VOICE FILE NAME: COHP The Hon Gareth Evans

Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
GE: The Hon Gareth Evans (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Professor Gareth Evans, the former Foreign Minister of Australia between 1988 and 1996, at the Australian National University in Canberra on 27th March, 2014. Sir, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me for the Commonwealth Oral History Project, especially when you are so jet-lagged.

GE: Not at all.

SO: I wonder if you could reflect, please, on the importance that you feel the Commonwealth played in Australian foreign relations during your time as Foreign Minister, as a general overall introductory question. I understand that you emphasised, during your time as Foreign Minister, Australia's status as a middle power, pursuing niche diplomacy, good international citizenship and later cooperative security. Was the Commonwealth a useful platform, in any way, for these particular broad goals of Australian foreign policy?

GE: Overwhelmingly, the most important role that the Commonwealth played was in the context of South Africa and the anti-apartheid enterprise, certainly during the time that I was Foreign Minister. That's where it had a very genuine role: resonance and impact. I think, in a nutshell, we led the way internationally on the issue of financial sanctions, with Australia playing quite a significant role in that respect. The key group was the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on South Africa, headed by Joe Clark from Canada [and] with Ike Nwachukwu from Nigeria, Narasimha Rao from India, Ben Mkapa from Tanzania, Nathan Shamuyarira from Zimbabwe, Luke Mwananshiku from Zambia and Rashleigh Jackson from Guyana. I quite vividly remember those meetings over quite a substantial period of time, where we forged and crafted a combined policy approach.

SO: That Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on South Africa came out of the Vancouver meeting in 1987, and so you stepped in as Australian representative once you had become Foreign Minister?

GE: Yes.

SO: Britain, of course, was a very determined absentee from this particular committee.

GE: Yes, and that generated some pretty lively exchanges – about which you have possibly been informed – in the context of the CHOGM in Kuala Lumpur, in particular.

SO: Yes.

GE: John Major was the newly arrived Foreign Minister from the UK. I have forgotten what had precipitated the reshuffle in which he rather implausibly found himself in that role: new, and knowing very little about anything, but with Margaret Thatcher having very determined and decisive views on all sorts of things. And one of the things that she made very clear to him was that she expected no truck – no compromise whatsoever – with the hard line that the Commonwealth was taking on the South African issue. We, the committee members, met among ourselves, just before Major arrived in Kuala Lumpur, and decided to ask him to join us for an informal discussion that night, before our more formal ministerial meeting the following day, to see whether there was any common ground that we could in fact thrash out and not have a confrontation. I was mandated to meet Major when he arrived at the hotel and ask him to join us. And when I did, he said, "I don't choose to join your meeting." I replied, "Have I heard you correctly? You are not just unavailable to attend the meeting; you don't *choose* to?" He said, "That's perfectly correct. I don't choose to. You know we have no intention whatsoever of being pressured into anything. You know our position on this, and it's absolutely firm."

I reported this back to the others, who were deeply underwhelmed – as was I. And so, we had a fairly major – no pun intended! – confrontation the next day when the Foreign Ministers met. But at least the story had a rather charming sequel. Very soon after the Malaysia meeting, when Major had still only been Foreign Secretary [for] a few weeks, an unexpected resignation elsewhere led to him being appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer. I sent him a rather cheeky note saying, "Dear John, I know we had our differences in Kuala Lumpur, but Maggie didn't really have to move you that quickly." He replied with splendid grace: "Dear Gareth, Thank you for your message. I did indeed learn something about the language of diplomacy when I was in Kuala Lumpur. Maybe that's why I am now Chancellor." It was a nice exchange.

In fact, I remained quite good friends with John Major in years thereafter. He was in an impossible position in Kuala Lumpur. His own instincts were reasonably decent, but Thatcher's were totally indecent on this issue, and it was really quite a substantial confrontation that continued all the way through the leaders meeting on that.

But all that apart, the other work that was done by the committee did involve quite substantial discussions with the South Africans – with Thabo Mbeki, in

particular, as he was the ANC-in-exile guy. And it was really a process of backwards-and-forwards dialogue, not aimed simply at formal communiqués and resolutions, for better or worse, and formal meetings, but crafting policy that would actually make a difference.

In that context, Australia initiated the financial sanctions movement. At the leaders' meeting, Bob Hawke undertook to do a study of the impact of financial sanctions on South Africa. He designated a particular treasury official, Tony Cole, to lead the project, and we not only did the study but turned it into a Penguin special book, which we commissioned, and assisted in the publication of, called *Apartheid and International Finance*. This had actually quite a major influence in the worldwide debate – not just within the Commonwealth, but within all the financial centres and within the Unites States in particular. It made a very detailed and well-articulated economic case for specifically *financial* sanctions – as distinct from trade sanctions, sports boycotts and cultural boycotts, all of which had some psychological impact but were of no particular utility in actually forcing South Africa to its knees. It was the financial sanctions that mattered, basically drying up bank finance, the kind of thing that has been developed into a complete art form now in the context, for example, of US financial sanctions on Iran. But South Africa was where this stuff had its first workout.

SO: So this Commonwealth study was really a pilot fish for what was later developed in other international fora?

GE: Very much so. Everyone remembers the trade sanctions which went back years before. Everyone remembers the sports boycott, the cultural boycotts and so on. But it was the financial sanctions that only really started to come on after 1988/89 that mattered, and the Commonwealth actually led the way: that particular group of Foreign Ministers, and Australia within it. I see FW de Klerk a fair bit these days around the conference traps, and I am a member of an organization he leads. I have talked to him about this, and when I visited South Africa in 1991, I spoke to the Governor of the Reserve Bank and others about this, and they all left me in absolutely no doubt that it was the financial sanctions and the squeezing off [of] that sort of money supply that was needed for investment that was the critical tipping-point factor in bringing them to the negotiating table.

SO: I know that, in the run up to the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the British Ambassador to South Africa, Robin Renwick, was trying to use it to encourage FW de Klerk to release Walter Sisulu and other political prisoners.

GE: Yes.

SO: I understand from Renwick's memoir, *A Journey With Margaret Thatcher* (London: Biteback, 2013), that he felt – and Thatcher agreed – that this gesture of good will should not go unrewarded, and that if financial sanctions had been brought in at that time, it would have seen it as an additional punishment.

GE: Well, this was the usual nonsense that one had from the Brits. It may well have been well-intentioned nonsense in the case of Renwick, but it was no less nonsense for that. You had to put the pressure on; you had to maintain

the squeeze. It wasn't just a matter of releasing Sisulu. It was a matter of releasing Mandela, it was a matter of getting into a full-scale transition to democracy, and small gestures were not enough. No, it was time for an absolutely major squeeze, and it was just the usual defensive nonsense that we had from the Brits on that. The rest of the Commonwealth was really very, very united and very strong. Britain was very much an outsider. It was the Commonwealth – there is no doubt about it – that was the engine that fed the strategy back into the UN and elsewhere. Obviously, there was only so much the Commonwealth countries by themselves could do – particularly without British support. But it was a matter of getting the banks themselves subject to pressure, and then persuading the US government and others to start really ratcheting up that pressure. And they did.

SO: So, did you do that that as the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers? Acting as a united body, did you approach the US administration to try to exert pressure?

GE: Yes, we did. I have forgotten precisely the mechanism by which it was done, but it was quite a substantial diplomatic effort. Sonny Ramphal was still Secretary General, wasn't he?

SO: Ramphal was still Secretary General up to 1990, yes.

GE: And Ramphal was an important vehicle for communicating all this stuff, because he was very active, well regarded and keen to make the case. But I think it's really the intellectual case that was made. The political case? It wasn't so much that what the Commonwealth could do, by itself, was self-executing, but I think its contribution in that period was very important.

SO: I have interviewed Joe Clark about this particular time, as well, and he's very much of the view that it was worth the energy and the effort that he put into it.

GE: Yes. We met very regularly. It was at three or four monthly intervals or whatever – you would need to check the record, but I have a memory of four, five, or six meetings of that group. It bonded very well; it was a strong group, and it was very influential.

SO: Yes. After de Klerk had made that speech in February of 1990 in the South African Parliament – saying the ANC and SACP were going to be unbanned, and implying that 'the door is open, you don't have to push at it', etc. – was there debate within the Foreign Ministers Committee about when sanctions should be removed, or was this very much Australia's national decision?

GE: I don't think that there was any move to be pulling back on sanctions, unless the big stuff actually happened and there was an actually negotiated transition. We all know that sanctions were only useful if you can pull them off in a graduated way, as well as apply them. But I don't remember any view, at that stage, of it being appropriate to relieve any of the pressure.

SO: I just wondered. I know that the Brian Mulroney government paid very close attention to the course of the negotiations and was in touch with

Mandela's office, saying, "You tell *us* when it would be useful to start stepping back."

GE: Yes.

SO: Was Australia adopting much the same approach?

GE: Certainly. We were in complete sync on that with the Canadians – Hawke with Mulroney and me with Joe Clark. I can't remember the detail. We may well have left the formal communications [and] negotiations with the ANC to Joe Clark as the chairman of the Foreign Ministers Committee. I can't remember any separate formal negotiations with Australia *qua* Australia. I did have various meetings by myself. On one memorable occasion, I met Mbeki in the Chobe Game Park in Botswana, the one where Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor went off to have their famous assignation. [*Laughter*] There was an awful lot going on, a huge amount of tick-tacking, as we were trying to devise ways individually – but more particularly collectively – to sustain, increase and maintain that pressure.

SO: Were you, like the Canadians, providing particular assistance to governance, assistance with constitution-building, assistance with the diplomatic effort, [or] assistance to COSATU, given, in particular, Bob Hawke's own trade union background?

GE: Yes. A whole little book has been published recently, written by someone called Peter Limb, about the role that the Australians played through the transition – using particularly the trade union connection as a vehicle, through its aid organization APHEDA [Peter Limb, *A Shared History: The ALP, the ANC & the Australian Anti-Apartheid Movement* (Canberra: Labor International, 2012)]. A woman called Helen McCue was actually over there and working with South Africans – with community people – and just developing contacts and connections. There was quite a lot of financial support. It was funnelled in through that particular mechanism.

SO: Did you go to South Africa for the elections in April 1994?

GE: No, I wasn't there for the elections, but I met Mandela when he came out of jail in 1990. I was one of the first to meet him, because I happened to be in Lusaka at the time. He flew almost immediately up there to meet the ANC leaders in exile, and I just happened to be there. I was literally one of the very, very first international officials to meet him when he came out. And I have written and talked about that a bit around the place. See for example the speech on my website called 'Australia, Nelson Mandela and the End of Apartheid' [originally given on Nelson Mandela Day, 17 July 2012, in Government House, Sydney].

SO: Terrific. Did you attend the Harare CHOGM, taking place against the background of the new Secretary General Chief Emeka Anyaoku's drive for democracy and good governance? Did you have a particular view on that?

GE: Yes. I am just trying to remember again. What year was this?

SO: 1991.

GE: We had a Harare declaration of some kind, didn't we?

SO: You did.

GE: Yes, I think the Commonwealth played a reasonably useful role during that period as a promoter of democracy and human rights, because we were still in transition mode in an awful lot of these countries. The big rush of independence had been in the 60s, 70s and 80s, but there were still a few to go. But there was still a lot of poor governance going on around the place, and I think we generally perceived the Commonwealth as a very useful vehicle, both in terms of applying moral persuasion and institutional pressure. The Commonwealth then was a bit more important than it has been since, I think. That is the sense one has. Hawke certainly took it very seriously. I took it a bit less seriously. I was a bit underwhelmed overall by the utility of it all. But I certainly was turned on by the anti-apartheid things that we did, through the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers. The thing that sticks out from my entire period as Foreign Minister – from 1988 to 1996 – on anything to do with Commonwealth is that this was the stuff that seemed to have real bite, substance and sharpness about it. Everything else was a fair bit of fluff, I think.

SO: It has been said that the Commonwealth had a grand strategy towards contributing to the end of apartheid. On this issue, it had hard power implications for a soft power organisation. Others have commented that the Commonwealth has been looking for a role after the end of apartheid and after the end of the Cold War. Do you feel this is fair?

GE: Yes, but it hasn't really found one, because it's it hasn't had enough clout. Yes, there's a kinder, gentler, softer dimension to it, but…

SO: What did you think, then, after the Auckland summit, of the creation of CMAG?

GE: I can't even remember… What was CMAG?

SO: The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group. This came out of the Millbrook Declaration and it was to do with military governments – a means for the Commonwealth to pressure against military coups, to encourage them to return to democracy.

GE: Right, well, nobody took much notice of it, did they? As I seem to remember. Or did they? I don't know. One thing that I do remember is Bob Hawke investing an awful lot of political significance in his attendance at summits and the CHOGM, and how crucial it was for him to go the next CHOGM meeting when he was under a degree of internal political pressure in the early 1990s. When was the Auckland summit?

SO: In 1995, so it was before Keating. I think the Harare CHOGM was Bob Hawke's last one.

GE: Yeah, but then the next one was where?

SO: Limassol, Cyprus, in 1993.

GE: I remember, yes. This is a bit sensitive but nonetheless it's relevant, I think. Hawke was making much of the crucial necessity for his attendance at that CHOGM meeting, and therefore the need for him to stay in the leadership role and not hand it over to his challenging successor, Paul Keating. I remember Keating asking me very explicitly, as Foreign Minister, how important was this forthcoming CHOGM, and how critical was Hawke's attendance in it? I have to say, I remember very clearly saying, "It doesn't really matter very much at all, in terms of the larger scheme of things. Hawke is talking this up because he is quite passionate about the Commonwealth and about its utility." And, of course, this goes back to his involvement not just with the Foreign Ministers issues I have described, [but] it was the Eminent Persons Group before that. Hawke was very high on Obasanjo's group, and all who sailed with it. I think Bob regarded the South African stuff as a great personal achievement, and he was certainly one of the leading lights within the Commonwealth. He said the Commonwealth was a vehicle for that, and that gave him a bit of a rosy glow thereafter, but it also gave him an excuse. He tried to use it as an argument for not being knocked off, but the rest of us were a bit more cynical about it.

SO: So, the Commonwealth and its regular get-togethers for inter-governmental heads provides a particular platform for the Australian Federal Prime Minister?

GE: Hawke certainly felt as much, [believing] that it was an important vehicle, platform, and occasion, for example, to develop a close working relationship with Mulroney in Canada. This was much closer than Australia usually had with Canada, so the Commonwealth was very much the vehicle for that. And once we got over the South Africa thing – the relationship with the Brits and Thatcher and so on – then the focus was much less on the Commonwealth than just the standard bilateral stuff. I have to say that since the South Africa days, the Commonwealth just hasn't had the same sort of resonance in Australia. Keating was profoundly sceptical about the Commonwealth, as he was about all things to do with Brits – the Monarchy and that stuff. The Black Irish Republican tradition looms very large with Keating. But the Commonwealth did come back into favour a bit with the subsequent change of government – with Howard's passion for the Anglosphere and all things British. The Commonwealth fitted comfortably on to that. But then they had no great passion for multilateral politics of any kind, or for using it as a vehicle for anything in particular. I can't really remember, in all that subsequent period, the Commonwealth looming large in political discourse.

SO: So, it become a single issue vehicle in that case, as far as South Africa was concerned? Compared to your other key foreign policy components: reshaping your relationship with America; pushing into Indonesia and China, particularly; going into the Asian region…?

GE: Yes. I mean, the Commonwealth had zero relevance in terms of what we were doing in Asia, and that was really the main game.

SO: So, you didn't use the Commonwealth dimension with Malaysia or with Singapore?

GE: Not really, no. I don't ever remember using the Commonwealth in that context. There was a little bit of a Commonwealth dimension in the Indian context, I suppose, but really, again, that was more just straight bilateral stuff.

SO: How about relationships in the Pacific?

GE: No, that wasn't the Commonwealth; that was South Pacific Forum. The South Pacific Forum was a very significant institutional grouping in the aid programmes and everything else that ran through that. But I think there were some programmes that were delivered through the Commonwealth, and we did that in partnership with the Commonwealth – small island states stuff, but predating the climate change issue. Frankly, on the Commonwealth… I did write a book about Australian Foreign Policy, entitled *Australia's Foreign Relations* – with Bruce Grant, published by Melbourne University Press in 1995 – and it had a section, as I recall, on the Commonwealth. But I haven't been back to read it since I wrote it, and that was 1995. I have completely forgotten what I wrote. It may well be that I now identified some useful things that the Commonwealth was doing that we used the Commonwealth for. But, if you are asking me now, cold, do I remember it? No. The only thing that I remember is the South African stuff.

SO: Professor Evans, please, I'm very interested in your single, strong memory on how important the Commonwealth was, because the trouble is that, when I interview Commonwealth people about the Commonwealth, I start with the implicit premise that 'this is important'.

GE: Yes.

SO: And so I am trying to set the Commonwealth in context.

GE: Well, in short, it wasn't very important. I think Sonny Ramphal was a considerable figure in the whole development agenda argument and what became Millennium Development Goals and all that sort of stuff. I don't cast any aspersions on an earlier period, because I do think now the evidence probably is that the Commonwealth was one way of giving that collective voice to people that didn't otherwise have it internationally. That was really the raison d'être, in many ways, for the whole organisation – unlike the UN, which had so many other things on its plate. It was difficult to get a united voice from the emerging developing countries, but that's really what the Commonwealth was overwhelmingly about. So, I think, if you go back to the 60s, 70s, [and] 80s, you can probably find all sorts of useful things to say.

SO: So, there is the critical context of the international political system in those decades, particularly for these new states in transition mode. But now, as they are increasingly mature states, could it be said that the Commonwealth has less of a raison d'être?

GE: Well, I think it does. That's exactly right. With the stuff about the Harare Declaration and democratisation and good governance and all that sort of stuff, the Commonwealth had aspirations to be a player – aspirations to play a significant, moral and cohesive force. But with due respect to Emeka and Don McKinnon, I don't think any subsequent Secretary General has had the force of personality and the ability to really make the kind of difference that Ramphal did. Ramphal was a force of nature in many ways, and

organisations of this kind very much depend on their leadership. There are all sorts of institutional constraints that limit the capacity of the most enthusiastic and competent leaders in the world, and you have to be very strong to overcome them. The Ramphal period was the heyday of the Commonwealth, in [the] sense that there was a combination of the opportunity to make an impact with the evolution of the independence movement in Africa and Asia: a willingness, on the part of most of the old Commonwealth states, to play a positive role, and then leadership of real grunt with Ramphal. By the time you get into the 90s, you are losing a lot of that momentum. The Commonwealth just lost its way a bit.

SO: There was also a change in leadership. The Commonwealth did enjoy an extraordinary period of longevity of leadership by governments. It was not just the Queen, having been there since 1952. There was a degree of personal chemistry between leaders – the question of trust that Malcolm Fraser talks about in his memoirs.

GE: Fraser, of course, did use the Commonwealth very much. He was very enthusiastic about it, and wanted to be the Commonwealth Secretary General. Bob Hawke asked me to be his campaign manager, which was rather bizarre, given the 1975 constitutional crisis and my role as a constitutional lawyer and a fierce opponent of Fraser. But one thing I did actually always like about Fraser – and which was absolutely genuine – was his non-racism. He really did not have a racist bone in his body, and the story behind that is actually quite interesting. He was at Magdalen College, as was I, at Oxford, and I discovered years later why this was. He arrived there as a gawky adolescent straight from Geelong Grammar School, without having been to university in Australia. He found himself shy and friendless around the place at Magdalen, until someone moved in the staircase opposite him. This was a young Indian guy, and they apparently bonded and became terribly firm friends – this aristocratic, aloof, white Anglo-Saxon character who had totally conservative values in every other way. I am not sure that Fraser will concede this if you approached him directly, but that was the story that I got from his history tutor, who was also mine years later at Oxford. Fraser was very passionate on this issue, and he was very brave to be that in a party which, at that stage…

SO: He seems to have been fundamentally out of step with others.

GE: He was very much out of step, and that became very clear when you have got your John Howards and so on, all of whom were dreadful on these issues. Menzies was shockingly pompous and dismissive about all this sort of stuff. But Fraser was very genuine. This is the 70s, running into the 80s. The Labor Government was passionate about all those issues; Hawke was passionate about it. So, you did have that combination of good, strong leaders with a real interest in these issues. In the main, the old Commonwealth countries combined with the occasion to work for good. The leadership within the Commonwealth itself – institutionally, with Ramphal – was strong. But most of those things just evaporated one way or another as you get into the 90s.

SO: Please, could I ask, how much do you think Fraser was also motivated by his sense of racial injustice here within Australia? And the idea that, perhaps, he might be able to push forward this particular agenda and debate in an international forum?

GE: Well, he was all of a piece. He was genuinely troubled by racism in any shape or form and in any context: whether it was the White Australia policy or whether it was Aboriginal policy, domestically, or whether it was manifestations of that in South Africa or whatever. He was just good on those issues. Some people are instinctively good and others are just instinctively resistant. He was instinctively good. But all of that ran out. I don't want to be too silly about it, but Emeka just didn't have the grunt that Ramphal did.

SO: No. Could I ask you more about being Malcolm Fraser's campaign manager for his bid to be Secretary General?

GE: Oh, it was absolutely impossible! I have never had a harder task in my life, because he had no small talk whatsoever – no capacity to communicate at any ordinary level with any human being. So, you would take him into a swirling to meet people and…

SO: But he was a politician; he should have been able to handle it.

GE: He would just be like a granite Easter Island statue, standing there about the clouds – he was a great towering figure at 6ft 6 or something – and unable to communicate with anybody. Hawke was always very generous towards his political enemies. Part of the reason [for this] was he wanted to create some good precedent for what happened in his own political afterlife. Anyway, it was a hopelessly lost cause, because Malcolm was just unsaleable. People respected his role, but…

SO: After all, he had been one of the co-leaders of the Eminent Persons Group. He had an excellent track record – together with Michael Manley – in trying to establish a Common Fund. His credentials for promoting development and West/South collaboration were excellent.

GE: Yes, all of the above. But at the end of the day, it was a personality type thing. The majority did opt for a white Dominion character with Don McKinnon thereafter, but I thought that the mood at Kuala Lumpur was just a bit of a hard sell for one of the old Dominion countries, and Malcolm was a particularly hard sell. The reason I took the job on, and Hawke took it on, was because he thought Fraser's credentials were impeccable. As did I, in this context. He was considerably less than impeccable in other ways, but here he was fine. But, it just all sort of fizzled. I can't remember how. Does this thing go to a vote or how does it work?

SO: It did go to a vote, yes, and Chief Emeka had…

GE: But there was a period leading up to it, of course.

SO: Yes, there was.

GE: Yes. There are other contexts where I do remember squiring Malcolm around: various other crowd-scene situations.

SO: At the Senior Officials meetings beforehand?

GE: Maybe…whatever. But he was not an easy sell.

SO: Better running Care Australia?

GE: Yes. Well, maybe.

SO: So, just to draw this to a more general conclusion, having set the Commonwealth very firmly in context for Australian policy and the national interest in your time as Foreign Minister, how do you think that the Commonwealth has survived, and what does it say for it going forward?

GE: Well, that's a very good question. What's intrigued me is, why have Mozambique and others like Rwanda joined the Commonwealth?

SO: Yes, Rwanda joined in 2007.

GE: Which reminds me: Kagame is such a dreadful piece of work.

SO: He is an 'aid darling' in the UK!

GE: I know he is an 'aid darling' of the UK, and the UK makes many mistakes of this kind! He is a darling – admired in the sense that he tackled the genocide head on, but then he perpetrated a fair chunk of it himself in the aftermath. I know him quite well. I have spent time with him. This is in my mind right now, because I was asked by his then-Foreign Minister to organise a commemorative thing here…

SO: For the 1994 genocide.

GE: …in Canberra in mid-April, to speak in a month's time. I have been finding excuses for not doing [it], so I got another email from him yesterday saying, "Can you get someone to host something?" So, I will get the Commonwealth to do it! There you are: there's a useful role for the Commonwealth that you have given me. Who is the Commonwealth person here in Canberra now? There is a Commonwealth mission, isn't there?

SO: Would you be talking about the Commonwealth Roundtable of Australia, here in Canberra?

GE: But there is a Commonwealth mission, is there not?

SO: No, there isn't a mission of that kind to the Australian government.

GE: Can't I ask a Commonwealth Rep to host something?

SO: I am sure you could try and ask…

GE: Well, the Brits love him. So, as you say… Who is the British Ambassador here now?

SO: I don't know who the British High Commissioner is at the moment! Okay, so, if you feel there is a fair degree of inertia which explains the Commonwealth's survival, and that it continues to…

GE: So, there is somebody who coordinates the Commonwealth countries in each?

SO: The Commonwealth High Commissioners get together and have their regular discussions when in post.

GE: But who convenes them?

SO: I don't know how it works.

GE: That's what I need to do: get them together - the Commonwealth and the Africans. Anyway…

SO: So, some have argued that the Commonwealth has survived through sheer inertia.

GE: It's inertia. It's the Queen thing. It's been obviously significant, because she has been very passionate about it and people are sentimentally attached to her. I am even sentimentally attached to her. I'm not to her husband, who is a dreadful piece of work, but her? Yes, she's very engaging.

SO: So, you have seen her in action at Commonwealth meetings, or state visit meetings?

GE: Yes, I have talked to her. I have met her half a dozen times. She is a hoot, actually, very funny in talking about other Commonwealth leaders, mimicking and such. She knows all about their strengths and weaknesses – or she did, then. There were very interesting conversations about Mr Lange from New Zealand and others. But, I think two or three of the times that I have met her have been at Commonwealth occasions – Commonwealth meetings – just chatting at garden parties and whatever. One conversation we had should not appear in your notes, actually, because you are not supposed to talk about it. She had been in Australia…It was a tradition that the High Commissioner hosts a dinner after such a visit, at Stoke Lodge in London, and I just happened to be the only Minister in town, so I was invited. The anecdote has got a couple of dimensions. One relates to when I met her at the door and she said, "Now, you are an Australian?" I said, "Yes ma'am, that's why I am here." "Tell me what precise week in March was my Australian trip. Was it the second or third week?" I haven't got a head for dates at the best of times, so I said, "Sorry ma'am, it completely escapes me. I was out of the country at the time and I am afraid I just can't remember." She turns to her lady in waiting and says, "Bloody hell, bloody hell!" And then she comes back to me and she says, "My lady in waiting and I have been arguing in the car all the way here as to whether it was the first or the second week, and we thought we would resolve this by asking the first Australian we see. Well, you're the first Australian and you can't remember! Well, bloody hell!" So, that was that!

And then I was sitting across the table – slightly bigger than this – next to her, actually. We got into a private conversation about the worst people we had ever come across in our respective public lives. And she led with Nicolae Ceausescu, for obvious reasons: "Dreadful little man, with his food tasters." And she asked me, and I said, "Chief Buthelezi" – I had just come back from South Africa, and there is another long complicated story I could tell about him. He is just a monster. Do you know about Buthelezi?

SO: No, I don't.

GE: Oh, he was the leader of the leader of the Zulus.

SO: Well, obviously I know *who* he was!

GE: Well, he had all this reverse racism. Evelyn Waugh *Scoop* sort-of-fashion. He had white servants in this palatial headquarters, occupying positions of extreme subservience, padding around in six-inch pile carpet, Waterford crystal and veneer… Anyway, booing people like me that said things that he didn't like, with armies of retainers.

So, the Queen is very amusing. And I think a lot of people who deal with her at the head of government level think so. I was privileged to be dealing with her as a mere Foreign Minister. But she is personally very amusing and very warm, and regards us as family. I really do think that's been quite an important factor in holding the show together. Whether that will be sustainable with Charles or someone in the future is questionable. It will be one less bit of cement holding it together.

SO: This is part of the big debate about whether the next head of the Commonwealth should be the Monarch. Should it be Prince Charles? Or should it skip a generation? Or whether, indeed, the Commonwealth is sufficiently grown up that it doesn't need a head, as it has got a Secretary General.

GE: Yes, well, perfectly true. It doesn't need any of this stuff, but if you are asking analytically why it has held together, I think that's been part of the reason.

SO: How much was the Commonwealth's 'hard power' – the cutting power that you have made reference to on South Africa – possible precisely because it was relatively 'below the radar'? The Commonwealth has this aspect of invisibility: in fact, it has been claimed it's part of…

GE: No, the whole point of this exercise was to get ourselves above the radar, and to bring into the broader international agenda some really powerful tools that had been underdone. So, whatever the utility of flying under the radar generally might be in gathering up common ground, that was not something that we saw as a virtue in this context. It was a matter of energising and leveraging…

SO: Precisely to get visibility?

GE: …and getting visibility. Thus the publication of our Penguin special.

SO: Were you part of a 'good offices' role in trying to approach Buthelezi, to try to bring him into the negotiations?

GE: No, there wasn't a formal good offices role, as I remember. It was just part of the business of sorting things out after Mandela was out. This was a feud between the ANC and Inkatha.

SO: It is a very interesting period for the continuing role of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth's push, up to 1990, is very visible. It's very well covered. But for the 1990-94 period – which is equally important in terms of that unlikely and relatively peaceful transition – the Commonwealth's role is not widely known nor widely researched.

GE: Yes, I am just trying to remember… I think the main period of our relevance and role was up until 1991. Thereafter I was one of those visiting South Africa, but that was more wearing an Australian hat rather than as part of the Commonwealth team. Certainly, I was very conscious of Buthelezi's spoiling role, and he was just generally a total pain in the tail during the whole enterprise. I spoke to the Afrikaners – the Roelf Meyers and all the others, the field of negotiators – but that was just 'Australia being Australia' at that stage. You will have to remind me what the Commonwealth's role was. We had a continuing role on the Committee – I went to Pretoria after the swearing in of Mandela as President, I was there for that.

SO: And you are now on the de Klerk Foundation?

GE: Yeah, I am on something called the Global Leadership Foundation – which is a bit more sizzle than sausage, I have to say. But I quite like de Klerk. Without him, it would have been very difficult to bring home the bacon on this one. He partly was under pressure, but others had been under pressure and had not recognised, as he did, the absolute necessity to make the change if bloodshed was to be avoided. De Klerk deserves a huge recognition…

SO: Did Australia try to form a good relationship with Pik Botha as a representative of the South African government?

GE: Up to a point, but Pik Botha was just a dreadful drunk. He was a less serious character than de Klerk. I knew Pik Botha better at that stage than I knew de Klerk. De Klerk was distant and exalted, but I had some pretty fierce arguments with Pik Botha over this period. Particularly, I made a fairly famous visit there in 1991 – the South African security people behaved dreadfully. I went to the Khayelitsha township to visit some activists, and the security detail insisted on cars of police and flashing lights and all the rest of it, all of which was profoundly embarrassing to the community workers who had set up the visit. It was meant to be unobtrusive, but it was deliberately made obtrusive. I had some words to say – not directly, but actually to my wife in the back of the car – which were duly overheard and transcribed, about how "effing useless and impossible all these people are." And that was broadcast all over the media as, "Foul-Mouthed Foreign Minister Attacks Officials."

SO: Well, I was going to say that the infighting was going on within the dysfunctional South African government at that point….

GE: Oh, yes, and they had some dreadful people in their diplomatic corps. It was really, really intense: a handful of sensible moderates who wanted change and saw it as absolutely indispensable, and hard-line resistance. It wasn't a direct correlation between the Afrikaners and the English-speaking, either. Some of the English-speaking were some of the worst offenders, in my recollection. Anyway, that's got nothing to do with the Commonwealth.

SO: Did the Commonwealth have any utility for Australia in the whole question of a nuclear-free Pacific versus French nuclear testing?

GE: No.

SO: And there's no question of a Commonwealth dimension on the issue of nuclear proliferation in the Commonwealth, with India and Pakistan?

GE: No, not that I can recall. Maybe there was, around the edges, but I can't recall. It just didn't feature on the landscape.

SO: Do you think there could have been a potential 'good offices' mediating role?

GE: Not really. India and Pakistan just didn't want to internationalise anything, and they were under huge pressure from the UN on the Kashmir thing all the way through. And, given what the UN was unable to do, I can't imagine the Commonwealth would have been able to do any different. The fact that they met each other in a Commonwealth context was not unhelpful: it did create avenues for contacts and so on, and that's probably true generally in some of these conflicts. But again, it was only very rarely. Can I recall situations where pairs of Commonwealth countries were lined up against each other? Confrontational stuff in South East Asia, [but] that wasn't Commonwealth versus Commonwealth…It's only really India and Pakistan, isn't it?

SO: Can I ask whether there was any degree of Australia lining up with Britain and America in trying to press or to try and encourage de Klerk to decommission South Africa's nuclear programme?

GE: No, but I don't think that we really knew much about the nuclear programme, even though Australia was quite actively involved in anti-nuclear stuff. No, I don't think that was the case.

SO: I was just wondering if there was, to an extent, an 'old Commonwealth' or Five Eyes alliance dimension in trying to deal with it?

GE: Not that I am aware of, no. Have you found something somewhere else?

SO: I know that the Brits and the Americans were encouraging de Klerk to decommission the South African atomic arsenal, because there was a…

GE: Well, that may well been the case, but I think they knew much more about it than we did. I certainly don't remember any Commonwealth intervention, and I don't remember any Australian dimension to it.

SO: So, for the Commonwealth going forward, it's now turning into the Commonwealth with a Charter. There's a drive among certain states for a human rights agenda, and I understand Michael Kirby has been very much at the fore of this particular approach. However, this emphasis on human rights – and particularly a Human Rights Commissioner – is causing tensions between the old Commonwealth countries and the new Commonwealth. Can you see the Commonwealth slimming down to be a leaner, keener Commonwealth?

GE: Well, I don't know. Sri Lanka was a pretty good test for it and it failed fairly comprehensively, didn't it? There was a lot of help from Australia, I have to say, behaving abominably. We played nice to the Rajapaksas, who were among the most abominable bunch of thugs in the universe, and because we, under this new government, had an agenda about asylum seekers and refugees. We had a lot of people coming by boats from Sri Lanka, and we were highly dependent – or were seen as highly dependent – on cooperation with the Sri Lankan government to try and stop that at the source. That's overwhelmingly the reason why – apart from having no particular interest in human rights anyway, and having no particular interest in multilateral process for the advancement of human rights – they had another reason for not offending them. But nobody came out of that with any glory. Mauritius boycotted, I think. I was talking to Cassam Uteem the other day in Europe. Didn't they boycott it for all the right sort of reasons? Canada was wholly a function of Tamil politics in Toronto, with nothing to do with anything more high-minded. The Brits were a bit more decent: they came only because they felt that they had to. They did their best to use the occasion. But I didn't get any sense that the Commonwealth as such put any sort of united front at all, in exactly a situation where it could have exercised some leverage had human rights values really been at the forefront and there had been a really genuine commitment to using this soft power or whatever. In the event, it was all a bit embarrassing – the whole thing – for the Rajapaksas. They didn't get what they wanted out of it, which was unquestioned support. But equally, one didn't have the sense that there was any particular coherence about the Commonwealth position. Maybe I missed something.

SO: What did you feel – as an interested observer – about the Perth CHOGM of 2011?

GE: I don't think I felt anything very much about it at all! I didn't tend to take much notice of it. Where was I then? [*Laughter*] I'm sorry.

SO: [*Laughter*] So, it was the Commonwealth dropping below the personal radar as well!

GE: I am so sorry! I simply cannot remember a single thing about it. Where was I? I was preoccupied with something else; I wasn't taking much notice.

SO: Commonwealth as not important!

GE: Not really. I mean, Don McKinnon is a dear friend and I quite liked Emeka – I got on all right with him. But I thought Emeka was a bit limp, and Don, you know, tried hard, but was not in a very congenial environment.

SO: Well, the next SG is going to face some serious challenges.

GE: What's the tipping? What's the field?

SO: The discussions are going on now, because 2016 is the end of Sharma's term. But I totally take your point about leadership being a critical factor in the Commonwealth.

GE: It's a critical factor in every organisation: every multilateral, every international NGO, every government…You like to think of bigger forces at work – social

forces and broader ideological forces – but it's just force of personality, force of leadership, [and] whether people energise an organisation or suck the energy out of the organisation.

SO: Sir, thank you very much indeed.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]