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Key

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

JS: Jon Sheppard (Respondent)

SO: Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Jon Sheppard in Canberra on Tuesday, 25 March 2014. Jon, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to us for the Commonwealth Oral History project. I wondered if you could begin by saying, please, how did you come to be Director of Political Affairs Division at the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1996?

JS: Thanks, Dr Onslow. I was a good friend of the then incumbent in that position, Max Gaylard. He and I had talked previously about it and he had told me that he had very much enjoyed the work and the job. I also knew Hugh Craft who had done exactly the same and had painted a very positive picture of that job as well. So, over some time I kept my eye out for when it would become vacant. It was advertised when I was in Jordan as Australian Ambassador and I thought "Well, maybe this would be my chance to apply for that position" and I did. There were questions about - I think you raised it yourself at the Witness Seminar - why do Australians always get that job? Well, they don't really and in my experience there was quite a wide field of applicants. I had to go through first an internal process of within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, so that they could decide which of the number of candidates they would sponsor. I was successful in that and I was put forward as the candidate with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gareth Evans' backing. I then went to London and was interviewed for the position. I certainly know that there were a number of other applicants, some internal Secretariat applicants as well as external. It was interesting in a way, Sue, I was in a job, so I didn't have a lot of time to spend in London. I went there - I think it was a day and a half - I met with Max and a couple of other people I knew. I had my interview and then I said "Right. That's it. Next morning I'm out of here on the plane" and off I went back to Australia. I got home to Canberra and the first thing my wife said to me was "Oh, you had a phone call from London and it was Mr Srinivasan and he wanted to talk to you". I said "Oh, okay". I rang him back and he said "Where are you?" I said "Oh, back in Canberra". He said "But you've got the job". I said "Oh, right. When do you want me back?"

SO: 'Be back by Monday!' stuff?

JS: Not quite, but, of course, we then talked about a suitable occasion and timing and everything, but that was kind of fun.

SO: It would've been.

JS: I didn't expect to get the job, as there was a strong field and it had always been building up this idea that, you know, the Australians think they've got this job.

SO: Well there is quite a list of you Australians as Directors of International Affairs/Political Affairs Division.

JS: Three.

SO: Three, yes. Hugh Craft, Max Gaylard, and yourself.

JS: Or four.

SO: Four?

JS: Yes, with Matthew (Neuhaus). Yes, but I believe the Canadians always went for the Deputy Secretary General of the CFTC level job for many years. Britain considered that they prefer to have one or two people at senior levels of the organisation. For a while they had a Deputy Secretary General as well. They could never nominate for the Secretary General, because of the location of the Secretariat. These are the ABC countries who are most active, both financially and politically in supporting the Commonwealth and I don't think it's inappropriate that they should have people at key positions in the Secretariat. Other countries, like India and South Africa have been invited many times to put forward people and haven't really done so up until recently.

SO: Well, let's see. Kris Srinivasan is after all an Indian, who was appointment in 1995. Amitav Banerji a longstanding Indian diplomat who has served at the Secretariat since 1990; I think it's when he first joined the Secretariat – he is still there, of course, now as Head of Political Affairs. Also, Moni Malhoutra...

JS: That's true.

SO: So, these are indications of value attached to the Commonwealth by India?

JS: I think a lot of those people got there at their own initiative from India, more than as a result of their government saying "Right, we want somebody competent and senior in the Secretariat".

SO: So how much importance did your government, at the time, attach to the Commonwealth as an entity, as an institution?

JS: Perhaps not as much as we would have wanted it to. When it comes to multilateral diplomacy, I think the Australian government tends to look

towards New York, Geneva, more than London. There's a certain feeling there that the Commonwealth is Britain's baby and...

SO: Is there?

JS: Oh, I think so.

SO: And with that, comes an implicit assumption that Britain will help drive whatever Commonwealth agenda is there, even though it's not 'the British Commonwealth'?

JS: No, it's not the British Commonwealth, but what brings all those countries together in the first place and where is it located? So, you know, I do think that Australia values the Commonwealth in both the political and economic development fields, but they don't consider themselves a leading act. Well, they do to some extent, yes, but...

SO: Yes, as you've just said 'the ABC countries'.

JS: Yes, they do, but nevertheless, I think they consider "the" leading act is the UK and I suspect the UK thinks the same.

SO: I would say the British Government is quite conflicted about the Commonwealth.

JS: Yes, but if you look deeply... You have the Queen, of course. She's the Head of the Commonwealth.

SO: Indeed, the Head of the Commonwealth is the Monarch. She "happens" to be the Queen of the United Kingdom, the Queen of Canada and still the Queen of Australia, although, of course, you had your referendum in 1999 and there is still a Republican sentiment in this country. This question of individual national attitudes towards the Commonwealth, I think, is very interesting in considering the view of the possibilities and the policy space that the Commonwealth provides. I know that the Conservative government of John Major was thought to be more consensual and collaborative with the Commonwealth after the tensions between the Thatcher government and the Commonwealth, particularly over Southern Africa and Apartheid South Africa; but by 1997 with the arrival of the Labour government under Tony Blair, that the Commonwealth was not necessarily top of their list of international entities and organisations.

JS: No, the EU was.

SO: Exactly. Then at the time of your arrival at the Secretariat in 1996 your government had a certain value and attachment to the Commonwealth, although it was not top priority. When you arrived in April 1996, there that was around the beginning of Chief Emeka's second term as Secretary General; and also very shortly after the seminal Heads of Government meeting in Auckland at the end of 1995 and the Millbrook Declaration, which set up the CMAG. How involved were you in helping to set up the structure and framework of CMAG?

JS: The CMAG meeting followed my arrival by about three days and, of course, I couldn't participate in a meaningful way, I was just an observer at that stage. But, yes, they were feeling their way, obviously, and there was quite a lot of excitement about the CMAG, because there was a feeling that finally some teeth had been put in the Commonwealth structure and that was true and it worked out that way, which was good.

SO: Yes. So, at that particular point it would have been New Zealand's Foreign Minister Don McKinnon?

JS: Yes, Don McKinnon was a member. Zimbabwe's Stan Mudenge was chair.

SO: Yes. Britain was a member as well?

JS: Yes. I think Claire Short used to come along occasionally representing the UK.

SO: So, after that particular meeting, did you attend all other meetings of CMAG?

JS: Yes, every one, during the time I was there. CMAG started with a large degree of enthusiasm and promise. However, it soon became apparent that the Ministers were reluctant to delve too deeply into the 'internal affairs' of fellow Commonwealth countries. Zimbabwe is a case in point. As long as Zimbabwe was a member of CMAG, it was very difficult to put that country under the CMAG spotlight. And of course some of CMAG's members were the prime offenders.

SO: Nigeria was the critical issue from CMAG's inception in late 1995. How far did you feel that Chief Emeka, as a Nigerian and a former Foreign Minister of a previous Nigerian government, in fact was in a delicate position?

JS: He was and there was some talk that if Nigeria failed to meet the required standards, then Nigeria would be ousted and all Nigerians in the Secretariat would have to leave their positions; that was a very interesting undercurrent. It didn't happen in the end, but the other side of that coin is that the Secretary General, the Chief, was very keen to democratise Nigeria to get rid of the military rulers and to return to democratic rule. He certainly put a lot of pressure on for Nigeria to be top of the agenda. I think I mentioned the other day at the seminar that I spent a lot of time in Nigeria at various occasions. I went through regional, local government, parliamentary and presidential elections leading the Secretariat team in Commonwealth observer groups and I got to see a lot of Nigeria. And it worked. It was a success story.

SO: That was after the death of General Sani Abacha.

JS: Yes after Abacha had passed away – in dubious circumstances – but right, yes, and then you had this incredible man, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, was a military leader who wanted to return to democracy and he was the one that set in motion all these elections that I just mentioned. A couple of years later he and I were in Zimbabwe together for the electoral observation there.

He was not an Abacha man at all; he was, in fact, in some danger in his position because of his opposition, or his failure to enthusiastically support and whatever; so when Abacha suddenly passed away and he'd come in, that was it. That was the turning point and everything flowed from that.

SO: On your involvement in COGs, Commonwealth Observer Groups: there was by then an established modus operandi: setting up a particular team, going down and assessing various aspects of the election organisation, pre-issue of the electoral roll, liaising with the Election Commission, etc. How far, though, was the Commonwealth really a minor part of election observation at that particular point, because surely the Commonwealth hadn't got the funds of the Carter Foundation, or other international observer groups?

JS: It wasn't an established procedure when I got there. It was something that we worked out. I mentioned before that I participated in about thirteen of them and as did a colleague in the PAD (Political Affairs Division), who deserves a lot of the credit for the way these things worked; and that's Chris Child, he's British. I'm not sure where he's moved onto now, but he was a very good organiser and he knew what had to be done. We worked out how these things would operate.

SO: Did you draw upon the earlier Malaysian election observer mission at the beginning of the 90s, and the Commonwealth observer mission in South Africa in 94?

JS: Oh, yes. To some extent, yes.

SO: This was not 'tabula rasa' in terms of Commonwealth procedure?

JS: Not entirely. These things always develop over time, but by the mid-point we had a model worked out and that model seemed to work effectively; it probably evolved in Nigeria and was transported to just about everywhere.

SO: Yes. So, you established that you needed, obviously, as many Commonwealth observers as possible, drawing upon the particular pool of expertise within the Secretariat. Were you looking outside as well?

JS: Well, you really looked outside to start with and you tried to find people who had the relevant experience. I'm not sure what's happened since I left. I'm not sure if it's working as well, I really don't know. The problem that did occur at times for us was that we didn't have a big enough pool to draw on. We kept getting the same people again and again; "Oh, so and so who is the Chief Electoral Officer in x country? He did a great job last time. Let's get him again" and we should have looked more widely. I suspect that's become even more the case. You've got these people who are almost professional Commonwealth observers.

SO: Is that a problem?

JS: Yes.

SO: Why would that be a problem?

JS Well, you're trying to help and educate the people who are the observer group as well. You're trying to instil in them the principles.

SO: Ah! So it's precisely so that there will be a cross fertilisation of good electoral practice, to carry it back to their own country?

JS: Yes. Indeed. One good example of that. We had a very good Ghanaian Head of the Electoral Commission there, and we had him a couple of times as an observer and we also then supported the Ghanaian Electoral Commission and its development and everything meshed very well there. That was the sort of thing we were hoping to achieve as, if you like, a side effect of the observer missions, I suppose.

SO: But a very important one?

JS: Yes. The other point: observing elections is only a very small part and we kept trying to say this. It's only a small part of the democratisation process and what goes on before the elections and after the elections in the institutions that are developed are equally, if not more, important. We'd had some very unsuccessful observers who would just go out and say "Oh, everything's fine. Look they're all lining up and voting and there's nothing going wrong. So it's fine". Of course, you say "Yes, but who was on the electoral roll and were those people intimidated in the weeks leading up to the election?" and so on. And "Oh, we didn't see that, so we have to give it a tick". We had some interesting battles in Zimbabwe in 2002 I can tell you, with people who were convinced everything was above board. "Didn't see that, no. No, it looked alright to me".

SO: You're joking?

JS: Yes, also "And nobody complained to me. Anyway, these opposition people are a bunch of rat bags."

SO: So, you contributed, or you oversaw, thirteen Commonwealth observer groups?

JS: I led the Secretariat team to be accurate, yes, and supported the people who the headquarters unit led by, for instance in Zimbabwe, by General Abubakar. Of course, the Secretariat has to draft the reports and then you meet around a long table or a number of tables and you discuss it and thrash it out with the observers.

SO: How contentious was your 2002 report on the Zimbabwe election?

JS: Very. Yes.

SO: In its drafting? As well as its impact?

JS: I went to Zimbabwe with Don McKinnon (as Secretary General) in 2000 and we went to see Robert Mugabe and had a very interesting interview with him.

SO: In what way?

JS: Well, it was the first time I had met face to face with him. He and Don didn't, obviously, get along too well, but then who could with Mugabe? But we weren't able to persuade them to change their tactics for the coming election, but nevertheless they did accept a COG.

SO: Was your visit to Zimbabwe before the 2000 Parliamentary election on the Constitution?

JS: Let me think. The Referendum, I think, had already taken place.

SO: Let's see: the National Constitutional Assembly had established itself in 1999; the referendum on the constitution was held in February 2000, and then the Parliamentary elections in June. That was the first demonstration of opposition to what ZANU-PF was trying to do and then, obviously, the next election was the 2002 Presidential poll.

JS: You see, the sequence of events is interesting in that the MDC, if they had really thought this out carefully, wouldn't have opposed the Referendum on the Constitutional change. They would have allowed that to go through and saved their ammunition for the Parliamentary Election, which they would have won; but the sequence was wrong and the calculation was wrong. By the time the Parliamentary Election came about, ZANU-PF had decided that they were pulling out all stops and it was nasty. The COG Report referred to violence and intimidation, but it didn't specifically say that that had prevented a result that reflected the will of the people. Some of us thought it clearly did and some didn't, so you had to choose wording that was ambiguous.

SO: Was there a particular African national divide versus the rest of the Commonwealth at that particular point?

JS: I don't think there was ever an African divide. No. I think there were Africans who certainly felt that this was all going wrong and that the Commonwealth should say so and there were Africans who disagreed.

SO: Was this a SADC aspect to all of this?

JS: No. It didn't depend on regionalism. No.

SO: Okay. That's an interesting point to register.

JS: But it was all going in the one direction then and it was pretty clear to most impartial observers that the election had been fraudulent. There were problems with the electoral roll, there were problems with the counting, the tabulation and, of course, there was this massive intimidation, particularly in rural areas. But when we got back and the CMAG was convened. CMAG was interested, but no action was going to be taken. We knew the 2002 election was coming up and thought "Well, that's the one that really counts" because that's the Presidential Election and based on 2000...? Well, we all thought the MDC had won the 2000 election and at the time we said "Well, they're voting, you know. There's all of this happening. Just wait for the announcement, it's going to be interesting and keep an eye out the window and see if there's tanks in the streets", because we also knew that Mugabe would never

concede; those of us who knew Zimbabwe and the regime. Mugabe liked elections. He wanted to be portrayed as a democratically elected leader.

SO: Legitimacy, yes.

JS: But, the elections were all rigged. So when 2002 came about the same thing happened again. More people were willing to say "This has gone too far" and we had the most energised meeting of the observers, I think I ever saw. Some were adamant that Zimbabwe had to be condemned and yet there were a few - and I won't mention who - who were saying that it was all MDC's fault and they had created these conditions of violence and intimidation and they were intimidating voters. Some of it was laughable, but apologists exist for any regime; however, anyway because, at that stage as well, because we hadn't condemned it in 2000, there were many who felt (and people in the media) that the Commonwealth was a toothless tiger, and this was a real test for the Commonwealth. I think the reason that we succeeded in condemning the Mugabe regime for its conduct on that occasion, was that if we had failed to, the consequences of failure would have been equally as severe as the consequences of having taken a positive step. So, we had some interesting observers and Kevin Rudd was one of them. And so was Julie Bishop. Julie wasn't present for the wrap up, she'd had to leave early.

So this, I think, was a crisis point for the Commonwealth. I think it was perceived as such and the expectation was that the Commonwealth would sweep it under the table, as it most often did. That the Commonwealth wouldn't take stern action, particularly in Africa against an African member country. We had as our leader of the group, General Abubakar, whose democratic credentials were very impressive, in my view, and he saw it that way too in the end. Some of the observers were quite adamant that we had to tell the truth and call a spade a spade and when we did it at first, because we were under great pressure to say something quickly, - a Commonwealth observer report is about a quarter of an inch thick and it's pretty dry - so we decided to issue an interim report. We met in the Meikles Hotel in Harare and there was quite a turn up of the media. The interim statement quite clearly said that there was a high level of politically motivated violence and intimidation, and that most acts had been perpetrated by members and supporters of the ruling party against members and supporters of the opposition MDC. It also said that the police, very often, did not intervene in acts against the MDC, concluding conditions in Zimbabwe did not adequately allow for a free expression of will by the electors. Despite the diplomatic language that was a condemnation of the regime. I remember the surprise and startled looks from some of the media, as though "My God, the Commonwealth's actually saying something meaningful" and, yes, that was it; and that led to, ultimately, Zimbabwe leaving the Commonwealth.

SO: How much energetic support were you also getting from the SG, Don McKinnon at this particular point?

JS: He was waiting in London to hear from us. He was very interested, of course, and, I believe, as I recall, he must have had some media contacts of his own at the time. I called him the same evening and we sent that report, the interim statement, to him. So, I think, Don was also quite conscious that this was a test for the Commonwealth and a test that if had failed... just think! If we had

failed to state the obvious, what had happened, and it was a close run thing; I think people would have walked away from the Commonwealth saying "Why are we bothering with this organisation?"

SO: I've got in my Commonwealth chronology: 19 March 2002 after the Commonwealth Election Observer's report that Zimbabwe's Presidential Election was rife with fraud and intimidation, the Troika, led by John Howard, announces Zimbabwe's immediate suspension from the Commonwealth. However, this is obviously not right, as you said that you issued this interim report and then when...

JS: The Troika suspended Zimbabwe from the Councils of the Commonwealth, which is not quite the same thing; but it's a step in that direction. I think, personally, that John Howard played an important role there. If he hadn't been prepared to take the lead... he was Chairman of the Troika, again, the Commonwealth would have been seen as a paper tiger and he saw that, I'm sure. I think he recognised that it was imperative for the future of the Commonwealth that something happened and, you know very well that the Commonwealth is seen as a sort of a toothless tiger in many ways, so some of us strongly felt that we just had to do something. He, I think, led the charge on that.

SO: So, how far were you aware that there was close liaison between Marlborough House and John Howard on this?

JS: I wasn't involved if that was the case.

SO: So if there was, this would have been the SGs office, rather than Political Affairs?

JS: See, there's always this bit of a problem that there's a gap between the SGs office and the PAD in what was happening. To a certain extent, the Secretary General's office likes to take hold of anything interesting, without putting PAD fully in the picture.

SO: So, to what extent were you an interested observer or actively involved with the events between 2002 and 2003, when Mugabe left the Commonwealth heads meeting in Abuja?

JS: I wasn't. I left the Secretariat towards the end of 2002. I missed the final act of this drama, unfortunately. I was taking a break in England at the time, but I was heading back to Canberra, yes.

SO: I know that you went on to be Ambassador in Zimbabwe.

JS: Right, yes. That was fun, because I never thought that they would accept me. They knew who I was. They knew the role I played.

SO: Were you surprised to be nominated for that particular post by DFAIT?

JS: I was delighted. I've been a Southern African specialist in my diplomatic career and I knew that Zimbabwe was the sort of posting that would suit me,

so a bit like the job in the Secretariat: I kept my eyes open. In the Australian Foreign Service they advertise positions and you have to apply for them.

SO: Same as the UK.

JS: Right. It didn't used to happen that way, but now it does. Anyway, so I thought, "Right. Who knows Zimbabwe better than I? I've trod every square mile of it, just about and I know all the people". So I said "It would make good sense". So I put in an application and I added to the application that "if you really want to get up Mugabe's nose, you'll send me".

SO: As leader of the awkward squad!

JS: I think this appealed to the (appointments panel). I never really had feedback on it, but I know what the then-Minister's like and it would've appealed to him. So, yes, they said, "Right. We'll send Sheppard" and in went the request for agreement. That took six months and half way through, I said "No, that's it. I better start applying for other jobs because they haven't forgotten me", but eventually it came through. I went in the middle of 2004.

SO: Goodness, in time to witness the extended ZANU-PF reaction to the 2002 poll and for the run up to the next batch of contested elections?

JS: Yes. Well, I suppose, yes. I observed the next batch in a different capacity.

SO: I've read Philip Barclay's book on Zimbabwe, which is really a damning indictment. He was, I think, First Secretary in the British Embassy at that point as Zimbabwe had withdrawn from the Commonwealth. His account is an eye opener. He was posted there in 2006 and his book covers the election period 2006/2007 and the immediate aftermath. He makes exactly the point that you've referred to about the conditioning factor of violence and then the peace around the actual polling time; and then the appalling retributive violence thereafter.

JS: Operation Murambatsvina. 'Throw out the rubbish.'

SO: You were there for that?

JS: Oh, yes.

SO: So, did you liaise with the UN envoy Anna Tibaijuka, who came in on a fact-finding mission on Murambatsvina?

JS: No. I didn't. I don't know anything about that.

SO: Her highly critical report was published in August 2005. Were you monitoring how many people were displaced in Operation Murambatsvina quite carefully?

JS: Absolutely. I drove through the areas of Harare that had been flattened. I went out to the countryside where these people were supposed to be relocated. I talked to people.

SO: Where there was nothing.

JS: Well, no there wasn't anything. They just tossed them out. 'If Harare voted against Mugabe, we'd fix that. We'll get rid of those people. Kick them out of Harare.'

SO: Did the Commonwealth former High Commissioners, now Ambassadors, still act as a communal group in Harare?

JS: Yes. We used to meet quite regularly.

SO: Yes, to pool information?

JS: Look, it was more a discussion group than anything. The people who could provide information were maybe three or four, and the others never said anything. They just listened, but we all got along very well.

SO: Did you liaise with the American Ambassador too?

JS: Yes.

SO: I know that Matthew Neuhaus has done this, so I just wondered the extent to which that there's established practice between Australian High Commissioners and the American Embassy.

JS: Chris Dell was the American Ambassador in my time. He left just about the time that I did. Yeah, we liaised very closely. They had much better resources, of course, than we did. The Australian Government, in its wisdom, at the time had scaled back the Australian representation in Zimbabwe in the mistaken belief that now that Zimbabwe was out of the Commonwealth, there wouldn't be as much going on in relation to Zimbabwe as before. So we were cut back down to the bone. Of course, that wasn't the case at all. In fact there was almost more going on, if not an equal amount going on and it was quite difficult in that respect.

SO: Jon, if I could take you back to other events that preoccupied you as Head of PAD. Issues of issues of Hong Kong, leading up to reversion to the PRC in July 1999. Not on your radar? Fine. I'll come onto the question of CHOGMs later; but there's the Papua New Guinea peace of January 1998?

JS: That's it. That's the one I was referring to.

SO: That was the one that you were referring to, that Chief Emeka was encouraged by the Australians to use his good offices to ensure that there wasn't a military coup?

JS: And he did. Yes, that was a very enlightening experience for me. We were on that visit as I mentioned, to Australia, the where he was Guest of Government and in Canberra when this crisis emerged, where it looked like the military was about to seize power in Papua New Guinea and so the Australian Government thought "Well, here's somebody with experience of military government and what a bad thing it is. Why don't we ask him if he could go

up and have a word to these people and try and talk them out of it and, oh, by the way we'll fly you up there in a RAAF aircraft and that should help". Chief said, "Well, thank you. I'm very happy to try and use this good offices. I won't arrive in an Australian aircraft", but what we ended up doing was flying up to Cairns and picking up a charter flight from there. Now, I'm afraid my memory of the names of the people we saw is a little rusty, but we did see the Chief of the Defence Forces in PNG. Of course, we saw the Prime Minister and we saw a rather bellicose middle ranking officer who was thought to be the leader of the radicals. We had to drive in the barracks there with large crowds of people swirling around noisily and soldiers with guns standing all over the place. We went in there and we met with this group of officers and the Chief said (the Chief was very calm) "Well, you know, Major, you must think very carefully before you take any such step and think what you're going to do afterwards. How will you rule a country or take control of the government? Do you know what to do? Nobody likes a military takeover, and the history of military takeovers is such that they aren't successful in the long run". Anyway, and he said "Believe me, Major, I've been directly involved and I've seen it many times".

SO: Which was true!

JS: It's very true. And I think this did make them think and I think they stepped back because Papua New Guinea is prepared to listen to Africa. It wasn't Australia telling them this; it was a distinguished African, who had direct experience. We then went and saw the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Governor General, everybody, up there and they appreciated the Secretary General's role, but strangely there was never a word said in Australia. It might as well not have happened.

SO: How do you account for that?

JS: I don't really, you'd have to ask... maybe you could ask some of the politicians at the time. But clearly they didn't think it was significant.

SO: They didn't think it was significant, or there was perhaps a resistance to give credit, because this was Australia's patch? I don't know.

JS: Partly. Yes, I think all of that, but you raised before the question of, why didn't the Secretariat say something more? Chief Anyaoku would have said "No, no, no, no. Good offices has to be handled quietly with kid gloves and the effectiveness depends on confidentiality". That was his line. So he didn't put out a press release saying "I've just visited Papua New Guinea and diffused the situation. Hooray for me!" He thought that his role would be appreciated and understood by governments. The Chief never really thought too much of the public. After all, he was the Chief and he knew what he was doing! He thought governments knew what he was doing and that was sufficient and that was an example of it. But I personally would have thought a little more generosity of spirit wouldn't have gone amiss. Maybe I'm misunderstanding the situation and, of course, I was directly there on the ground, so maybe I got a false impression of the role that we played. I'm not sure. Anything's possible.

- SO:** This is the problem of being the emissary who, in fact, helps behind closed doors, to assist people to reach an accommodation, and a realisation that perhaps a chosen path is not the most appropriate. Therefore if you don't wish to rub their faces in it, and you want it to go on being effective and to maintain the possibility of going back in there and negotiating again, you must remain ultra discreet.
- JS: It's a balancing act, isn't it?
- SO:** It is indeed. So, also eighteen months later, there was the coup in Pakistan. October 1999.
- JS: I was going say, which coup?
- SO:** Well. Indeed. Six days later 'the Commonwealth's Ministerial Action Group suspends Pakistan from the Councils of the Commonwealth'.
- JS: And, there again, you had people who were Pakistani nationals in the Commonwealth thinking that their jobs were going to go, but that didn't happen either. I didn't have much to do with that particular action. I remember when Musharraf came to London subsequently and met with the Secretary General. People didn't want to force Pakistan out of the Commonwealth. It wasn't quite the same thing.
- SO:** Was this because it was a nuclear power by this point?
- JS: No, it was because, I think, Pakistan's a significant player and, I think, you're always conscious that, you know – do you keep the people in the tent or boot them out? And there was a strong feeling that more influence could be exerted by keeping them in the tent and that was the case with Pakistan. It wasn't the case with Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe was considered to be beyond the pale. It had gone too far. But this wasn't the first military regime to rule in Pakistan. It was almost back to the normal state of affairs, so a *modus vivendi* was required.
- SO:** So, were you involved, at all, in the attempts to maintain any sort of links with the Musharraf government?
- JS: No, not really. I wasn't.
- SO:** So, then working through the military coups, then: of course there had been the Fijian incident in 2000 and then the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group; in 2001 lifted Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth, but kept it on the agenda.
- JS: A balancing act. Yes. Don McKinnon very much wanted to keep his hands on the situation in Fiji and, I think, again quite a few people, and I consider myself one, didn't want to drive Fiji out of the Commonwealth. We wanted to find some way of keeping in touch, because Fiji had, traditionally, been a very strong supporter and while we regretted the turn of events there, we felt it wasn't beyond redemption. I suspect that's the case right now. I detect a certain amount of gratification that Bainimarama has stepped aside, so to speak, and that provides a way to start bringing Fiji back. I think a lot of

people want to help Fiji. I would be one. I've lived in Fiji for a number of years. I know the people quite well.

SO: When I lived there in the late 1970s, I was consistently struck by the warmth of feeling towards the United Kingdom, towards the whole Commonwealth world - or the wider world that Fiji could be part of, that is Commonwealth. The importance of the Commonwealth ideal, in the Fijian political psyche then. As Denis Blight remarked yesterday, that use of 'the Commonwealth' in its broadest sense. If I could ask you please; I mentioned Hong Kong. In 1999 Hong Kong reverted to People's Republic of China's sovereignty, but continued participation in the Commonwealth Lawyer's Association, The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Commonwealth Association of Legislative Counsels. Were you involved in any way?

JS: Not in the least. No, never an issue for us in the Political Affairs Division.

SO: Jon, if I could ask you please about CHOGMs? You, of course, assisted in the organisation of these heads' meetings, and attended a number of CHOGMS.

JS: Yes, I was the Official Secretary for the Edinburgh, Durban and CooLum. Edinburgh 1997 was my first experience. I was very new to the job at that stage. I think it was a CHOGM that worked well.

SO: Yes, but how much commitment to the Commonwealth, and understanding of the Commonwealth ideal did you observe in the Blair government?

JS: I never thought that Tony Blair was a Commonwealth man.

SO: Because it was ' Europe and the Special Relationship'?

JS: Yes, it was all Europe. One of the things that used to irritate the hell out of most ComSec people was arriving in London at Heathrow and finding there was this huge queue of people from everywhere, shall we say, and we had to join the end of it and there off to the side was EU citizens and they were just walking straight through. We thought "Well, that is a reflection of the relative value that the UK government accords to the EU and the Commonwealth" and I probably still think that's the case. The Commonwealth is convenient, but it's yesterday's child and the EU is far more important.

SO: Well, immigration is a very hot political potato in the UK at the moment, as it is here in Australia.

JS: Yes, I'm not trivialising it, I hope, but I thought that that probably was an indicator of how the then government regarded it. The EU was far more important. And it is, it's true. At that time and probably now, 'Europe' is still a bigger drama than the Commonwealth is, I'm sure it is.

SO: Stuart Mole in his interview talked about the dynamics, and the choreography of the Edinburgh meeting; he also reflected that Blair and his team didn't understand the Commonwealth.

JS: Stuart would know more than I on that. I recall they said all the right things and they did all the right things, but there was never any passion in it. There was never any depth of commitment, no.

SO: So, it was a case of 'going through the motions'? Okay. How about Durban 1999?

JS: By that stage I was more involved and Durban was an interesting occasion. This and the visits that led to the Durban CHOGM brought home to me the fact that South Africa wasn't all that keen on the Commonwealth either.

SO: So there was no sense of a residue of gratitude of the Commonwealth's contribution to the ending of apartheid?

JS: No. It didn't exist. Didn't happen.

SO: So it didn't fit a victory narrative by the ANC?

JS: I was with Chief when we visited South Africa to talk to Nelson Mandela about the possibility of hosting the Commonwealth heads' meeting. We had a great visit and when we were talking to them, Mandela was... well, he was Mandela.

SO: What do you mean by that?

JS: Well, he was gracious in every respect. He was a very empathetic man, but at this key point he said to the Chief "Well, you know, why do you want us to hold the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting?" and Chief said "Well, you know, it would be very appropriate. The Commonwealth has played such a role..."

SO: And the Chief had played such a role too.

JS: Yes, and my colleague Max, Moses and others had been very active, but Mandela didn't seem to be across that. But he said "Well"... and then one of his advisors said to him "Oh, we've got the OAU. We got all the SADC, as well. Now the Commonwealth wants a meeting here. Everybody wants to come to South Africa!" and so Mandela said "Well, I'm told it would be very difficult for us to host this meeting" and the Chief said "Ah, but Madiba, you really must do this. It's important to the Commonwealth" and Mandela shook his head and said "No. No. I hope you don't insist upon this, Chief" and the Chief said "But, Madiba, I DO insist". *[Laughter]*. And he raised his eyebrows and he said "Very well, if you insist then we will, of course, be delighted to do this".

SO: That's interesting because so much attention is focussed on the role of Madiba in Auckland, in 1995; his moral outrage at Abacha ordering the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa; Madiba coming to Edinburgh, and the

photo opportunity of Tony Blair and Nelson Mandela; and yet a resistance.

JS: They were reluctant hosts and they didn't see... they didn't put the Commonwealth in a different category from any of the other organisations, and to be fair at that time for everybody, South Africa was the flavour of the month. Everybody wanted to go there and experience the new South Africa and they were probably a bit wary of it.

SO: And it's expensive for the South Africans as hosts?

JS: Expensive for them, yes. We then got onto the details, but it was entirely clear that they, and particularly the officials advising Mandela, didn't feel that the Commonwealth warranted special treatment.

SO: So, you didn't feel that you had a natural recruit in Thabo Mbeki? He had been Mandela's foreign policy adviser, and at that point was effectively running the cabinet with Madiba as a figurehead; and he was eventually designated as Mandela's successor?

JS: No. We subsequently had talks with Mbeki, but at that point, no, it was all Mandela.

SO: 1999 is also the next South African election, and Mandela had stepped down as ANC President.

JS: I think you're right. I went to that election. We had a Commonwealth observer group. Which we also had to insist on. The first post-independence and they didn't particularly want us.

SO: Was it a case of 'We know what to do' by then?

JS: I think they were possibly right. That there was no need for an observer mission. The elections were held. A free and fair election and there was no question of... however, maybe the Secretary General and others wanted to put their stamp of approval down firmly on the electoral processes and so it happened.

SO: Thabo Mbeki became the first Chairperson in Office at that Durban meeting. Did you have a particular view on the creation of that role?

JS: No. I don't think there was very much in it. It was only when John Howard came into that position that they ever actually did anything, as far as I'm aware. I can't think of any other occasion in which they acted.

SO: The next CHOGM, of course, was due for 28 September 2001.

JS: In Brisbane. It was going ahead for Brisbane and I remember I was actually there in the preparatory role when it occurred. I was in London for 9/11. I watched it happen on live TV, yes, in the Secretariat and we watched that.

SO: It must have been a total sense of shock.

- JS: We thought it was a game changer. The world will never be the same and it was quite clear, like everybody else, we couldn't quite comprehend it as it was happening; but it was quite clear that this was the dawn of a new era.
- SO: How quickly do you think Don McKinnon realised, the need to delay the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting? Or was he responsive to Heads' attitudes on this rather than driving and shaping decision-making?**
- JS: No, we went ahead on the assumption that it was going to take place as planned and it was only when we – myself and a couple of colleagues – got to Australia and we started inspecting facilities. I remember, we were on the south bank of the Brisbane River, where the conference centre was, and somebody came running up to me and said “the Prime Minister wants to see you”. “Oh, really. When? Where?”. “Now”. “Okay” and we sent up to the conference building and there was John Howard. He said “I'm terribly sorry, but we're going to have to change plans. We can't handle the security issues that will arise from having such a meeting in Brisbane at this time. We're happy to hold the meeting, but it'll have to be delayed and we may have to look at a new venue” and so it was. We shifted up to where the retreat was going to have been held all along and that became the venue for the Heads of Government formal meeting as well. It went quite well in the end.
- SO: At Coolum?**
- JS: Yes, Coolum. That was the reaction and I think people were mainly concerned with the security aspects. It was a tense time everywhere and nobody knew quite what was going on, so rather than risk having such a meeting in a major city in Australia, they preferred to go to a place that they could button up more carefully.
- SO: In terms of how you at the Secretariat also responded to this: you've commented on the immediate sense that 9/11 had been a game changer in the international system; did international terrorism ratchet up your areas of focus and priority?**
- JS: No, it didn't. We recognised that priorities would be changing, but, I think in my remarks the other day, I said that the Commonwealth didn't really play a role on the global stage. It played a role more on specific and more localised stages and terrorism is certainly a global issue, so we didn't play a part in that. It didn't affect our plans to continue the growth of democracy in Commonwealth countries. It was happening in parallel to what we did and we didn't change our modus operandi by anything at all, as far as I can remember.
- SO: Jon, in your time at the Secretariat as well as your role as Australian Ambassador in Zimbabwe, do you feel that the Commonwealth had a role as an autonomous diplomatic actor? Or is that a little too strong a label for Commonwealth activities by the SG and the international organisation that supported him at Marlborough House?**
- JS: Well, the short answer is, yes. The Commonwealth did have a role and it all depends how much they chose to operate within that. Secretary General

Anyaoku was very much a believer in quiet diplomacy, behind the scenes activity, and he felt that was the most effective way for the Commonwealth to act. He may have been right and he had some successes in that. I think Don McKinnon was more inclined to take a public role. He certainly increased his activities with the media.

SO: As a product of being a politician, and a former Foreign Minister?

JS: Chief hated the media and avoided them. Don McKinnon loved the media, sought them out. So there was quite a difference in that respect. The trouble for Don was that the media had got used to the Commonwealth being a quiet behind-the-scenes actor and didn't really think they were doing anything anyway and weren't really persuaded otherwise. So he must have found it a little bit frustrating. And then again, you've also got the fact of governments not really wanting the Commonwealth to stand up and make a splash publicly.

SO: Because of this question of 'What is the SG? Is he a Foreign Minister? Is he a Senior High Commissioner?'

JS: If you want a multi-lateral diplomat to make a statement, then you look to the UN.

SO: THE international organisation, where there's a Secretary General.

JS: Yes. And, of course, there was always this undercurrent of jealousy from the Secretary General's office to what the UN was able to achieve in terms of profile.

SO: But it could be said that the Commonwealth doesn't have the problem of the veto and the P5.

JS: It doesn't have a role in security issues either.

SO: No. As you mentioned yesterday, it does not deal with the big issues of disarmament or security.

JS: That's right. Well what's going on in Europe now (on the Ukraine)? Well, I imagine the Commonwealth is sitting there doing nothing. Just what can they do? It's not in their mandate.

SO: This involves the UNO, NATO and the European Union.

JS: European Union, there you go. And, as you said, in international terrorism, there's nothing there. There was an attempt at one stage (now my memory isn't that good but), Don McKinnon wanted to get something going within the Commonwealth on international terrorism.

SO: I've got a little note here on Commonwealth and international terrorism October 2000. McKinnon became Secretary General in April 2000.

JS: I'm referring to after 9/11 when he thought that the Commonwealth ought to play a role, but it was rather ill-defined what he wanted it to do. I think in the end he was told to butt out; it was nothing to do with the Commonwealth. That

might be worth following up with the British and maybe Australia and Canada and see what their recollection of that is, or even New Zealand, or even Don McKinnon. Don would know.

It never got very far. It was all very nebulous, but there was a feeling, by Don (and he wanted the Commonwealth to be an actor in these major issues), but I don't think the governments wanted the Commonwealth to do so... new roles. This happened on a number of issues; human rights was one as we were talking about yesterday, Governments didn't want the Commonwealth to be an active human rights role. Some people, like our favourite Prime Minister, may have felt that this was an area in which the Commonwealth should be active, but the bulk of the Commonwealth member governments said "No, we've got enough trouble with this Human Rights Commission in Geneva".

SO: And 'we are the elected governments. We have the mandate from the people and so why should an unelected association lecture us?' There's a sense of sensitivity on domestic affairs. It is a very contentious issue; and there seems to be opening up a gap between the old Commonwealth and new Commonwealth.

JS: That's always been there in various ways. I think anything... I think it goes back to Arnold Smith, doesn't it?

SO: It does rather. So, to recap, you feel the Commonwealth does have a role on specific issues as an autonomous diplomatic actor. Was there ever any sense in Marlborough House while you were there, that the Commonwealth could help resolve intra-Commonwealth issues, such as the tension between India and Pakistan over Kashmir? I appreciate that that has been consistently been 'off limits', but I wondered if there had been any discreet probes, because by this point, 1998, both had acquired nuclear weapons.

JS: Neither India nor Pakistan wanted the Commonwealth to be involved, and that was the end of it. Because, I remember thinking much the same as you at one point, and the Chief told me absolutely, India does not want Commonwealth involvement in this. End of story.

SO: Well, I guess Britain would have taken much the same approach to a Commonwealth attempt at intervention on Northern Ireland.

JS: Yes. Did you ask Chief Anyaoku about his drive to get Ireland to become a member of the Commonwealth? He was very keen. He visited Dublin. He held talks with people. Of course, it wasn't going to happen.

SO: No. It's a particular sensitivity that Ireland would have to accept that the British Monarch is Head of the Commonwealth. And a hyper-sensitivity that the whole question of any closer relationship with Britain might compromise Irish neutrality.

JS: You see the United States could become a member too for that matter.

SO: So could Palestine.

- JS: Small qualifier... so could Jordan, and I don't know why Jordan hasn't. People are worried about adding such a contentious issue to the Commonwealth agenda.
- SO: But that was British "informal" empire, so it could be said a residue of British historic influence does run through that particular area.**
- JS: Do you know who the Chief wanted to become a member, and this will stagger you. Israel! And he talked to people about it and I said to him once "Chief, how do you think Israel would respond to observing the human rights principles of the Commonwealth". "Oh, no problem". I said "Yes, there is a very big problem and if you bring in Israel, you'd have to bring in Palestine and then what about Egypt? What about Jordan?"
- SO: Were you there when Yasser Arafat visited Marlborough House? Stuart talked about particular images of Chief with Arafat.**
- JS: No, I don't remember that. I did meet Arafat. When I was Ambassador in Jordan I was accredited to Tunisia and that was in order to liaise with the PLO who were there. That's like going off at a tangent, but there was much better rationale for any of those countries that we've mentioned being a member than there is for Rwanda. I think they've lost the plot! As far as I can see.
- SO: Rwanda joined in 2007. So were you involved in any of the negotiations for that?**
- JS: Well after my time. I don't know how they handled it.
- SO: But you were Director of Political Affairs when Cameroon joined.**
- JS: Yes, Cameroon's okay. Yes.
- SO: And also Mozambique?**
- JS: Yes. When we visited Mozambique we could hardly find anybody to talk to because they didn't speak English. My Portuguese is non-existent, but as I said, I think, in the meeting that Mozambique got in simply because Mandela wanted them in. It was at Auckland, wasn't it? Yes.
- SO: Yes, so it seems the question of regionalism was featuring strongly.**
- JS: There's an argument. Yes, they can be entirely in the struggle. Frontline State for many years, but there was also a set of criteria that were carefully worked out. There was a committee and a report on Commonwealth membership and they simply didn't meet that criteria. So, why are you going to do that if you are going to ignore it?
- SO: The Commonwealth now identifies itself very much as a small states organisation, as you've mentioned yesterday. They form the majority of the member countries that are part of the Commonwealth. You've also pointed to the Commonwealth as acting as a historic, but also going**

forward, African problem solving institution. So these are particular dimensions to the Commonwealth's work?

JS: 32 of the 54 members have qualified as small states.

SO: Exactly. What do you think this says then for the Commonwealth going forward? Its visibility? Its viability?

JS: I don't see any bright new horizons for the Commonwealth, but I don't see why it can't continue to do what it's been doing well and that is developing democratic institutions. Putting pressure on states that do not observe the Commonwealth principles, and I also said yesterday that the proof of the pudding is that those countries want to be members of the Commonwealth and they want to be seen as good international citizens. They see the Commonwealth as a vehicle.

SO: It's not because of its financial resources?

JS: Look at Fiji, for instance. Fiji definitely wants the Commonwealth stamp of approval. So does Pakistan.

SO: How important do you think the question of the Headship is? The Head. The Queen. The Monarch.

JS: For some it's very important, yes, and the Queen's personal attachment to the Commonwealth is very important too. I don't know... I wouldn't hazard a guess how that's going to evolve in years to come, but I think that's one of the binding factors for the Commonwealth at the moment. It would be a shame if that was lost.

SO: Well, how much is that tied to the institution of the Monarch, but also the persona of the Queen, who has made it Her life's work. It's very much a symbiotic relationship.

JS: Yes, it is. I think the answer is what you're hinting at, is that it's very much a question of the Queen's personal attachment and how she's encouraged the Commonwealth. Yes. I don't know too much about Prince Charles' attachment. I think it's there. I don't know if it's as strong.

SO: Because, Chief Emeka instituted the Queen's speech to Heads in 1997 in Edinburgh. This was an innovation that she had a formal role, rather than having an informal presence, with private audiences with members of the Commonwealth and those of her realms around the edge of the Heads of Government meeting. The Queen actually made a formal speech to Heads at Edinburgh for the first time. It obviously didn't leave a lasting impact on your memory.

JS: I'm waiting for the bells to start ringing, but they're not.

SO: Okay. I'll speak to Chief about that. He has commented on why he felt that it was important and I know that he's a great Monarchist.

JS: Are you sure that happened?

SO: Yes.

JS: It's not in the record.

SO: It is actually, after the institution of the Commonwealth mace. That idea came out at the beginning of the 90s; followed by the innovation of the Queen's formal address to Heads at the start of the meeting.

JS: It didn't happen again, did it?

SO: Yes.

JS: I'll have to dig out my records and have a look, but clearly it didn't make a lasting impression, I'm sorry.

SO: As a longstanding Commonwealth activist, if I can call you that, and observer, what do you rate the Commonwealth going forward then? Change and decay? Crisis? This is very much the public and press discourse coming out of the Sri Lanka meeting of last November.

JS: I have to confess that I've been living in America for the last five years and there nobody knows what the Commonwealth is and it doesn't rate a line, so I'm out of touch. I have certainly heard my colleagues talk about the decline of the Commonwealth in recent years and I think that would be a shame, but I think the Commonwealth ought to have a role. As they say in management circles "Stick to the knitting. Do what you do best" and I think that there's been too much of an inclination to try and be all things to all men. Look, I have to say again, the example of Rwanda is one of those. Just because a country wants to become a part of the Commonwealth... what happens if Zaire decides it wants to be... the DRC wants to become a member of the Commonwealth? Do we accept them?

SO: Algeria, also.

JS: Algeria.

SO: Burma and South Sudan.

JS: Burma's got a case.

SO: So does South Sudan.

JS: Yes indeed. Oh my God. And so does Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Iraq.

SO: And then it becomes the United Nations. You made that very point about the Retreat at Coolum that it was so large that the whole point of the informality and interchange between Heads was lost. Once you get into that much larger forum, it becomes a problem.

JS: That's why a group like the Troika becomes more important because it's manageable and it can take a lead. It may be not appreciated and it initially it

didn't have much of a role, because it was inactive, but it could do. Why not? You just need people in that Troika to be activists. Commonwealth activists.

SO: You also need the Troika to get on.

JS: Maybe. Politicians know how to get along when they're not getting along.

SO: True. So it's up to them to manage that question of personal chemistry and to be effective. Jon, thank you very much indeed.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]