VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad

Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
MM: Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow interviewing His Excellency, Tun Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad, in Putrajaya on Monday, 12th May 2014. Sir, thank you very much indeed for taking part in this project and giving us your valuable time. I wonder, Sir, if you could begin please by saying, what was your attitude to the Commonwealth when you became Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981?

MM: I felt it was a misnomer. The 'wealth' is not 'common' at all. It belongs to only four members and the rest are poor. So, calling it 'the Commonwealth', that is common, when obviously wealth is not common; then, I thought it was in the first place the wrong name. And to give it that name, it is, in a way, not being sincere. So, I thought I would stay away from it.

SO: Did you have a great deal of scepticism, also, because your predecessors – as you say in your memoirs – were devoted to the Commonwealth and you felt that their attachment to it was misplaced?

MM: When I became Prime Minister, I looked back on what was done before – what were the policies and actions before – and I thought that I need to be critical if I'm going to do anything at all. I was not quite satisfied with their past performance. I was grateful to them because they gained this country independence, but I thought that we should do something better for us as a nation and for us as a member of the world's other organisations, including the Commonwealth.

SO: So, this was a deliberate ordering then of your priorities when you became Prime Minister: to put ASEAN, first, then the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, above the Commonwealth?

MM: Yes.

SO: Sir, how did you come to revise your opinion on the Commonwealth?

MM: Well, I thought I belonged to those other groups more when I was in the Commonwealth because there was a kind of unequal role played by the different members of the Commonwealth. Mostly, it was very British; [it was] very much focused on Britain and its role. If not Britain, then either Canada or Australia or New Zealand. And the rest seemed to be followers. They have a different role to play and their problems were not really attended to by the Commonwealth.

SO: So, Sir, you felt that it was a British and European-dominated Commonwealth? But you came to revisit that opinion? How did you come to revise your attitude of the value of the Commonwealth to Malaysia?

MM: I did not go to the Commonwealth meeting for a few years and then I decided – by that time, of course, Malaysia had changed a little – that Malaysia's experience was also relevant to the development of the poorer members of the Commonwealth, and I need to contact them. Actually, I invited many Commonwealth leaders to come to Malaysia. They did not accept my invitation. By that, I mean, they didn't say they didn't accept, but they just didn't come here. I suspect it was because they felt, 'What is the point of going to another developing country like them?' They had nothing to gain, nothing to learn from us. By then, Malaysia had actually shown early signs of development and I felt that our experience could contribute to their own development: the problems we faced, the policies we adopted and all that. Perhaps this would be relevant. And since they did not consider it worthwhile to come here, I felt that if I was active in the Commonwealth and I play host to the Commonwealth, they would be forced to come to Malaysia.

SO: So this is why you made that surprise announcement at the Vancouver Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, saying that you would host the next meeting in Kuala Lumpur?

MM: Yes.

SO: I note that this came as something of a surprise to some people at the CHOGM. You write in your memoirs that you felt that Sir Sonny Ramphal and others may have regarded Malaysia a little as – how did you put it – "**the prodigal son coming back into the fold.**" **But this was a very hard-headed decision that you had made to invite other developing country leaders to come to Kuala Lumpur to see what you had achieved in eight short years?**

MM: It was part of my foreign policy. I adjusted foreign policy to stress more on being friendly with developing countries who were in the same category as Malaysia. And, since it is not often that they visit Malaysia, but they don't see Malaysia as anything different from them, so they did not respond to my invitation. But I thought if I play host to the Commonwealth, they will come.

SO: So, how did Sir Sonny Ramphal try to change your mind before this point?

MM: He tried to persuade me. He sent messages to me, asked me to attend the Commonwealth Conference and all that. But I had already drawn up all my policies and programmes. Certainly, regarding the Commonwealth, I did not visit the developed countries like America, like Britain. I did not visit these countries because I felt that these are developed countries: they are not really interested in Malaysia. They cannot benefit Malaysia. So, in the Commonwealth, these countries are there too, so it is about my foreign policy that I should develop friendship with my neighbours, with the small countries, with the Pacific islands, with Islamic countries, before I focus on the Commonwealth. But there is nothing in my programme about visiting the developed countries like America and all that. This came last. I didn't even put it on my agenda.

SO: I know that you went to the CHOGRM, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meetings, that were held in Suva in 1982 and then in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, in 1984. The Nassau meeting in 1985 was the first time you had gone to a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Your deputy, Musa Hitam, had represented you at previous Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. How far did you also feel that the Commonwealth was not a valuable platform to achieve anything for Malaysia, particularly because of apartheid South Africa?

MM: Yes, that is one of the things that influenced my thinking: that, even in South Africa, the Commonwealth were not doing anything, and their attitude was to tolerate apartheid in South Africa. There was a lot of lip service being paid to the need to stop this practice, but nothing was done. But, when we came to the CHOGRM, this is a big thing that is going to be cited in a developing country. So, then I thought I should go.

SO: I've read your personal letter to other heads that you wrote before the Nassau meeting, arguing very strongly for a firm decision on economic and financial sanctions. Looking at the record, your sense of frustration at the lack of activity on South Africa comes through very strongly. Did you, Sir, ever consider pulling out of the Commonwealth because you felt it was just a 'talking shop'?

MM: Well, I did not think about pulling out. I felt that, at some stage, I may need to meet the members of the Commonwealth, especially [those] from the developing countries. And that would be an easy access point for me if I stay in the Commonwealth. If I had become isolationist, that wouldn't help at all, because we have our neighbour here in Malaysia [Indonesia] who decided to pull out of the UN [in 1965-66], and that was not very beneficial to Malaysia. So, membership of an organisation is good, as long as you can make yourself heard.

SO: Yes. I know, also, that you commissioned a particular review by your Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October of 1986 and also asked ISIS to

assess the value and the benefit of the Commonwealth. Were these two reports in any way influential to your thinking?

MM: Yes, it brought me to focus on issues that are relevant which could be taken up by the Commonwealth.

SO: Your importance in Cabinet was remarkable, and yours was the guiding voice on foreign policy for Malaysia. But did you use particular officials? Were they useful to you as advisors or sounding boards in any way, as you came to form and direct your foreign policy?

MM: Yes, there were some very experienced diplomats in the Foreign Office and I did listen to them. And I used them to make known my thinking. For example, almost immediately after becoming Prime Minister, I brought up the question of Antarctica. And this was picked up by the Foreign Affairs Ministry and they kept on promoting this idea about Antarctica being a world – as well as a national – concern.

SO: I understand that Zakaria Ali and Kamil Jaafar were particularly useful to you in helping to implement and manage foreign policy, and also that Razali Ismail was a particularly influential Malaysian diplomat and, of course, of long standing at the United Nations.

MM: They were people who were very active. They established contact with most of the diplomats at the UN and in other countries, and they were all prepared to voice the policies of Malaysia, to establish contacts and friendship with certain countries, particularly with those which were facing problems.

SO: Sir, in contrast, how valuable to you was the Non-Aligned Movement at the same time?

MM: Yes, it is yet another avenue for me to link with developing countries, and for that reason I valued the Non-Aligned Movement.

SO: I just wondered whether you felt that the Commonwealth in the 1980s was too ‘**pro-West**’**? You emphasize Britain and the other Western members of the Commonwealth. Even though the Commonwealth is a multilateral forum, I wondered if you thought it came across as** ‘**leaning to one side**’ **in the Cold War?**

MM: In my evaluation, the Non-Aligned Movement is far more representative of the developing world than the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is a mixture of developing and developed world, in which the developed countries were very influential and their policies hold sway most of the time. So, I thought that the Non-Aligned Movement would be and was a better forum for me.

SO: I know that, at the Belgrade meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1989, Sir Sonny Ramphal suggested to you the idea of a G15. Was this something that you had already been contemplating yourself?

MM: It is part of my idea of trying to give voice to some of the developing countries of the world, and when he suggested forming this G15, I thought that this was

a very good representative group – representing the three continents, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

SO: I understand that the Latin American countries were less enthusiastic. Is it fair to say that? You make this remark in your memoirs.

MM: They were under the influence of America and, also, they felt that countries like Malaysia were countries that are not relevant to their affairs and unknown to most of them.

SO: So, in this time, when comparing the relative importance to Malaysian foreign policy of the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations Organisation – obviously, three very different organisations of differing sizes – did you put a particular weight towards the Non-Aligned Movement rather than the United Nations? Or did you pursue Malaysian national interests through each of these organisations in parallel?

MM: I would think I would put the Non-Aligned Movement ahead of the United Nations because, even then, I thought that the United Nations is a creature of the five super-powers who were given veto powers. I don't like veto powers at all.

SO: So, the Non-Aligned Movement, in that it was founded on equality of representation and dialogue, was preferable?

MM: It was more democratic. The UN is hardly democratic.

SO: But did the Commonwealth represent a different platform by the end of the 1980s, when the crisis in communism was producing a progressive sea-change in the international system? I wondered how far you came to re-evaluate the Non-Aligned Movement and the Commonwealth, going into the 1990s.

MM: I still have a preference for the Non-Aligned Movement. And the fact that it was less inclined to be of the Eastern camp was, to me, a positive thing, because I wanted the Non-Aligned Movement to be truly non-aligned, not under the influence of East or West.

SO: Sir, if I could come back, then, to the Commonwealth being of lesser importance in your world view. After your decision to host the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, how did you manage the conference itself? This was a superb showcase for Malaysia, as you say, and as the means to encourage developing heads to come to this country.

MM: The first problem was the replacement for Sonny Ramphal. You see, there was the contest between the Australian [Malcolm Fraser] and Chief Emeka, and I conducted the voting for that and I made the announcement. It was Emeka who won. Unfortunately, Fraser decided to leave the country and went home: it was a disappointment. But, otherwise, I had a problem because Australia and New Zealand were very much against Mrs Thatcher and her

policies. And I had to be sure that the conference went on without having an open crisis, because I wanted the Commonwealth meeting in Malaysia to be a successful meeting.

SO: And it was. I have seen it described in press reports as the most successful meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government. Looking across the long history of Commonwealth Heads meetings, the range of decisions made at the Kuala Lumpur summit and the overall success of the meeting is very striking.

If I could ask you, please, Sir… When you were deciding on how to manage the vote on the next Secretary General, you did it very deliberately at the start. I am aware you privately canvassed people's opinions. I understand you didn't even tell your wife of the division of opinion and votes. But this was a very sensitive issue, and people were expecting you to take it to the Retreat to discuss and decide. What made you decide to do it straight away?

MM: I actually had this approach because we were going to have the meeting after that, and we didn't want this thing to be in the way of our focus. Our attention [was] to be on other matters.

SO: So, by dealing with this potentially divisive matter quickly and discretely, this ensured then that the discussion would swiftly move on to the points under review. The Retreat at Langkawi is known for the division, as you say, on South Africa. The Committee of the Foreign Ministers on South Africa, under Joe Clark, had already met John Major and there had been a very robust discussion. How did you soothe the divisions between Australia and New Zealand and Mrs Thatcher? Her press conference afterwards was very combative.

MM: Yes, she was combative all the time. But I wanted to reduce the incidents like that during the Commonwealth meeting. I tried to make the Retreat a very social kind of retreat. We were together to get to know each other, and to appreciate that we would not be able to resolve all the problems. The problem of South Africa would remain on the agenda.

SO: I know that, in the January of that year, Bob Hawke had already proposed that there should be an Asia Pacific Economic Forum, rather than the ASEAN ideal and your thoughts to expand it in the South East Asia region. However, Bob Hawke's proposal tended more towards a Pacific Rim version of the OECD. Was this something that you also discussed at the Retreat?

MM: No, not much. What triggered this idea about having the Asian economic community was because of the failure of the GATT. You know, there had been meetings so many times and each time they were frustrated by the attitudes of the United States and the developed countries. On the one hand, they wanted to open up places but they themselves were not opening up. So, I said, "Well, if we cannot agree on the larger scale, let's reduce it to a smaller scale." And, also, I realised that Europe had already moved towards the European Union. So, they were more united, they behaved almost like one

unified country. America had NAFTA: it was already a very powerful force in the world, and in the trade forum GATT. So, I think, in order to give us strength on our own, we would not have any influence. Even with ASEAN there is not much influence. But if we could have the three north eastern Asian countries together in a single forum, then we could speak more strongly about our views in international fora, particularly with regard to economics and trade.

SO: So, you were explicitly trying to avoid the protectionist barriers of the European Union and indeed of the NAFTA bloc because it seems that, when developed countries push free trade, it was – and is – always free trade on their own terms?

MM: Yes. I realised that very early. I realised that there would not be any success in GATT at all. At that stage, I gave up on GATT and decided that we should have a stronger voice through a regional grouping, a strong regional grouping.

SO: Please, could I ask you some more questions about the Commonwealth in various dimensions? What was your motivation behind deciding to host the XVI Commonwealth Games in 1998?

MM: At that time, the Commonwealth Games was never held in any of the smaller countries: I didn't think there was one anywhere. So, we thought that we should show that even a developing country can play host to such a major games. We did not imagine ourselves playing host to the Olympics. We felt that the Commonwealth did represent the world, in a certain way. There were developed countries, there were countries coming from all the different regions, and there were good athletes among the Commonwealth. So, in a way, it is a smaller edition of the Olympics. We would never be able to put on the Olympics because of the conditions required.

SO: So, you were emphasising functional cooperation through sport? You were opening it up, particularly, to team sports. The Malaysian Government's financial and political support for the Games was phenomenal. The XVI Games were the first to be offering assistance and acclimatisation for the athletes, and the infrastructure development that you initiated to enable the Games was truly impressive.

MM: By that time we were quite prosperous. We had the money. The country was doing well, the economy was growing, and we could spare the money. And we could show that even a developing country need not be so backward. A developing country can develop itself to an extent that it can aspire to play host to a function, a meeting, like the Commonwealth Games.

SO: Notwithstanding Malaysia's impressive growth – particularly in the 1990s – you had had to endure the battering from the Asian financial crisis of 1997/98?

MM: Well, we suffered badly. Our currency was almost half its value. We were pressured to accept the IMF, but we had internal problems which did not permit us to accept foreign management of our economy. We have these

three different races in this country. It is necessary that the three different races should share in the wealth of the country fairly. We were doing that through affirmative action and we felt sure that if the IMF came in… Well, then it is the bottom line that counts. Its economic growth, achievements and all that, is not for distribution. We have all this talk about growth with equity. You see, it's not just growth alone. But, since we knew the IMF and the World Bank would not care about that, we said, "No, we cannot allow our economy to be run by others. We have to do it ourselves."

SO: I know that Zambia in the 1980s had tried to go a separate road from one that was being dictated by the IMF, but President Kaunda was not able to sustain it. You, however, achieved a striking success, in direct contrast to the prescription from the IMF. I know, Sir, that you pinned the ringgit to the dollar, and you also reintroduced currency controls to prevent those huge surges of currency outflows.

MM: Well, we knew business likes stability; they like [conditions] to be predictable. They had to budget for the year and they cannot budget if the money, the currency value, is not stable, and things like that. We understood that. We had to grow our country. We had to accept foreign direct investments. So, all these factors – together with our internal need to re-structure our economy – made us think about another solution, not the IMF solution. Fortunately for us, we had the biggest savings in the world: 40% of GDP saved every year, and that is very big. It is bigger than any other country. So, we were financially strong and we resented this allegation that we were not able to manage our finances well. It is not true at all. What was true was the currency traders thought that they saw an opportunity to make a pile for themselves. So, they said we didn't know how to manage our economy and therefore the currency depreciated. But it was not because of the economy or financial management; it was because of currency traders. That is why we went after the currency traders. We blamed them and we tried to find ways to stop them from fiddling with our currency. So, that was what decided us on this currency problem.

SO: Please, could I ask you also about the restructuring of the Commonwealth from 1989 through to your decision to step down from being Prime Minister in 2003? I know that, at the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, not only was it a supreme success, but also that you were Chairman of the High Level Appraisal coming out of that CHOGM to review the Commonwealth, including the Secretariat – to see was if it was 'fit for purpose', going forward. How much energy and time were you able to devote to that, though, given the other demands of office?

MM: Well, I didn't think there would be enough time to complete this review. There were lots of things that should be done. I should be seeing all the Heads of Government, explaining things to them. Physically, I was not able to do that. But I know the situation of the Commonwealth generally, and I know that the aim should be to make the Commonwealth much more relevant to the poorer countries.

SO: This has been your consistent determination: to ensure that the Commonwealth supported development, rather than getting side-tracked with other developed country agendas. At the Harare meeting of 1991, to what extent were you supportive of Chief Emeka's decision to push good governance as one of the Commonwealth's core agenda?

MM: Yes, I believe good governance is very important. Because, when we became independent, we really had no experience running a country. Malaysians, during the colonial period, were not given the top positions: we were always subordinate. Fortunately for us, the people who took over were mainly civil servants: people who were serving the Government. The Tunku was a Government servant, Razak was a Government servant. These people understood administration. But where countries fight for independence, there were guerrilla leaders and fighters: they were the ones who took over the administration and, obviously, while they may be very good in fighting, they are not conversant with the need for proper administration.

SO: That was particularly true of Robert Mugabe's liberation movement coming to power, because the fighters-turned-politicians had been deprived of the chance to develop their administrative skills. It was equally true for the ANC and for SWAPO.

MM: And many other countries where independence came through military action, where the leaders of the independence movement naturally expect that when they become independent, they will rule the country.

SO: Part of Chief Emeka's drive for good governance was also tied up with his emphasis upon the Commonwealth as an election observer: promoting good electoral practice by observation and experience. I understand that a Commonwealth electoral monitoring mission came here, at your invitation, for the elections in 1990. Do you recall how that played out, as far as you were concerned?

MM: Well, we welcomed anybody who wished to look at us and find out whether we had conducted the elections properly or not. And we think that every country should accept; even if they consider that they are doing the right thing, observers should always be welcome. And my assessment is that if, in an election, the opposition can win seats, [then] that indicates that the election is properly conducted. But when you have elections in which 90% or 95% or 99% of those elected come from one party, then I think there is some fraudulent act.

SO: Obviously this was the first time that the Commonwealth had put together an election observation team since the early 1980s [Uganda; Rhodesia/Zimbabwe]. Do you recall how closely this team worked with you? How these officials went about observing Malaysian elections?

MM: They were often on their own. I don't remember contacting them. We are quite familiar with people being critical about our elections, and they could come and observe. We had no fears. But what they did, what they reported, was not something that I focussed upon, or learn from, because I think that, in Malaysia, when we conduct elections, it is a fair election.

SO: Sir, by 1995 there had been a growing view that the Commonwealth should take more of a stand against military dictatorships. The regime in Nigeria under General Sani Abacha was causing acute concern in the Commonwealth. On the eve of the Auckland meeting in 1995, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni political activists took place in direct opposition to the Commonwealth's plea – and President Mandela's personal plea – for clemency. I know that, at the Retreat, the discussion for CMAG was held. Do you recall that discussion at all, and the decision?

MM: Not that clearly.

SO: I know that you were at a press conference afterwards, and you were asked for your view. You supported the establishment of CMAG. But I was struck by the letter that you wrote to President Clinton the following year in 1996, in which you said, "CMAG is not doing what it should because General Abacha just refuses to see them". And yours seemed to be a personal plea to President Clinton on the basis of "hard power": to try and get American leverage. I just wondered whether you felt CMAG was useful at all in correcting military coup regimes.

MM: I really didn't think deeply on that issue. It was something that was proposed and how if functioned, whether it was successful or not, I didn't pay much attention to it.

SO: Malaysia, of course, served on the CMAG from 1995 to 2002. Did you allocate responsibility to the Malaysian representative while you focused on other issues of greater importance?

MM: Yes.

SO: Please, overall what were your relations like with other Commonwealth Heads of Government? Did you choose to have a particularly good working relationship with certain Commonwealth leaders?

MM: Well, I did make friends with a number of them: particularly those who became involved with the Langkawi Dialogue and the South African dialogue. I became very friendly with them. I knew them personally. It goes beyond just official contact: they were my friends and I feel very comfortable with them.

SO: Yes. Would you name any particular Commonwealth heads with whom you formed a close working relationship? In your memoirs, you remark on the importance of personal chemistry between heads.

MM: I was very friendly with Robert Mugabe, with Sam Nujoma, and later on with Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. They were people who were active and they were facing problems, and I became involved with them quite closely, especially Sam Nujoma, where he was struggling to gain his country's independence. So, these people I knew very well because they stayed longer. They remain the leaders even if they are not officially leaders, and were respected as leaders by their own countries. And some of those I got to

know, but by the next Commonwealth meeting they had disappeared and somebody else took their place. So, it was difficult to develop good relations.

SO: Yes. I can understand that importance of ongoing personal friendship in this Commonwealth practice of '**summitry**'**. Sir, on this question of longevity of office, how important do you feel the Queen was to helping support the Commonwealth?**

MM: Well, I think she was a symbol – someone who was regarded as Head of the Commonwealth – and she made it a point to visit the countries when there was a Commonwealth meeting. She came here, to us, for the Commonwealth meeting and she graciously accepted our request that she stay in the guest house that we provided, rather than on the ship. And, of course, all Commonwealth heads called on her during the meeting and she had been very well briefed. When she talked with me, she knew about Malaysia, particularly the climate!

SO: Please, Sir, if I could ask as my last question… **What do you feel about the future of the Commonwealth now?**

MM: Again, any organisation has a future, provided it is properly led and it sticks to the objective of that organisation. No one should have extra influence on an organisation. We should always regard ourselves as equals in the organisation, and we should be concerned about each other's problems. We have a need to understand problems that are faced by different members of an organisation. In that sense, I support the Commonwealth, and I think it can play a big role. For example, when we formed this group, the Langkawi Dialogue Group, later on others outside the Commonwealth appealed to be members and we accepted them. Of course, the Commonwealth cut us off completely from any financing because we were not confined to the Commonwealth.

SO: So you feel that the Commonwealth and its role in functional cooperation, in helping with training in technical and management skills, that these are avenues and areas in which the Commonwealth can be enormously beneficial?

MM: Yes, it is. But still, contact and understanding our policies are important. For example, I had a problem with Britain when I was Prime Minister, and Mrs Thatcher decided to raise fees for the students coming from Malaysia – not from Europe. Europe, which can afford higher fees, was not affected by the new rates. I met Mrs Thatcher and I told her, "You are making a big mistake, because when students study in the UK and they come back and work in Malaysia, whether it is in business or in Government, their tendency is to refer to the place where they studied, if they want to recommend any company or any system. But, when you cut them off, you lose future relations with these people. And if these people would recommend, those countries would benefit." After that, she decided to give some scholarships for Malaysian students. But this is what is missing now in the organisation. They don't realise that getting to know each other is very important. If you know each other well, you want to do business with people you know well. You don't do

business with strangers. Most people in organisations like this don't think about the importance of getting to know each other.

SO: So, just to conclude then… Do you feel the Commonwealth was useful for Malaysia to enable Malaysians, at various levels, to get to know the world outside? I know that you were determined that Malaysians should not be – as the proverb says – 'like frogs under a shell'!

MM: Yes. [*Laughter*] If you go to African countries, I think they know Malaysia well. Of course, we are members of the OIC and other Arab countries know us well. Most developing countries would know Malaysia quite well. Why? It is because we believe in contacts. We offer them some help for training, for example. We call it 'technical cooperation'. We are not trying to teach them anything: we're trying to cooperate with them. And that is one of the results of getting to know the poorer countries of the Commonwealth.

SO: I know that you've spent millions of ringgit on this particularly important form of cooperation. And that it's not aid: it is cooperation.

MM: Cooperation. We want to learn from them as much as they want to learn from us.

SO: Yes. Sir, thank you very much indeed. I'm very grateful for your time.

MM: Okay, you're welcome.

[END OF AUDIOTAPE]