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INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

INTERVIEW WITH SIR MALCOLM RIFKIND

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

MR: Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Sir Malcolm Rifkind at Portcullis House on Tuesday, 12th March, 2013. Sir Malcolm, thank you very much again for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if I could ask you, please, about your involvement in the second Eminent Persons Group of 2010/2011. How did you come to be part of this delegation?

MR: It's a very good question. I was approached by the Commonwealth Secretary General. The decision to have an EPG had been decided at the previous Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, so then it became a question of the composition of it. And I think probably the first contact I had was a phone call from William Hague just trying to sound me out whether I might be interested in being the UK representative. And I responded positively and then I was asked to see the Commonwealth Secretary General, Sharma. And we had a long chat and he told me he'd been given a responsibility by the Commonwealth to try and put together such a group; and so the appointments which were essentially made, were recommendations by him to the Commonwealth. They weren't appointments made by national governments. That was the form of it because there are 53 governments and there are only going to be eight or nine members of the EPG. But he concluded that one of the countries that ought to be represented should be the United Kingdom and I presumed he had informally sounded out the Foreign Office and they discussed possible names. So the end result was I was approached and asked, and I responded.

SO: Had you followed the Commonwealth closely up to that point with the debates about the extent to which it should be reformed, and what was the appropriate mechanism to do this?

MR: It had not been a subject which was, as it were, the top of my agenda. I've had an involvement with the Commonwealth going back to my days at university. When I was at university I took part in a Commonwealth expedition, known as Comex. I and 200 other British undergraduates travelled overland from the United Kingdom to India; we drove in five single decker buses in convoy. We drove our own buses, these were our own buses. We had radio contact

between the buses. I was a radio operator. We travelled through Western Europe to Austria, to Hungary. From Hungary, it was 1965 or '66. We travelled through Hungary, down Yugoslavia, Greece, Istanbul, Turkey. Turkey down to Jordan. We spent a day in Jordan: it was before the Six Day War so we went into East Jerusalem. Then across the desert to Baghdad, putting our buses and wagons in circles in the desert. And it was very moral: the girls slept on the buses, the men in the middle, in the gap.

SO: You didn't keep guard all night?

MR: Well, that's one way of putting it. And then from Baghdad to Tehran. We didn't go through Afghanistan because that was too tricky. But we went down to Nok Kundi in Pakistan. Crossed into India and ended up in Delhi.

SO: Who funded this trip?

MR: Well, it was a retired Ghurkha officer called Lionel Gregory who retired to Edinburgh as it happened and I saw him several times. And he had known Nehru: because he was a Ghurkha officer he knew India well. He'd retired from the army and he had a passion for the Commonwealth. He thought what he wanted to do was bring young people from the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries together; and to start this process he arranged this first expedition. He travelled on the expedition. And we got funding from various sources – the usual sort of worthy sources, industries, charities, trusts. We kept our costs to an absolute minimum. There were several such expeditions; we were the first. But the problem in our case was when we got to India a week later, India and Pakistan went to war with each other which meant we couldn't go back the way we came. So instead of being able to go back overland, we stayed in India several weeks longer; the buses were sold and with the proceeds we flew back via Russia on a chartered plane.

SO: Do these Commonwealth expeditions run regularly?

MR: There were several of them. The idea was it would become a regular feature. There were in fact three or four. One had a tragedy; there was an accident in Yugoslavia. Several people were killed unfortunately. So they went for three or four years. During the period we were there we fanned out from Delhi; we went to Rajasthan for a week or ten days. Another contingent went to South India and then we all met and went up to Simla.

We were with young Indians throughout this time. It was enormously interesting. Anyway, that was the beginning of my Commonwealth involvement.

SO: The beginning of your Commonwealth career, as it were?

MR: Then of course at the end of my Edinburgh University days I spent two years in Zimbabwe, Southern Rhodesia as it then was, I was doing my post grad Master's degree. I wrote my thesis on the politics of land in Southern Rhodesia. And this was during the UDI period when the Commonwealth was very heavily involved. While I was there I had a reasonable amount of free time because of my university job there. I travelled round Zambia and Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland.

SO: Did your fellow members on the EPG in 2010, have a similar long standing, interested engagement with the Commonwealth?

MR: Well, they all had involvement in quite different ways. For example, Ronald Sanders who basically drafted the report -

SO: He was the Rapporteur.

MR: Yes, he's a West Indian; he has been High Commissioner, with a long and passionate interest in the Commonwealth. Hugh Segal who is a Senator from Canada and since the report has been appointed by the Canadian Government as a special envoy on Commonwealth issues. Michael Kirby, the Australian judge, also from a judicial point of view, has strong interest. Asma Jahangir is a Pakistani human rights lawyer. She was Pakistan's representative, obviously. Badawi was the Prime Minister of Malaysia. So when you ask 'Did you have a strong Commonwealth interest?' we all had strong reasons to be aware of the Commonwealth dimension. Some of them would have had a personal history, some might have just as a by-product of the job they were doing.

SO: You said to the Foreign Affairs Committee when you gave evidence that there had been a main concern that existed that led to the group in the first place. Where had been the locus of concern for the creation of the EPG?

MR: I was not involved at that stage obviously, but essentially it was a feeling that the Commonwealth was drifting. The Commonwealth's high moment in terms of public awareness of the Commonwealth as a political institution, as an institution that could help change the world in various ways, was during apartheid South Africa when the Commonwealth basically led world opinion, in coordinating, initiating and activating. Not always to the United Kingdom's comfort. It was a strategy to force change. Since then the Commonwealth has largely been known because of the Commonwealth Games, because of its various departmental roles. And its political identity had diminished. Now the Commonwealth was never meant to be a single organisation with a single strategy, but it is basically a values-based organisation. It's not just a collection of countries which have a link with the United Kingdom historically. It's meant to essentially be a force for promoting the rule of law, respect for human rights, democratic values.

SO: But it could be said that with the Harare Declaration of 1991 and the Millbrook Declaration of '95 and the creation of CMAG, that the Commonwealth had already taken -

MR: Well, there was no shortage of declarations! The problem was in making these more than declarations. And the concern was that for various institutional and political reasons, the Commonwealth was not using the opportunities it had to help realise some of these aspirations and part of the concern was the Secretary General. Not the person, that's another issue, but the Secretary General was in a weaker position than, for example, the Secretary General of the United Nations. Or maintained he was, saying that he could not speak on behalf of the Commonwealth unless he had a mandate. In other words, if something happens, Ban Ki-moon or whoever is Secretary General of the UN, has to have the approval of the member states

for action, but if he's wanting to express outrage or concern or initiatives, he just does it. That's his job.

SO: Excuse me, Sir, but that never seemed to hold back SG Sir Sonny Ramphal.

MR: Well, quite. But if you look at the documents and the detail and so forth, there is nothing that explicitly gives the Secretary General that mandate.

But the public also want to be reassured that the Commonwealth has seized the initiative. And the single biggest example, and it's still a live issue, I'm sure you are familiar with this, is Sri Lanka. And at the height of the problems in Sri Lanka, the Commonwealth didn't say a word. No one said anything on behalf of the Commonwealth. Individual governments were speaking out, but the Secretary General did not explicitly seize the issue. The role of the Secretary General, what he either did say, or didn't say, and let's leave the individual out of it. There was a question of the clarity of the office, what he was entitled to do. There was CMAG. CMAG had responded extremely well whenever there was an actual military coup d'état. If a government was overthrown and a country had to be suspended, CMAG did its job properly. The criticism of CMAG was that it didn't seem to be willing to have the political will or the tools to operate when you had grave abuse of human rights or rule of law that fell short of a change of government. So democracy hadn't been overthrown; the spirit of it was being either trampled on or ignored. So there was that dimension to it. So that was a matter of anxiety and a general feeling that although there was no hostility to the Commonwealth amongst wider public opinion, there was a growing difference. It was just fading away gently and quietly and that should be, if possible, altered.

SO: Was this a concern amongst a certain group of countries, or was this a wide-spread sense of unease and a missing opportunity for the Commonwealth?

MR: I can only comment on what I've been told because I was not involved at the time. This all happened with the previous heads of government. I was at the CHOGM in Perth, I was not involved in the previous CHOGM because I was not in government and there was no reason why I should have been involved. My understanding is that a number of countries including some of the old Commonwealth, but also some of the newer member states - I can't off hand remember which ones - but there were at least seven or eight perhaps nine or ten countries that were seized of this. And as often happens in these international gatherings, when it comes to drawing up a communiqué, ideas are put into the melting pot and sometimes you get away with something which, if it had been thought about in more detail, other countries might have opposed seeing as this could lead to difficulties or the thin end of the wedge. So the communiqué of Trinidad - I think it was Port of Spain - Heads of Government Conference, was agreed with a reference to the desirability of inviting a group of eminent persons, so called, to look at these matters.

SO: You said that Sri Lanka was the prime example in which there were national government statements and activity because of their concern, but the Commonwealth itself was more reticent.

MR: Well, the Commonwealth during the height of the trauma in Sri Lanka when there were major allegations, whether they were true or untrue is not the point, but there were major allegations of atrocities, of large numbers of innocent people having been killed, of the government being insufficiently careful as to how it dealt with that crisis. The Commonwealth did not have a view. Neither condoned nor condemned and it was left to individual governments who did feel strongly about it to express their concerns. And therefore the concern was how can you have a Commonwealth which is based on the rule of law and respect for human rights and has been willing to speak out on South Africa or on other issues, but somehow doesn't seem to have the structure that enables it to do so in this area?

SO: You told the Foreign Affairs Committee that there had been other examples. I just wondered whether any particular ones came to mind? You said Sri Lanka is the most obvious one, but other ...?

MR: Well, you have, for example, some very savage sentences on homosexuals in one or two African countries. Uganda. And I think there was one other country where it wasn't just a question of homosexual activity being criminalised, but it was treated as something akin to rape or murder to be found guilty of having had homosexual practices was quite heavy, so that gave rise to a lot of controversy. And there were a number of examples which, to be honest, I'd have to go back and check to be clear in my own mind the details.

SO: So those were your two principal approaches; the Secretary General should be given an express mandate to always -

MR: We concluded three basic areas of proposed reform. First was to give the Secretary General an explicit mandate to speak out on his own authority when things happen, not to feel that he had to clear it with other people. That was the first point. The second was to beef up the remit of CMAG so that it would be expected to involve itself, not just when governments were being overthrown but when they had reason to believe that there was serious violations of human rights or rule of law issues in an individual country. And the third issue which became the most controversial was our recommendation for a commissioner for rule of law, human rights etc. And for the reasons we explained in the report we felt it would be desirable.

SO: Going back to the first two, were those unanimous? There was consensus?

MR: All our recommendations were unanimous.

SO: I'm just wondering about the internal diplomacy and discussions.

MR: This is an interesting point. Most of the energy within the EPG, most of the initiatives and the discussions and the argument, it was all very constructive. Probably the people who were most involved were Ron Sanders, Hugh Segal, I suppose myself, Michael Kirby, Dr Asma Jahangir was very good when she was there. She missed a couple of meetings but she was pretty active. Badawi, he's a rather quiet, reticent man. Badawi in his own quiet way actually became very supportive. And the proposal for the Commonwealth Charter came originally from him.

SO: Did it?

MR: Yes. I don't know who gave him the idea but it was certainly his initiative in the discussions that we had. A Jamaican lady Patricia Francis, who's based in Geneva, was very articulate, mostly on economic development issues and social issues. One or two were rather quiet. Sir Ieremia Tabai, from Kiribati, was very helpful but very rarely spoke; the young chap, Jo Kavuma, a Ugandan... The assumption had been that you needed somebody to represent those under the age of 60.

SO: He was your token youth member?

MR: Yeah, but very good, nice guy. But he was a little bit overwhelmed by it all, I think. But he was good, he was articulate. Michael Kirby was primarily concerned with rule of law; he's a judge, he's not a politician. Rule of law issues, but also overwhelmingly concerned with gay and HIV issues. He is gay himself. He came out publicly in Australia some years ago and it was all very controversial at the time. Newsworthy I should say, rather than controversial. And he was deeply anxious that we should come out explicitly calling for those Commonwealth countries which still criminalise homosexual activity - we had to handle that very sensitively. It ended up with a form of words which we could all live with. None of us disagreed with what he was trying to achieve. But we took the view that ... we already knew that we were going to have a hell of a battle over the commission and rule of law and all that sort of stuff. We were advised that on the issues of gay rights you had a problem in quite a number of Commonwealth countries that were in other respects democratic and respected the rule of law. Some of the Caribbean countries felt very strongly against what he was wanting. Some of the Muslim countries in the Commonwealth took a similar view that there was just no way their governments were going to be able to accommodate that. So I think the report uses a slightly ambiguous wording about calls upon Commonwealth governments to examine any legislation they have which might unreasonably discriminate. Michael Kirby was a bit disappointed at that, but he went along with it. But on the broader issues it was mainly Ron Sanders, Hugh Segal and myself that were doing most of the talking, if the truth be told.

SO: To go back also to the second point, the CMAG should be reformed to require it to consider, as you say, and if necessary take action. You said to the Foreign Affairs Committee that they had already carried out their own study of what might be needed and their conclusions had been similar to yours and had been largely endorsed. But then you went on to say that there had been resistance from a number of countries. Was this on the reform of CMAG, or was it specifically focused on the issue of the commissioner?

MR: It's a question of chicken and egg. CMAG was indeed already authorised to review its own procedures and its own mandate and so forth. Our guess is, and I can't prove this, but our guess is that if it hadn't been for us, they would have come up with something tamer. But because we put quite strong and powerful arguments, I think not to be overtaken by us, those on CMAG who wanted a stronger conclusion anyway were able to persuade their colleagues, better that we should be doing it ourselves than this rotten EPG.

SO: 'We've got a backbone'?

MR: Yeah. So at the end of the day what were our public recommendations on CMAG were implemented. But technically CMAG were able to say it's a pure coincidence, we're doing it anyway. Now so people can speculate as to how much of that would have happened but for us. So the main controversy was not CMAG; nor was it the role of the Secretary General. The main controversy was the commissioner which we always knew would be the one we were unlikely to get. It turned out to be even more difficult than we'd expected because it wasn't just the usual suspects, it was countries like India and South Africa.

SO: Why?

MR: Who knows? Although India and South Africa had no basic reason to be nervous about a commissioner; it's partly I think doctrinal. The whole concept of a commissioner for the rule of law, although we emphasize the role of the commissioner is to advise the Secretary General, to help CMAG and not to have executive powers himself or herself, they saw this as the thin end of the wedge, an interference in internal affairs. A bit like some of the problems you have in the United Nations on human rights issues.

SO: You said that you'd expected that there would be some controversy, but were you taken somewhat by surprise by the strong hostility that you did encounter?

MR: Well, we had strong support as well. But the Commonwealth can only operate by consensus so it's not too difficult. And you tend to get countries sheltering behind others, rather than coming forward. So I think we'd always assumed Sri Lanka and one or two other countries with dubious governments would be very unhappy with what might end up as more pressure on them to reform their ways. India wasn't represented by its prime minister which didn't help either. Mamohan Singh wasn't at the CHOGM Heads of Government Conference; I think it was their vice president. And Zuma was there in South Africa and both of them were very, very unhelpful and that made it perfectly obvious that that part of the proposal would not get endorsed. We all knew that might happen. There had been a debate in our own ranks, do we put forward a recommendation that we know probably is not going to be accepted? And one or two were a bit inclined in that direction but the strength of the argument which won the day was, 'No, we're not ministers, we're not governments. Our job is to say what we think ought to be done.' And it's not just the recommendation, although the recommendation might not be accepted; we have given a very full analysis in our report, there is a chapter as to why we think this is desirable. That is now on the table, it is there. And even if it's not accepted at this moment in time, they are on alert. They are on watch. How they handle future problems in the Commonwealth, if they don't handle them effectively and convincingly the argument for going back to the commissioner proposal will still be around. So better it's on the table as something they've rejected for the time being. Those who were against us argued we don't need the commissioner, we can do these things anyway. Okay, well let's see if you can.

SO: If I could go onto the non-publication of the report: I'm very struck that in comparison to the 1986 EPG Report on South Africa which came out before the special review meeting in London in 1986, this had a rather different trajectory.

MR: Well, that's because they got approval to do that. We had right from the very beginning - I was as guilty as anyone, I'm proud to say I was as guilty as anyone for this - we took the view that although our job was to report to the heads of government, as far as the Secretary General was concerned, he assumed that meant we didn't say anything at all in public. Did our work and privately sent our report to the heads of government who would then handle it and it would be up to them whether they wished to publish it, or not, period. We took the view that because we knew all along there would be some resistance to some of our more sensitive recommendations, we would have a better prospect if we generated a debate in the Commonwealth why we were sitting, why we were deliberating. People should know the direction we were moving. So that hopefully we would get endorsement from various parts of the Commonwealth family and the heads of government would be faced not just with a recommendation, but with something that clearly had support behind it. So we established our website, we gave progress reports from the very beginning on the way our thinking was going. And when we came to our conclusions what we did, purely a device to maximise the impact we could make, we knew that we couldn't send our conclusions and final report to the public because technically it was for the heads of government. So what we did was we published on our website and wrote to various Commonwealth NGOs and Commonwealth interested people, we said these are our draft conclusions. They are not our final ones, they may be changed but these are what we are currently thinking; these are the arguments and recommendations we are likely to be making. We want to give an opportunity for everybody to comment on them so that we can take into account your comments and your views. So it was already all in the public domain. And we got a lot of response and most of the response was 'You are not going far enough' sort of stuff which ... no one was saying 'this is unacceptable', on the commissioner for example. And there was a good discussion about some of the detail. Some people saying you should have more power for the commissioner, but virtually no one saying 'This is a wrong idea and you shouldn't be doing it in the first place.' And that's exactly what we talked -

SO: So where was this generation of interest coming from? NGOs, private citizens?

MR: We'd drawn up a list, the Commonwealth has about 100 NGOs. They automatically were all communicated with, they got letters from us with this. But there was also a couple of dozen well-known Commonwealth individuals, people who speak and write on the Commonwealth regularly. There were journalists, there were various other ... And because it was on the website it was technically open to any citizen of the Commonwealth to respond. I was quite proud of this; it was my idea. So then we ended up with our final report and that was still private in one respect, although none of its conclusions or recommendations were not already in the public domain, what was not in the public domain was all our reasoning behind these conclusions. All we'd published was a series of recommendations with perhaps a brief sentence about them.

SO: Not the detailed argument of how you got there?

MR: That's right, and so we were very keen for the whole thing to be published as soon as possible so that people could read not just our conclusions but why we reached these conclusions and see the strength of the argument for them

and so forth. And that's where we were unsuccessful in the short term. Pretty certain the secretariat, the Secretary General wasn't very keen either. And we kept being given excuses. The British government was excellent, the Canadian government was excellent, but it needs consensus. And we kept being told there were some governments who were unhappy about it being reported, a report being published in full before the heads of government have deliberated and discussed it and so forth. So, okay, we were irritated but we didn't treat this as a resignation issue because we assumed it was going to be published by CHOGM. We all arrived in Perth, it's still not been published. And first day, first day and a half we were still being given these excuses. And then the heads of government go into retreat, which is where the decisions are going to be taken and they still haven't published the report. So again, I'm afraid I was probably the main person responsible, but it wasn't just me, we were just so pissed off, excuse my language, that we called a press conference while the heads of government were in retreat.

SO: Grossly improper!

MR: We called a press conference and we had copies of the report obviously which we had, but which hadn't been published. And we presented the press with a copy of it. Said, as they had refused to publish the report, we are publishing it. We think it's quite disgraceful, this is not the private property of the heads of government, this belongs to the Commonwealth as a whole. We are publishing the report as of now. And, of course, because the heads of government were in retreat there was no news coming out of the retreat. So this was the story of the day, that the EPG was publishing its own report.

SO: A political coup?

MR: Yeah. And word originally got to the heads of government in retreat and within an hour, or an hour and a half, I can't remember the exact time, they had published the report. Because they knew it was embarrassing enough for them. But at least by saying, "They didn't have to do this, we were doing it anyway," you know. Absolutely rubbish! We knew perfectly well they weren't going to do it. So we won that one. We won the battle but on the commissioner we lost the war, obviously, for the time being.

SO: Were there any ramifications of, as you say, bouncing the heads of government into -

MR: Well, they were intensely irritated with us but by that stage we didn't give a damn because the ... it was perfectly obvious they were going to reject the recommendation anyway. The only reason for us not having done -

SO: Why do you think they were so dilatory in publishing the report?

MR: It's unfair to say they, implies there was a single view, there wasn't. And the British government, the Canadians, many of the West Indian countries, some of the Asian countries were all supporting us and saying, "Of course it should be published, this is absurd." But the Commonwealth operates by consensus.

SO: Was there any degree of tension also ... of any slight entanglement with internal Australian politics?

MR: No, the Australian government was first class. The Australian government was extremely helpful but being the host, last thing they wanted was a bust up. And at the end of the day, and I don't dissent from this judgement, the question of our report being published was not an issue in which you'd allow the summit to be deeply divided. There were more important issues frankly than whether our report was published that day or 48 hours later. But nevertheless it was an important development.

SO: On the recommendations: you were asked by Mr Roy at the Foreign Affairs Committee hearings whether you felt they were overly ambitious.

MR: They were ambitious, they weren't over ambitious. If the question was did you only make recommendations in the knowledge they would be accepted? The answer is no, we didn't. We made recommendations some of which we thought it was highly unlikely they would be accepted.

SO: So they were aspirational, even though you realised -

MR: They were more than aspirational. They were our genuine views to what needed to be done.

SO: But whether they were realistic or -

MR: We were politically aware enough to know that because this is not just getting a majority vote, this requires consensus which means 100%, even one country. Now, I don't want to exaggerate that, if the one country is Tuvalu they can be leant on by the rest and can't in practice hold up a decision. I'm not being unfair to Tuvalu, but I'm just giving you an example. If, on the other hand, it is India or Canada or the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth will not enjoy that. That's exactly what happened. Do you remember, during the apartheid period under the question of economic sanctions, the Brits were in the minority. So I don't complain about consensus requirement: that's the nature of the Commonwealth. It's not a company, it's not a government, it's a voluntary association of countries. You can't run it in any other way.

SO: Just coming out then of the Perth CHOGM, the next CHOGM is supposed to be held in Sri Lanka. And this is increasingly contentious.

MR: I was on Channel 4 last night and I was asked whether it would be appropriate for the CHOGM to be held in Colombo in Sri Lanka and I said, "Well, I don't want to exaggerate, but given all the terrible things that have been happening in Sri Lanka, the sacking of the Chief Justice and the appointment of some crony to replace him and the refusal to have an independent enquiry into all the allegations," I said, "I don't want to exaggerate but having the next Heads of Government CHOGM in Colombo would have been rather like having the CHOGM in Pretoria during the apartheid disputes while South Africa still remained a member of the Commonwealth." It's not just who chairs that conference for two or three days. The country that chairs it is the chairman of office for the next two years and is automatically represented on CMAG because they are the chairman in office, quite rightly.

SO: So you can't be really on CMAG's list if -

MR: You can, but you will then be examined by a group which includes the country that is being examined. Now, there might be ways of handling that but nevertheless on principle it is highly undesirable for all sorts of reasons.

SO: Sir Malcolm, where do you see the Commonwealth going?

MR: The problem of Sri Lanka is relatively modest compared to the South Africa issue. And the Commonwealth survived that. You normally judge the health of an organisation by whether more people want to join or leave. And the Commonwealth still has a queue of people who would like to join if the Commonwealth wanted to have them. So I don't see the Commonwealth as it were disintegrating or collapsing. The main problem for the Commonwealth is indifference, not hostility.

SO: So in fact paradoxically the Commonwealth needs crisis to -

MR: Well, perhaps a dangerous way of putting it! But I know what you mean. It needs to demonstrate its relevance. And it is accepted as relevant when it comes to developmental issues. It's highly relevant ... and the thing that I most learnt from EPG, which I ought to have realised before but hadn't really thought about it, was that of the 53 countries about 20 of them are micro states in the Pacific and the West Indies, and so forth. For these countries the Commonwealth is, after the United Nations, the second most important part of their foreign policy because it's the only place they meet the big guys. If you're the President of Tuvalu you can rub shoulders with the British Prime Minister, the Indian Prime Minister, the President of South Africa on an equal basis, you can't do that anywhere else if you are that sort of size of country.

SO: You've said elsewhere that for 'the big guys', there is a disconnect between the warm words that they say towards the Commonwealth, and actually what happens on the ground in terms of their foreign policy.

MR: Well, no, not necessarily. It varies from country to country. The Canadians are very pro-Commonwealth and reflect that in their priorities. We ourselves: how many other countries have a Foreign and Commonwealth Office?

SO: In your judgement, though, is sufficient emphasis placed on the Commonwealth part of that particular title?

MR: As with any country's foreign policy you spend most of your time in any given year on the crisis issues. So where's the crisis? If you've got a crisis in the European Union, or if you've got a crisis in Syria or the Middle East, and you don't have a crisis in the Commonwealth, then it's not surprising that's not head of anyone's agenda for that time being.

SO: I was discussing this very point with Lord Hurd last week when he was Foreign Secretary between the end of '89 and '95. The way that international crises stacked up, like planes over Heathrow.

MR: Well, that's right. During the time I was Foreign Secretary I cannot remember now any dramatic Commonwealth issue that dominated my day. Issues arose from time to time but they were relatively small. Zimbabwe in more recent years has been a very important one which has quite rightly been a high grade issue.

SO: Sir, could I just ask you, though, your view of a particular attachment within the Commonwealth from certain sections, certain Commonwealth NGOs, to process rather than, shall we say, hard headed practical politics?

MR: It varies from country to country. For a lot of countries it's about developmental aid. There's nothing wrong with that. They are small, developing countries and membership of the Commonwealth gives them a priority, gives them a claim, a share of the resources that are available. Simultaneously for a lot of small countries the point I made earlier, it's a means of access to the big guys and the Commonwealth can sometimes help promote their interests. And if you are having negotiations at the World Trade Organisation or UNESCO or any of the global organisations, then if the Commonwealth has a view and can promote that view that's a great asset to many of the other member states who wouldn't otherwise ever be heard. It's a bit like the European Union. If you are a Luxembourg or a Slovenia being part of the EU gives you an indirect way of making a significant contribution to the global resolution of issues that might affect you.

SO: Do you see the future headship as being a likely contentious issue for the Commonwealth?

MR: I don't know, but it is a purely ceremonial, symbolic role. It will certainly continue to be the Queen as long as she is alive, as long as she is Queen. What will happen afterwards won't be automatic, there is no automaticity. The Prince of Wales will become king the moment the Queen dies. If the Queen died in the next five minutes, we'd have a new king simultaneously. He would not automatically be head of the Commonwealth. That would be for the Commonwealth to decide. How would it decide? I don't know if anyone really knows at this moment in time. But do reflect on the fact that the Queen and Prince of Wales automatically would be head of state of 14 Commonwealth countries. Well, 15 whatever the number is.

SO: Sir Malcolm, how far do you feel that the Queen has been part of the invisible glue of the Commonwealth?

MR: Oh, yes, she has, very substantially. Because the Queen and the Secretary General are the only two individuals who represent the Commonwealth as a whole and who have a public identity. But in addition to that, the Queen has always attached huge importance to the Commonwealth and that is known and appreciated. She is head of state of somewhere between a quarter and a third of Commonwealth countries. She takes that seriously. But she has also been often perceived to be perhaps sometimes more sympathetic to the aspirations of other Commonwealth countries than Her Majesty's Government. Put it that way. Whenever there have been issues, she's been too discrete to say anything publicly but in her own inimitable way it has become known that she has been a force for Commonwealth cohesion, even if that didn't always prove to be comfortable for the British government of the day.

SO: So through personal charisma, dedication to duty, longevity of office?

MR: Yes, all these heads of government, they love being invited to Buckingham Palace or Britannia when we had Britannia. The Queen is a global icon. Even heads of government are susceptible to flattery. Don't we know it?

SO: I think official hospitality is not necessarily given the attention that it deserves.

MR: If you think, when the EPG was formed, you will see through there a photograph of the EPG being received by the Queen. Now because of the jobs I've done, I've met the Queen and been in Buckingham Palace lots of times over the years; but for most of my colleagues it was the most exciting thing that could have happened. And there's nothing wrong with that. The Queen works hard at Commonwealth issues, always has done.

SO: Sir Malcolm, thank you very much indeed.

MR: Not at all.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]