealth matters. But beyond that period I cannot tell you that I have seen evidence of India's real interests in the Commonwealth, not even when they ran Kamallesh Sharma to be Secretary General of the Commonwealth. You didn't get the impression that there was a great deal of enthusiasm in India, or the Indian Government, to hold this position. They went along with it. They got it because people felt, 'Well, if India wants it...' India had now by that time become one of the more important developing country economies. People were excited about that, the prospect of developing economic relationships which would be beneficial to them so they were willing to do that. But India, in my view, has never played and still continues not to play the kind of activist role in the Commonwealth that one would like to see it do as the largest of the developing Commonwealth countries

So the short answer to your question is, I don't believe that in terms of India's regional role, the Commonwealth factors.

SO: If I could end with a question on my own area of particular interest. The Commonwealth played a significant - not an overwhelming but a significant - part in the trajectory of South Africa's final achievement of black majority government in 1994. And yet what has been striking is the way that there has been a diminution of South Africa's own energy and input into the Commonwealth. Thabo Mbeki from 1999 certainly was part of the troika in trying to encourage Robert Mugabe to improve political and human rights but, again, doing it through quiet diplomacy. Under President Jacob Zuma, there seems to be yet another deceleration of South Africa's own interest in the Commonwealth. I know that he made a private remark that the Commonwealth had played no part in South Africa's transition to black majority rule at the Perth CHOGM, would you say that that's an accurate observation of mine? In fact, what's striking is despite the Commonwealth's own contribution to the end of apartheid in South Africa, that South Africa is not necessarily putting the same energy back into the Commonwealth.

RS: I've heard more than one South African diplomat say that first of all South Africans don't know very much about the Commonwealth.

SO: No, they don't.

RS: They don't place any particular store in its value. I've always found that an amazing statement and I actually once said publically in a forum to a South African diplomat that I was so shocked by that statement because they should wear membership of the Commonwealth as a badge of honour because so many countries sacrificed so much to help them to achieve their freedom and to bring an end to apartheid that they should be eternally grateful to the efforts of the Commonwealth. It should be an institution that they should be promoting in South Africa.

SO: So the Commonwealth has survived because of inertia, the Commonwealth will survive because of inertia. The Commonwealth

faces an existential crisis. Where do you see the Commonwealth in the next five years?

RS: A lot will depend on what happens in Sri Lanka. If Sri Lanka is a conference that does not face up to the Commonwealth issues, it simply happens, so the people could say they've had another Commonwealth conference despite the controversy that surrounded it, and if President Rajapaksa becomes the Chairman of the Commonwealth for the next two years, haunted everywhere he goes by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Accusing him daily of human rights violations and not addressing the substance of the matters that they've asked him to. If that's the image that the Commonwealth will have for the next two years, unless the Commonwealth can find some evangelist to be the next Secretary General, somebody so fiercely committed to the idea of the Commonwealth and willing to work for it morning, noon and night, and when I say work for it I mean not only at the levels of Heads of Government but the levels of people to rejuvenate it as a going concern, I think it will only be a question of time before it withers and dies.

SO: **Sir Ron, thank you very much.**